Safe, Sane and Consensual: Theatricality in BDSM and Shakespeare’s Titus Andronicus

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“Everything in the world is about sex except sex. Sex is about power.” – Oscar Wilde

Years after the publication of Venus in Furs by Leopold von Sacher-Masoch and The 120 Days of Sodom by the Marquis de Sade—core texts that first introduced the concepts of BDSM vocabulary to the public—there still exists a lack of acceptance for this kind of alternative sexuality. Even in an age of emerging alternative sexual rights, BDSM and fetishism are still buried in a thriving subculture. Similarly, Shakespeare’s Titus Andronicus has suffered much negative criticism, dismissed as an unintelligent play not worth anyone’s time or effort (Maus 399). I would argue that the two are linked on several levels, through theatricality, violence, power, and how these relate to erotics and sex. However, there are also ways in which the sex-violence relationship in Titus Andronicus differs from that in BDSM, mostly concerning safety and consent. In the first part of this essay, I will examine how the language of BDSM is intrinsically theatrical and lends itself to study alongside a play. In the second part, I will examine how Titus Andronicus is aware of itself as a piece written for performance. Finally, I will amalgamate these two closely related aspects in a study of how I would integrate BDSM into a production of Titus Andronicus, with my ultimate goal being to use theatre to demystify BDSM while exploring the themes of sex and power already present in the play.
Defining BDSM is not an easy thing to do: the vocabulary is extensive and very specific, and stereotypes abound. However, the very language of BDSM is essentially theatrical. The compound acronym BDSM works in three directions to cover the essential categories: BD stands for bondage and discipline; DS for Dominance and submission, where Dominance takes a capital D and submission a minuscule s; and SM for sadism and masochism (Ortmann and Sprott xiii), all of which can be linked to the theatricality of wordplay.

One element that every source agrees on is that BDSM is not about sex: “there are many practices and activities that are not sexual, but may be experienced as extremely erotic” (Ortmann and Sprott 3). One submissive interviewed for the documentary Inside the 50 Shades says, “It’s not about fucking… it’s about something else.” It can be concluded that there is more to BDSM than sex, and I would suggest that this other element is power. The reason this distinction between sex and erotic play can be easily muddled is that in this context, power is willingly given by a submissive to a Dominant. This power imbalance, combined with erotic tension, should by all logic be classified as sexual assault; it is here that BDSM becomes touchy and uncomfortable subject matter. The argument is that it is not sexual assault so long as everyone consents, but there are few universal rules concerning this. Certain people are sexually aroused by having total power, others by surrendering all control to another. As Ortmann and Sprott detail in the introduction to their book, there is very little acceptance or discussion of BDSM and a great deal of shame. There are also BDSM practitioners who refuse to apply the safe-sane-consensual guidelines, believing that to do so cancels out why people do BDSM to begin with. The ground is undeniably rocky and the rules unclear. I am not trying to impose structure, but rather to discuss how Titus Andronicus can open a conversation about an otherwise tricky topic.

The use of Titus Andronicus as a point of comparison is by no means arbitrary. Titus Andronicus not only highlights and refutes the themes of violence and power, but is also a play that is aware of itself as a piece of theatre to be performed for an audience. The language used when discussing Chiron and Demetrius’s impending rape of Lavinia is much more explicitly influenced by the pairing of sex and violence. Aaron describes his plan by saying “Strike her home
by force” (2.1.118), which is later echoed in his words “…make pillage of her chastity” (2.3.44). Both these quotes refer to sex in relation to non-consensual violence, and both are also about Chiron and Demetrius gaining power over Lavinia. While this wording makes for striking imagery, there is also something sensationalistic about it. There is no doubt that Aaron enjoys his use of words, but there is also potential for the audience to enjoy them as well, enticing them to fantasize about what this scene will look like long before it happens. If it can be concluded that Titus Andronicus explores themes of pleasure found in sex, power and violence, the play is also in itself theatrical as the text deliberately manipulates audience reactions.

Ancient Greek theatre, in the style of Euripides’s The Bacchae, for instance, traditionally takes all the goriness offstage. Instead of seeing violence first-hand, the audience has to let their imaginations do the work while they listen to an account told by a shaking messenger. Titus Andronicus tracks the beginnings of a move away from exclusively off-stage violence. In some cases, only graphic descriptions are provided; in others, the actual violence occurs onstage. An intriguing example is that of Chiron and Demetrius’s rape and maiming of Lavinia. Here, the audience gets something of a two-part answer: the actual act of violence is not shown, but Lavinia nonetheless makes a spectacular entrance with her tongue cut out and hands amputated. And not only that, but since there is also a sort of precursor scene, the audience knows what will happen and can freely imagine it, with the added layer of the fantasy making an entrance in front of them. These few scenes are essentially about how a writer creates what an audience sees and manipulates it for a desired reaction. In this case, I would argue that the reaction is shock and sensationalism. Not only does Lavinia finally appear, but her uncle is also given a long, meandering and essentially unimportant speech so that the audience has a solid chunk of time to get a look at her bleeding body. And, if they so choose, get off on it.

Theatricality in Titus Andronicus is also explored in the scene in which Tamora, Chiron and Demetrius appear to Titus disguised as Revenge, Rape and Murder. In most of Shakespeare’s plays, characters don disguises and are never detected. Instead, they reveal themselves at the end of the play, much to everyone else’s joy and relief. Consider Twelfth Night, The Taming of the Shrew, and King Lear, all of which have plots that rely heavily on disguise and mistaken
identity. The difference in *Titus Andronicus*, though, is that Titus calls Tamora and her sons out on their ruse. This moment is not just about suspension of disbelief – it’s an active comment on the dressing up and goings-on of the theatre business. It’s a scene about role-play and its dangers, and about how easy it is for a role to turn into reality.

The language of BDSM is also full of characters and archetypes, the two main ones being very broad indeed. The terms “Dominant” and “submissive” encapsulate the main power structure that exists between people, arguably across geography and time. Beyond this, personal identity in the BDSM subculture becomes almost obsessive: power position, sexual orientation, gender identity, age and fetish are all part of who a person identifies as within the community (Ortmann and Sprott 15), and therefore what character they play in the scene. An actor will similarly assume a character, one who most likely shares some similarities and some differences with the performer. The actor’s skill lies in whether or not they can make the similarities accessible and fill in the gaps around the differences.

Furthermore, an extensive collection of props and costumes adorn the practice of BDSM. Jacques, Dale, Hamilton and Sniffer include a chapter in their book on equipment that is no less than thirty-six pages long listing every possible toy, including electrical, suspension, bondage and restraints for every part of the body, as well as whips and paddles. Props in *Titus Andronicus* are only as essential as the director makes them. Not only this, but Shakespeare provides little or no stage directions. This is partly why *Titus Andronicus* lends itself so easily to adaptation: the script is open to the addition of the very important props that govern the sign system of BDSM.

Similarly, roles are highly important to the power play that makes BDSM what it is. A role can, as in mainstream theatre, have a definite beginning and
end point. Jacques, Dale, Hamilton and Sniffer point out the difference between “assuming the rôle” and “acting it out” as follows. The latter is defined as “deciding you want to be the rôle for the duration of the scene or longer,” and the former as “acting it out for the duration of the scene and for the benefit of your partner” (40). The difference is the same onstage in that an actor can be their character for the duration of the play, or go through the motions for their fellow company members. Neither necessarily leads directly to success or failure, but “assuming the rôle… may be the most effective way to ensure that the scene is a success” (40). It will be easier for the audience and/or partners involved to connect to a scene when the actors believe in what is happening to them. As with props, assuming a role can go beyond a scene. Some people choose to live roles as part of their daily lives: “Whatever the rôle, living it will require a substantial commitment, and it is advisable for the definition of the rôle to allow for the players to exit from them” (Jacques, Dale, Hamilton, Sniffer 40). This blurs the line between theatre and reality, the equivalent of an actor playing a part carrying that character out of the theatre and into daily life and interactions. Furthermore, On the Safe Edge discusses the presence of “SM personalit[iest],” (38) or how a person identifies within the BDSM community, and places this role in opposition to who they are outside of the scene. There is essentially no difference between an onstage and an offstage role, since both involve being someone other than yourself for a set period of time.

Shakespeare’s Titus Andronicus is a play that is filled with the same themes that dominate BDSM. These themes can be seen in terms of Dom/sub power relationships, humiliation, bondage, and several kinds of play, as well as the awareness Titus Andronicus has of itself as theatrical. Most of the power relationships are established in the first half of the play, as alliances and rivalries are formed and re-formed. From the first scene, Titus Andronicus is very much a play about who is in charge, starting with Saturninus and Bassianus fighting for who will “…wear the imperial diadem of Rome” (Shakespeare 1.1.5-6). This turns Saturninus into a kind of super-Dom, in charge of a place as well as the people who inhabit it. Saturninus’ first conquest is Lavinia (1.1.240) and in the language he uses, she becomes an object, someone inferior to him and almost not worth his attention. He says to Bassianus: “you have played your prize,” (1.1.396) thereby taking away Lavinia’s status as a person. However, this is not a
feminist argument but rather a depiction of the power dynamic at stake which in this case happens to be about two Dom men and a sub woman.

The main difference that exists between the rules in *Titus Andronicus* and the rules of BDSM is the safe, sane and consensual guideline. This applies (for the most part) in real life BDSM practices, but not at all in Shakespeare’s play, unless Titus surrendering his hand to Aaron qualifies as consent. However, what does occur in *Titus Andronicus* is a conversation between reality and fiction. A play is not real, per se, and yet events occur live in front of an audience. Spectators, then, are left with a troublesome dual-layered understanding: what happens onstage is as real, and therefore as dangerous, as an audience allows itself to believe.

Having lost Lavinia to Bassianus, Saturninus’s next goal is Tamora. Tamora submits willingly to Saturninus, saying: “If Saturnine advance the Queen of Goths,/ She will a handmaid be to his desires” (1.1.328). In this scene, Tamora surrenders herself to Saturnine’s power, in fact going against her personality and status as Queen of the Goths. Tamora’s surrender is more about power than a man topping a woman, especially given how quick the reversal is. Tamora is presented with the opportunity to “top from the bottom” when she plots her revenge with Saturninus: “My lord, be ruled by me, be won at last,/...I’ll find a day to massacre them all,/ And raze their faction and their family...” (1.1.439-48). The relationship between Saturninus and Tamora is a complex one in which Saturninus thinks he is in power, when in fact he is being topped by Tamora. This is further complicated by Tamora’s new goal: overpowering the Andronici. Dominance becomes the ultimate plotline of the play, making power dynamics unavoidable from here on. As of yet, *Titus Andronicus* is not really about sex, but rather focuses on power with the knowledge that it might lead to sex.
Bondage is also an important part of BDSM, helping to establish who has power over whom. Bondage occurs on several occasions in Titus Andronicus, again serving to establish power dynamics between characters. Though the first entrance of the Goths is not specifically in bondage, this is a logical extension of their being prisoners, (1.1.sd) as well as being under the power of the Romans. After Aaron’s capture in Act V, the attempted hanging functions both as a form of discipline and power exchange. Lucius says: “A halter, soldiers! Hang him on this tree,/ And by his side this fruit of bastardy.” The hanging is, in part, performed as punishment because Aaron slept with Tamora, but it also allows the Romans to assert power over the Goths. Although not directly related to sex, power play is perhaps the most important aspect of BDSM, showing how the themes established in BDSM are also a part of Titus Andronicus.

Since the themes in Titus Andronicus overlap so significantly with those in BDSM, I would propose that a logical extension of this would be a production of Titus Andronicus that emphasizes these themes. However, I would like to accomplish this not by leaning on recognized stereotypes, but rather by utilizing the established themes and the original text.

The main elements I choose to focus on are power struggles and power exchange, and the main way this would be communicated is through costume. Every character wears a dog collar with a metal ring at the front, and carries a leash with a clip on it, like those used for dogs. When a character gains power over another in a scene, they attach their leash to the other person’s, establishing a Dom/sub relationship. For example, when Saturninus claims Lavinia, he would clip his leash onto her collar; when Tamora reveals her revenge plan to Saturninus, she would unclip his leash from her collar and attach her leash to him; when Chiron and Demetrius attack Lavinia, she would be attached to them by both their leashes. This device highlights the theme of power while also integrating a costume and prop piece that is iconic within the world of Dominants and submissives.

Costuming is perhaps the most likely pitfall for stereotyping. In an attempt to avoid this, I would ask each actor to decide if their character has a specific kink or fetish, and design their costume based on their discoveries and justifications. For instance, Marcus, who is by all evidence one of the least violent characters in Titus Andronicus, might have a foot fetish. This can be justified
because it would keep him away from delivering or receiving any heavy beatings. To indicate Marcus’s fetish, he might kiss the feet of characters who are of higher status than him. Marcus might also wear a red sock around his left arm, (Jacques, Dale, Hamilton and Sniffer Appendix E-3) which would mean integrating the handkerchief sign system, one that is very specific and limited to SM subculture.

While conducting research for their book, Gosselin and Wilson appear to have encountered some difficulty in extracting information about the population’s sexual practices. This led them to have access to less than five hundred people in total (29-31), an astoundingly small sample which ultimately gives their work questionable credibility. However, the numbers also point to the dexterity with which the BDSM community conceals itself. For this reason, I would for the most part costume the cast of Titus Andronicus in plain, modern-day clothing that echoes their rank within society. Except for a handkerchief and a collar and leash, the actors should be capable of blending in with the audience, as most BDSM practitioners do.

Titus Andronicus is by no means a simple play. The predominant themes centre on power exchange and acts of violence, topics that are generally avoided by everyone, including theatre artists. Similarly, the themes employed in BDSM—bondage/discipline, Dominance/submission, and sadism/masochism—also revolve around power dynamics and potentially harmful behaviour. The language of BDSM is intrinsically theatrical, lending itself to viewing BDSM through the lens of performance art. Like theatre, BDSM involves role play, costume, and props. In some ways, BDSM takes performance art to another level by blurring the lines between reality and the scene. Although neither is explicitly about sex, eroticism is almost unavoidably part of them. Since Titus Andronicus and BDSM so readily answer to each other, they could easily be integrated into a production of the play. This hypothetical production would not, however, be about emphasizing sexual abuse or violence, but rather an attempt to discuss power exchange and dynamics through the use of staging, props and costumes. Through this production, I seek to bring attention to the subculture of BDSM and the scene’s relationship to theatre without resorting to stereotypes, while also linking the predominant themes found in BDSM to those in Titus Andronicus.
WORKS CITED


