

ResearchSpace@Auckland

Version

This is the Accepted Manuscript version. This version is defined in the NISO recommended practice RP-8-2008 <http://www.niso.org/publications/rp/>

Suggested Reference

Boyd, B. D. (1997). The Blackamoor babe: *Titus Andronicus*, play, ballad, and history. *Notes and Queries*, 44(4), 492-494. doi:10.1093/notesj/44.4.492

Copyright

Items in ResearchSpace are protected by copyright, with all rights reserved, unless otherwise indicated. Previously published items are made available in accordance with the copyright policy of the publisher.

This is a pre-copyedited, author-produced PDF of an article accepted for publication in *Notes and Queries* following peer review. The version of record (see citation above) is available online at: doi: [10.1093/notesj/44.4.492](https://doi.org/10.1093/notesj/44.4.492)

<http://www.oxfordjournals.org/en/access-purchase/rights-and-permissions/self-archiving-policy.html>

<http://www.sherpa.ac.uk/romeo/issn/0029-3970/>

<https://researchspace.auckland.ac.nz/docs/uoa-docs/rights.htm>

THE BLACKAMoor BABE:
TITUS ANDRONICUS, PLAY, BALLAD AND HISTORY

by Brian Boyd

When the chapbook History of Titus Andronicus was unearthed in the Folger Library in the 1930s, its very feebleness seemed to prove it Shakespeare's source.¹ As Eugene Waith would observe in his 1984 Oxford edition: "It is much easier to imagine Shakespeare improving on this story than the history-writer disassembling the tightly-knotted strands of Shakespeare's plot or choosing the version of the ballad-writer, who had already done so."² But in 1971 Marco Mincoff suggested that the play had led to the ballad of "Titus Andronicus" and the ballad to the prose history.³ In his reconstruction, the ballad compressed the play according to the needs of its genre, and the history, often misconstruing details of the story, then expanded the ballad again without reference to the play. His arguments have since been extended by G.K. Hunter⁴ and, with some especially telling evidence, by MacDonald P. Jackson.⁵

Yet before the 1995 publication of his Arden Titus Andronicus, Jonathan Bate noted that it was still "the minority of scholars" who believed that the history was a derivative rather than a source of Shakespeare's play.⁶ Now his edition has appeared, that has surely begun to change, since Bate himself belongs to those who think the play comes first, and he compellingly marshals the arguments in favour of this case.⁷ But he does not address the major remaining counter-argument: that the history has an independent structure which it would seem difficult to derive from the play. Until the peculiar shape of the chapbook history can be accounted for, some might remain reluctant to accept the priority of the play.

In arguing against Mincoff's proposal, Waith (pp. 29-33) and G. Harold Metz⁸ for the most part attack his formulations without materially weakening his case for the priority of the play, but Waith (p. 32) seems to dispose of one of Mincoff's and Hunter's main points when he declares: "Considerations of generic requirements do not make clear why the writers of the ballad and history should have wanted to introduce the baby earlier" in the sequence of events than it is in the play. Let me try to make it clear, and to show that while the Moor's baby has a purpose in Shakespeare, it has none in the history.

In Act 4 of Titus Andronicus the birth of Aaron's son surprises us but justifies itself at once by so patently enriching the play's characters, conflicts and concerns. But it adds nothing to the horrors hounding Titus, and since the ballad is told from Titus's point of view, the babe can have no central part there. Yet that the empress of Rome gives birth to a blackamoor child is proof of corruption too colorful to omit. In order not to interfere with the crescendo of horrors, the ballad therefore tucks the Moor's son into the introduction of the Queen and her entourage, before describing the first of the murders:

The Emperor did make this Queen his wife,
Which bred in Rome debate and deadly strife;
The Moor with her two sons did grow so proud
That none like them in Rome was then allowed.

The Moor so pleased the new-made Empress' eye
That she consented with him secretly

For to abuse her husband's marriage bed,
And so in time a blackamoor she bred.

Then she, whose thoughts to murder were inclined,
Consented with the Moor with bloody mind
Against myself, my kin, and all my friends. . . . (ll. 21-31)

In its condensed version of the story, the ballad can leave the image of the blackamoor babe to resonate while it rushes on swiftly to the climactic crimes, without needing to stop to explain how the Emperor reacts to the flagrant fact of his wife's infidelity.

Unaware of the play, the history cannot know that the birth of the Moor's son originally follows the outrages Titus will have to avenge, and that the ballad's loose "in time" allows for such a sequence. The history places the birth where the ballad appears to, after the Queen of the Goths becomes Empress but before the crimes commence. Since the Moor must remain to take part in the later horrors, while the Emperor must now expel the favorite who has so obviously sired his wife's child, the episode in the history "is about as ineptly placed as it well could be."⁹ As Mincoff comments, "Anyone capable of inventing the story as a whole would, one would think, have devised a more telling place for it than this."¹⁰ And, surely, a less flimsy and entangled chain of events. Without the play's version of the action to build on, the history shows its sheer helplessness in the limp contrivances it concocts: the Empress's attempt to appease her husband by telling him the child "was conceived by the force of imagination" and bribing "women and physicians to testify the like had often happened,"¹¹ the banishing of the Moor, the Empress's feigning sickness and telling the Emperor she has had a vision ordering her to call back the innocent Moor or she will never recover.

The particularly inept invention here, where the history is quite unsupported by the play, strongly resembles the cluttered confusion of the events in the history prior to the material borrowed from the ballad and (ultimately) from the play. These opening sections of the history, which at first glance we may take for the kind of background Shakespeare would naturally discard to focus on the personal tragedy of Titus, seem in fact to have been designed to answer two questions in the ballad story that troubled the pedestrian mind of the prose-writer:¹² 1) Why is there a Queen of the Goths--and, obviously, no virgin queen--but no King? Answer: because Titus killed him previously; and 2) Why does the Roman Emperor marry the Gothic Queen? Answer: in order to end the warfare between their two states. In compiling his answers, the historian violates plausibility¹³ as egregiously as he does in answering the question "How could the Moor remain in Rome after the birth of the Empress's blackamoor child?"

There is nothing in the history to suggest why the incident of the Moor's babe should be there at all. It bears no relation whatever to the story's principal events--the framing and execution of Titus's sons for the murder of the Emperor's son, the rape of his daughter, and his ultimate revenge--and not only does not lead to them, but almost prevents them, until the historian's desperate invention intervenes. The birth of the Moor's child seems no more than a naive attempt to incorporate a splash of lurid color from the ballad, but by the time the history has made what it can of the incident, the color has turned to the muddy murk of a novice's gauche gouache.

But in the play the birth of Aaron's child, which has long been seen as the most Shakespearean touch in *Titus Andronicus*, not only adds new conflict and enriches Aaron's character but also introduces a complex structural contrast.¹⁴ It strains belief beyond breaking point to imagine that Shakespeare found in the history an event that served no purpose there,

that in fact almost ruined the story, but that happened to offer ready-made an intricate centrepiece for his own version of the same story.

Of course it would be no more credible for the historian to have taken the coherent account of the birth of Aaron's child directly from the play and deformed it into the confusion we find in the chapbook. But if the history derives from the ballad, and if the ballad-maker, telling the story from Titus's point of view, can afford only a line for the blackamoor babe, then the history has to make what it can of the birth. Almost nothing.

1. J. Q. Adams, ed., Shakespeare's Titus Andronicus: The First Quarto, 1594 (New York: Scribner's, 1936); R.M. Sargent, "The Source of Titus Andronicus," Studies in Philology, 46 (1949), 167-83.
2. In his 1984 Oxford edition of Titus Andronicus, p. 32. Citations from the history and the ballad will be from this edition.
3. "The Source of Titus Andronicus," N&Q, 18 (1971), 131-34.
4. "Sources and Meanings in Titus Andronicus," in J.C. Gray, ed., Mirror up to Shakespeare: Essays in Honour of G.R. Hibbard (Toronto: Univ. of Toronto Press, 1984), 171-88.
5. "The Year's Contributions to Shakespearean Study: 3. Editions and Textual Studies," Shakespeare Survey, 38 (1985), 248-50; "Titus Andronicus: Play, Ballad, And Prose History," N&Q, N.S. 36 (1989), 315-17.
6. Shakespeare and Ovid (Oxford: Clarendon, 1993), p. 102.
7. Titus Andronicus (London: Routledge, 1995), 83-85.
8. "The History of Titus Andronicus and Shakespeare's Play," N&Q, N.S. 22 (1975), 163-66, and "Titus Andronicus: Three Versions of the Story," N&Q, N.S. 35 (1988), 451-55.
9. Mincoff 1971:133.
10. Mincoff 1971: 134.
11. Waith, p. 199.
12. For a shrewd characterization of the rationalizing and prudential mind of the prose-writer, see Hunter 1984: 179-81.

13. When the Goths invade Italy, for instance, the Emperor raises "a mighty army in Greece, Italy, France, Spain, Germany, and England" (p. 196), yet does not call on his most trusted and ablest soldier, Titus Andronicus, who in fact happens to be governing a province in Greece, one of the very territories from which the army is drawn. Despite being governor, Titus when he wants shortly to come to the aid of imperilled Rome cannot command an army, and has to get together friends, and sell whatever he has of value to hire soldiers.

14. See my "Kind and Unkindness: Aaron in Titus Andronicus" (forthcoming).