

CHARACTERS

TITUS ANDRONICUS, renowned Roman general
LUCIUS, Titus's eldest son; ultimately Emperor
MUTIUS, QUINTUS, MARTIUS, Titus's other sons
Young **LUCIUS**, Lucius's son and Titus's grandson
LAVINIA, Titus's daughter
MARCUS ANDRONICUS, Titus's brother and tribune

SATURNINUS, Son of the late Emperor; later Emperor
BASSIANUS, Saturninus's brother; in love with Lavinia
TAMORA, Queen of the Goths; later Empress of Rome
CHIRON and **DEMETRIUS**, Tamora's son
ALARBUS, Tamora's eldest son (non-speaking role)
AARON the Moor, in a sexual relationship with Tamora

PLOT

The play begins shortly after the death of the Roman emperor, with his two sons, Saturninus and Bassianus, squabbling over who will succeed him. Their conflict seems set to boil over into violence until a tribune, Marcus Andronicus, announces that the people's choice for the new emperor is Marcus's brother, Titus, who will shortly return to Rome from a victorious ten-year campaign against the Goths. Titus subsequently arrives to much fanfare, bearing with him as prisoners the Queen of the Goths (Tamora), her three sons (Alarbus, Chiron, and Demetrius), and Aaron the Moor (her secret lover). Despite Tamora's desperate pleas, Titus sacrifices her eldest son, Alarbus, to appease the gods for the deaths of his own sons during the war. Distraught, Tamora and her two surviving sons vow to obtain revenge on Titus and his family. At that moment Lavinia, Titus' only daughter, appears to greet her father and brothers and to pay her respects to her fallen brother.

Marcus comes out of the senate house, greets Titus, and informs him that he is the choice of the people for the emperorship if he desires the office. Titus, unwilling to take on that responsibility at his age, persuades the people to instead name Saturninus emperor. Saturninus, in gratitude, asks for and receives the hand of Lavinia to become his queen. But Bassianus, to whom Lavinia has given her heart, seizes the maid with the help of Marcus and the sons of Titus and carries her away. Titus's sons tell Titus that Bassianus is in the right under Roman law, but Titus refuses to listen, accusing them all of treason. A scuffle breaks out, during which Titus kills his own son, Mutius. Saturninus then denounces the Andronici family for their effrontery and shocks Titus by marrying Tamora. Putting into motion her plan for revenge, Tamora advises Saturninus to pardon Bassianus and the Andronici family, which he reluctantly does. Believing their differences reconciled, Titus invites Saturninus to hunt with him the next day.

During the hunt, Aaron comes upon Chiron and Demetrius, disputing and about to draw their swords over their chances of winning the favors of Lavinia. Advising the youths to contain themselves, he tells them that both can enjoy Lavinia by seizing her in the forest during the hunt, which will be attended by the lords and ladies of the court. Later, Aaron hides a sack of gold at the foot of a large tree in the forest near a pit covered over with undergrowth. There Tamora finds him and learns that both Bassianus and Lavinia will come to grief that day. Before Aaron leaves Tamora, he gives her a letter with directions that the message should reach the hands of Saturninus. Bassianus and Lavinia approach and, seeing that the Moor and Tamora are together, chafe Tamora and threaten to tell Saturninus of her dalliance in the forest. Chiron and Demetrius come upon the scene. Informed by Tamora that Bassianus and Lavinia insulted her, they stab Bassianus to death. When Tamora urges them to stab Lavinia they refuse, saying that they will rape her first. Lavinia then appeals to Tamora to remember that Titus spared her life. Tamora, recalling how Titus ignored her pleas to spare her son from sacrifice, is determined that her sons should have their lustful pleasure. The brothers, after throwing the body of Bassianus into the pit, drag Lavinia away to rape her.

Meanwhile, Aaron, on the pretext that he trapped a panther, brings two of Titus's sons, Quintus and Martius, to the pit and leave them there. Martius falls into the trap, where he recognizes the murdered Bassianus by a ring he wears on his finger. When Quintus tries to pull Martius out of the pit, he loses his balance and tumbles into it. Aaron, returning with Saturninus, claims that Titus's sons murdered Bassianus. Tamora then gives Saturninus the letter that Aaron gave her. The letter, written ostensibly by one of the Andronici, outlines a plot to assassinate Bassianus, to bury him in a pit, and then to collect payment, which is a bag of gold hidden near the pit. When the bag of gold is found, Saturninus is convinced of the brothers' guilt. Despite Titus's offer of his own person as security for his sons, Saturninus sentences them to die. Tamora assures Titus that she will speak to Saturninus on his behalf. In another part of the forest, Chiron and Demetrius, their evil deed accomplished, cut off Lavinia's hands and tongue so that she will be able neither to write nor to tell of what befell her. Alone in the forest, Lavinia is joined at last by her uncle, Marcus, who leads her to her father.

In the city, Titus recalls his years of faithful military service to the state and vainly begs the tribunes to spare his sons. Another son, Lucius, unsuccessfully attempts to rescue his brothers, and he is banished. As Titus pleads in vain, Marcus brings the ravished Lavinia to him. The sight of his daughter leads Titus to wonder to what infinite depths of grief a man can come. Aaron announces to the grieving Andronici that Saturninus will release Martius and Quintus if one of the

family will cut off his hand and send it to the court. Titus agrees to let Lucius and Marcus decide between them; when they go to get an ax, Titus directs Aaron to cut off his hand. Later, a messenger brings Titus his hand and the heads of Martius and Quintus as well. Titus vows revenge. He directs the banished Lucius to raise an invading force among the Goths.

At his home, Titus appears to be demented. Even so, it is clear to him one day that Lavinia is trying desperately to tell him something. She indicates in Ovid's *Metamorphoses* the section in which tells the story of Tereus's brutal rape of Philomela. Suddenly, it occurs to Marcus that he can, by holding a staff in his teeth and between his knees, write in the sand on the floor. Lavinia takes the staff thus and writes in the sand that Chiron and Demetrius are her violators.

Titus now sends his grandson Lucius with a bundle of weapons to present to Tamora's sons. The youths do not understand the message that Titus attached to the gift, but Aaron quickly sees that Titus knows who Lavinia's ravishers are. As the brothers admire their gift, a blast of trumpets announces the birth of a child to Tamora. A nurse enters with the newborn baby, who is black, and states that Tamora, fearful lest Saturninus see it, should send the child to Aaron. Chiron and Demetrius, aware of their mother's shame, insist that the infant be killed immediately. When they offer to do the murder, Aaron, the father, defies them. As a precaution, he kills the nurse, one of three women who know the baby's color. Then he has a fair-skinned baby, newly born, taken to Tamora before he flees to the Goths.

Titus, now reputed to be utterly demented, writes messages to the gods, attaches them to arrows, and, with Marcus and his grandson, shoots the arrows into the court. He persuades a passing farmer to deliver a letter to Saturninus. The emperor is already disturbed because the messages carried by the arrows state Titus's grievances against the state. The farmer, meanwhile, delivers Titus's letter. Enraged by its mocking message, Saturninus commands that Titus be brought to him to be executed. A messenger then brings word that the Goths, led by Lucius, threaten to sack Rome. Knowing Lucius's popularity with the Romans, Saturninus is fearful. Tamora, however, confident of her ability to save the city, directs the messenger to arrange a conference with Lucius at the house of Titus.

In the camp of the Goths, Aaron and his child are brought before Lucius. Aaron's captor discloses that he came upon the Moor in a ruined monastery and heard him state that the baby's mother was Tamora. At Lucius's promise to preserve the life of the child, Aaron confesses to his crimes. Lucius decrees that the Moor must die a horrible death.

Tamora, meanwhile, believing that Titus is demented beyond all reason, disguises herself as Revenge and with her sons, also disguised, presents herself to Titus. Although Titus recognizes her, she insists that she is Revenge, his friend. Titus, for his own purposes, pretends to be taken in by the disguises; he tells Rapine and Murder, Revenge's cohorts, to seek out two such as themselves and destroy them. At Tamora's bidding, Titus directs Marcus to invite Lucius to a banquet, to which Saturninus and Tamora and her sons will also come. Titus persuades Chiron and Demetrius to stay with him while their companion, Revenge, goes to perform other duties. He then calls in his kinsmen, who seize and bind the brothers. Titus tells them that he intends to kill them and feed to their mother a paste made of their bones and blood. Lavinia holds a bowl between the stumps of her arms to catch their blood as Titus cuts their throats.

Lucius, accompanied by a guard of Goths, comes to his father's house, where he puts Aaron in the charge of Marcus. Saturninus and Tamora make their appearance and are ushered to a banquet served by Titus, dressed as a cook. Titus, hearing from Saturninus that Virginius, in the legend, did well to kill his ravished daughter, stabs Lavinia. The startled Saturninus asks if Lavinia was raped and by whom. When Titus discloses that Tamora's sons did the evil deed, Saturninus asks to see the youths at once. Titus, declaring that Tamora is eating their remains, stabs her. Saturninus stabs Titus, and Lucius, in turn, stabs Saturninus. A general fight ensues. Lucius and Marcus, with their followers, retire to a balcony to tell the people of Rome of the manifold evils wrought by Tamora, her sons, and Aaron. After the people choose him as their new emperor, Lucius sentences Aaron to be buried waist deep and left to starve. He also decrees that Tamora's body be fed to wild beasts.

MAJOR THEMATIC CONCERNS

Revenge

- revenge is not the same as justice, even when revenge can be justified
- revenge debases those who seek it-- literalized in the motif of dismembered and mutilated bodies (Alarbus, Chiron, Demetrius, Tamora, Quintus, Martius, Lavinia, and Titus)
- revenge tends to escalate beyond reciprocal harm; in this way one loses any moral high ground
- though revenge can be alluring, it is ultimately ineffective and requires too high a price to pay

Justice and Order

- justice achieved through bloodshed tends to devolve into anarchy through a cycle of revenge
- individual perception is inherently biased; the revenger believes s/he is re-imposing order, when s/he is really acting as an agent of chaos
- there is an order and justice to the universe, but it is often inscrutable to human beings; people are pawns of divine will, not the other way around; order and justice will ultimately prevail, though it might not appear so from our limited perspective