



Marked by Violence: Bodily Autonomy and Sexual Politics in *Titus Andronicus*, *Written on the Body* and *Parable of the Sower*

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'Sometimes it's me you bite, leaving shallow wounds in my shoulders' (Winterson 118)

In Shakespeare's *Titus Andronicus* (*Titus*), Winterson's *Written on the Body* (*Written*) and Butler's *Parable of the Sower* (*Parable*) violence and sex are mutually dependent. The inescapable presence of violence within sex across these texts provokes questions surrounding the bodily autonomy of women. Across societal and temporal boundaries, the consistent intertwining of the two forces a reader to confront the notion that a woman's body is never considered her own. Moreover, this concept has been normalised. The forms of violence as presented in *Written* are what a contemporary reader is used to consuming in media, rendering the romanticisation of violence within sex less shocking. *Titus* and *Parable* contain forms of violence in sex normalised for their time that horrify a reader, due to their defamiliarized lens, forcing a re-evaluation of what a reader knows and of *Written*. Defamiliarized lens refers to the presentation of familiar values (here dealing with violence within sex) in an unfamiliar manner (societies a reader is unaccustomed to) to elicit a fresh perception of them. This essay will examine how the texts present the role that violence has within sexual encounters, both inside and outside romantic relationships.

Violence in sex is a subtle yet consistent undercurrent in *Written* and its toleration, both by the characters alongside a reader, is challenged when similar motifs are examined in *Titus* and *Parable*. The narrator in *Written*, a self-prescribed masochist ('I did suspect that I might like being whipped' (Winterson 76)), has a series of torrid affairs. The narrator's relationship with Louise is notable for both its physical and emotional intensity; the pair often leave sex with 'wounds' (Winterson 118). The narrator remarks 'Sometimes it's me you bite, leaving shallow wounds in my shoulders' (Winterson 118), as 'the weapon of [Louise's] jaw' (Winterson 120) is recognised. What is evident is a culturally encoded excitement of branding and possession which speaks to Louise losing her bodily autonomy. In turn, after her diagnosis, the narrator laments

that they ‘could not be rough’ (Winterson 124) with her now. What is evident is a culturally encoded excitement of branding and possession which speaks to Louise losing her bodily autonomy. She is the subject the narrator could no longer be rough with, contributing to a power imbalance. The narrator’s desire to own Louise is in itself an act of violence, stripping her of her own identity in their attempt to consume her. Further, this conceit of likening body parts to the semantic field of war runs through the text, factoring into a passionate but fundamentally unhealthy experience of sex. Looking at this through a defamiliarized lens helps to re-evaluate a reader’s perception of this presentation. In *Parable*, Lauren and Bankole must sneak away to ‘an isolated little spot’ (Butler 250) they found earlier to have intercourse. The threat of violence in Butler’s dystopian America is so acute it permeates into the intimate activity of sex. Like *Written*, there is an undercurrent of violence present in sex significantly more extreme (potentially fatal), which thus forces a reassessment of the presentation in *Written*.

Kristeva emphasises Louise-Ferdinand Céline’s depiction of sex, saying ‘this form of sex is an inebriation, another word for debilitated suffering’ (150). Not only does this highlight the commonplace nature of violence and suffering within sex but heightens the readers’ understanding of Louise’s and the narrator’s relationship. The lines between pleasure and pain are blurred; fitting with Kristeva’s argument that sexual excess is both an escape from suffering and a re-enactment of it. This arguably perfectly captures the intercourse in *Written*. It is both an escape from suffering, from a reality in which Louise is married to Elgin, and a re-enactment of the reality of the pain of their situation. Suffering is thus deeply encoded within sex and Louise is stripped of her bodily autonomy which is substantiated in Kristeva’s emphasis on the ultimate loss of self in sex. The narrator focuses on the usage of Louise’s body, not her personality. The reader only learns of crucial aspects of Louise’s identity after she has been removed from the

narrator's life, an act that is not even of her own volition. The pain of losing one ('or 2?') (Winterson 144); even the narrator does not know) potential children, the achievement of a Doctorate in Art History is not worthy of the narrator's attention until the immediacy of Louise's body is gone. The experience of Winterson's text is defamiliarized by the immediacy of its form. The reader is privy to the narrator's most intimate, most primal desires, which evokes a sympathetic understanding of the narrator's base instincts. The violence present within the narrator's sex is only questioned when read alongside texts that depict defamiliarized societies: what is accepted in the 4th century and Butler's dystopian America horrifies a reader and forces us to question the normality of violence in sex in *Written*.

This is perhaps most evident when comparing the presentation of cannibalism in all texts. In *Written*, it is a motif intended to demonstrate the extent of the narrator's desire. In *Titus* and *Parable*, however, the presentations are horrific, reflecting twisted revenge and base desire for survival. *Written*'s presentation of cannibalism, in its lustful manner, thus takes on a wholly different tone when read in conjunction with the other texts and highlights how violence within sex has been normalised in contemporary society. Cannibalism manifests in Winterson's text through the idea of love as consumption through the literal act. occurs in Winterson's text both as the literal act and the understanding of love as consumption. The narrator 'strained to taste [Louise's] skin' (Winterson 36) in the soup she cooked, determined to 'taste you if only through your cooking' (Winterson 37). They not only want to consume her 'flesh, [they] wanted her bones, her blood, her tissues' (Winterson 51), her very scent – as instanced when they consider going through Louise's laundry: 'Not the laundry basket... please.' (Winterson 50). Cannibalism is sensual, lustful and a mode through which to consume a lover. The direct address and ellipsis contribute to the sense that Winterson's text is a love letter to Louise, thus accentuating the idea

of cannibalism as an action of love. The narrator's inclusion of anatomy creates a deeply unsettling tone which opens the avenue of comparison to cannibalism as depicted in *Titus* and *Parable*. Cannibalism in *Titus* is a horrific form of revenge as Titus feeds Chiron and Demetrius, in a pie, to their mother. Titus exclaims, after killing his daughter, 'Why there they are, both baked in this pie, / Whereof their mother daintily hath fed, / Eating the flesh that she herself hath bred' (Shakespeare 152). The gentle language ('daintily' and 'Why there they are' suggest nonchalance in a situation that necessitates anything but) combined with putting the emphasis on Tamora and her role as a mother results in a vile juxtaposing image. This revolting depiction of cannibalism is mirrored in *Parable* as Lauren and her followers come across a group of 'Kids the age of my brothers' 'roasting a severed human leg.' (Butler 256). They watch as 'the girl pulled a sliver of charred flesh from the thigh and stuffed it into her mouth' (Butler 256). Therefore, a primal desire for survival is conveyed through the language: 'stuffed' indicates an unparalleled desperation and hunger to so eagerly eat a 'severed human leg'.

In both *Titus* and *Parable*, demographics suggesting innocence (such as motherhood and childhood) are perverted through graphic descriptions of cannibalism. Through the texts, "flesh" is a common factor but looking at that in *Written* in conjunction with the other texts greatly sours the motif. A re-evaluation of the cannibalism in Winterson's text is required. Inherently, consuming someone's body is not an action substantiated by equality and hence Louise, through the narrator's desire to absorb her wholly, loses her bodily autonomy. The inclusion of violent images and motifs in the description of sex provokes questions of bodily autonomy – a woman's body has never truly been considered hers as lovers desire to consume and own it. Societies across temporal boundaries share this constant, highlighting the continued devaluation of women's bodies from the 4th century to a dystopian future.

Moreover, the violence of lust depicted within romantic relationships across texts demonstrates not only how violence within sex crosses temporal boundaries but when women exhibit enjoyment of sexuality, society defines them by it. Bodily autonomy is thus undermined: women are not seen as people but sexual creatures. Tamora's and Aaron's relationship in *Titus* is coloured by the animalistic lust of the pair while the relationship in *Written* is destructive and can be questioned whether it is built on lust or love. Harris argues it is only 'As a sexual object [that] Tamora is able to claim a degree of authority for herself' (387). Indeed, she is a prisoner and it is only through her sexual appeal that she raises herself up from this standard into being Saturninus' wife. Her body is not her own when she has to use it for survival and to appeal to the men of the play in a fight for her life. Harris' argument extends not just to her position as Saturninus' wife but also in her relationship with Aaron. Aaron's entrance lines are 'Now climbeth Tamora Olympus' top' (Shakespeare 86), suggesting his primary concern is Tamora's rise to power, achieved using her sexuality to entice the emperor. The pair's relationship is characterised by lust, violence and power – although the only instance of pleasure in a savage play, it is strangely absent of typical markers of affection. Thus, an audience can infer Tamora's value comes from Aaron's attraction to her sexual appeal: their interactions either involve discussion of sex or of violence. The violence of lust is epitomised by this relationship; both are defined by their unbridled sexuality and violent desires. Indeed, Aaron refers to Tamora as 'this Semiramis' (Shakespeare 87) and he goes on to stress 'Venus govern[s her] desires' (Shakespeare 93). Women are recharacterized by men, Tamora's sexuality is first revealed by Aaron and these classical allusions reduce her to a binary. She is not seen as an individual, instead likened to classical beings associated with sexuality, placing her into one category. Indeed, Semiramis was renowned for her lust but also her successful military tactics. Thus, Tamora's sexuality and

violence are brought to light and the two are intertwined. She exacerbates the rape of Lavinia, encouraging her sons by saying ‘The worse to her, the better loved of me’ (Shakespeare 98). Tamora is defined by her sexuality and violent nature, stressing not only the intertwining of the two but also her lack of being outside it. She is not a defined individual but a lustful woman, undermining her identity and bodily autonomy.

The same is seen in *Written*; the themes of violence and sexuality are illuminated through prostitution and bodily fixation. On a literal level, Elgin’s sexual appetite is such that only prostitutes will satisfy it. Louise jabs at this, emasculating him through his inability to satisfy her and thus his turn to prostitutes: “‘I might as well have slept in a brothel.’ ‘I thought that’s what you were doing,’” (Winterson 90). Ostensibly, this evidences the intertwining of lust and violence through the exploitation inherent in prostitution. The act of paying for sex takes away a woman’s choice and bodily autonomy and is an aggressive manifestation of the patriarchy in modern Britain. This link between violence and lust is further seen in Louise’s and the narrator’s relationship. The narrator themselves admit ‘Sex can feel like love’ (Winterson 94), creating an opening for the argument that the passion of sex with Louise is the foundation of their relationship rather than love. This is reinforced considering the obsession the narrator exhibits regarding Louise’s body. They wish to ‘drown [themselves] in her’ (Winterson 111), the verb ‘drown’ a reminder of the violence underscoring this relationship. Both Louise’s external body and her insides are described in considerable detail, supporting the argument that the extent of the narrator’s emotion is fuelled by lust, not love. Louise is defined by her enjoyment of her sexuality: she is not seen as a woman but as a lover; the narrator has no scope of her identity outside that. In their final letter to Louise, the narrator asserts ‘Your flesh is my flesh’ (Winterson 106). The manner in which they view Louise is clear. The obsession with her body seeps

through, as she is important to the narrator because of the potential of her body which they desire to own – further stripping her of identity and autonomy. Like Tamora, Louise is viewed primarily as a sexual being – she is attributed little value outside the usage of her body. In both texts, violence and lust are intertwined. Examining Tamora’s and Aaron’s relationship highlights the darker undertones in *Written* while both women are stripped of identity outside their sexuality, limiting their bodily autonomy.

Furthermore, violence in sex outside romantic relationships further provokes questions surrounding women’s bodily autonomy, especially comparing presentations of the victims of sexual assault. Scarry states that there is ‘no language for pain, that it resists verbal objectification’ (12). This is pertinent looking at Lavinia and the numerous victims of rape in *Parable*. An audience is forced to observe Lavinia’s pain after her rape; she becomes a spectacle of violence, unable to articulate her own pain. The same is present in *Parable*: the epistolary form of the novel means a reader is only reading Lauren’s observations of these victims. They are unable to articulate their pain, reinforcing Scarry’s statement that their pain, here in the form of sexual violence, resists verbal objectification. A reader in both cases assumes a voyeuristic position, forced to observe Lavinia’s suffering as she is stripped of all agency and the sheer quantity of rape victims in *Parable* desensitises a reader to the crime. Thus, women are denied the chance to express their experience of assault, with it instead being described to a reader through a third party: Lauren and Titus.

Moreover, the reader is forced to observe Lavinia’s damaged body and the consequences of her rape: ‘[Enter...Lavinia, her hands cut off, and her tongue cut out, and ravished]’ (Shakespeare 103). Shakespeare draws explicit attention to the bodily agency Lavinia has been denied and then illustrates her loss of verbal agency. Both Titus and Marcus act as intermediaries

for her, Marcus asking ‘Shall I speak for thee?’ (Shakespeare 104) as Titus goes on to interpret her miming: ‘I understand her signs’ (Shakespeare 110). Titus becomes the patriarch of language; an audience does not know Lavinia’s intentions and her pain thus resists verbal objectification. Lavinia’s rape, as a single tragic event in the play, is presented in this manner: the Roman world crumbles in response to this event and law and order breaks down. Law and order has already broken in the world of *Parable* and thus sexual assault becomes a commonplace event and is presented as such. Lauren, while upset and disturbed by these events, reports rape in a nonchalant manner. Writing of Mrs Simms, she says ‘The thieves had tied her up and left her – after one of them raped her. An old lady like that!’ (Butler 22). Her shock is not at the act of rape itself but rather the age of the woman assaulted, indicating how normalised sexual violence is in Butler’s dystopian America. Lauren’s attitude towards sexual violence is shocking to a reader, as is the persistent examples of it. In a defamiliarized society, a reader is forced to confront differing presentations of sexual assault with the common underlying theme: rape is not to achieve sex but a male exertion of power over women. As with Lavinia, Chiron and Demetrius wish to own her. The numerous victims in *Parable* are victims of men wanting to exert strength over those weaker than them in a broken society. These presentations highlight the consistent violation across temporal boundaries, thus forcing a reader to question the presence of violence within sex in *Written* after reading depictions of these defamiliarized societies and being affronted with deeply upsetting descriptions of victims of sexual assault. The romanticised comments of the violent actions in sex sour; we cannot see the narrator wanting to push ‘the web of [their] hand until it caught against your throat’ (Winterson 129) as an act of love but as one of violation. The continual sexual assault and violation of women’s bodily autonomy is demonstrated.

Furthermore, both the invasion of Rome and Robledo can be likened to rape. Willbern argues Bassanius' wish to defend Rome from dishonour 'is primarily a wish to protect her from rape' (161) while Hampton introduces the idea of Robledo as a 'body' (63). This concept works twofold in raising political questions about women's bodily autonomy. Firstly, understanding a city as a collection of properties, as something open to rape, reduces a woman's body to such. She is just another thing for a man to own, through the act of sex. This is evident in all texts: Chiron's and Demetrius' hunt of Lavinia, the narrator's desire to possess Louise and rape as fundamentally an exertion of male power in *Parable*. Secondly, likening an invasion of a city (while a catastrophic event in itself) to the intimate violation of rape detracts from the severity of the impact on the victim. It is removed from being a personal experience to a collective one, undermining the gravity attributed to one woman's assault. The question of women's bodily autonomy is thus undermined as sex intertwined with violence is incomparable to other crimes, demonstrating how societies continually devalue women's bodies and liken them to property: something to be owned. This comparison is aptly presented in the narrator's desire to possess Louise in *Written*.

Concerns of bodily autonomy are raised when looking at the presence of violence within sex in *Titus*, *Written* and *Parable*. Both within and outside romantic relationships, a woman's lover claims ownership over her body through multiple forms, be it cannibalism or assault. Examining these three texts in conjunction reveals the romanticisation of this violence in sex in contemporary society, which is thus only confronted when looking at defamiliarized societies and their presentations of the same themes.

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