

SANS MERCY: THE POLITICS OF SENESCENCE IN SHAKESPEARE'S TITUS ANDRONICUS

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Abstract

The postlapsarian curse of senescence and the various ailments and fragilities that accompany it have provided subject matter for much literary discussion in the recent years. On the one hand there is a quiet acceptance of the approaching inevitability of death on the other there is an ululation over loss of youth, power and potential for greatness. To tackle the disquietude of one's own ephemeral existence, one may resort to either a stoic acceptance of the inexorable reality and submit to the idea: *momento mori*ⁱ; or revel in the hedonistic realization of *carpe diem*ⁱⁱ. This paper explores Shakespeare's attempt to chronicle the process of aging as well as to comment on the vacillating command of an aging man over his cognitive and physical faculties. With fields like gerontology and medical humanities growing in critical importance in the recent years, it is interesting to study how the passage of time impacts an individual's agency and identity. The paper attempts to answer these questions taking *Titus Andronicus* as the core text.

Keywords: Shakespeare, Titus Andronicus, Agency, Senility, Gerontology, Identity, Medical Humanities.

Introduction

The field of medical humanities has witnessed a contemporary surge in critical interest. This is especially true for the concepts of care and gerontology owing to the recent crisis faced during the outbreak of the pandemic. It is crisis, that allows a community to revisit some inherently flawed value systems in an attempt to ameliorate the present conditions of social welfare and justice. To explore this hypothesis, the current paper examines Shakespeare's work that deals with gerontology and care, *Titus Andronicus* through the lens of medical humanities employing seminal works of critics who have explored the problem of ageing and care like Ian Stuart-Hamilton.

Analysis

Literary texts have often dealt with old age as a curse, often a bigger curse than death.ⁱⁱⁱ Shakespeare, whose works are a treasure trove of human experiences conveyed through poetry, has much to say about old age as well. All his sonnets arguably deal with the theme of aging and the need to leave something behind before one departs. Old age is vile and grotesque, "Death's second self, that seals up all in rest" (Sonnet 73). It is a monster that disintegrates man's very identity; that preys ceaselessly upon the flesh until it is finally gone. As such, old age is often defined in Shakespeare not in terms of what it entails but rather what it lacks:

Last scene of all,
That ends this strange eventful history,
Is second childishness and mere oblivion,
Sans teeth, sans eyes, sans taste, sans
everything.
As You Like It (II.VII.143-70)

It is a state of existence that is often associated with loss of power and an overwhelming sense of inaptitude. There is a certain stigma associated with old age and this is the result of a youth-oriented culture that is preoccupied with the fresh and new. Youth is, in the world of capitalism, a commodity and those who lack it are often considered destitute. "To view with hollow eye and wrinkled brow/ An age of poverty" (*The Merchant of Venice* IV.I.281-2). And yet, it is actually meant to the time of wisdom, when man is richest as even though he has lost his youth and power he has earned several gifts through a life well lived.

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The term 'old' holds within in a certain amount of ambiguity. Shakespeare, himself seems to be unsure of when the apt time is to call a person "old." Shakespeare defines it as the last scene of life that may start at the age of forty, "When forty winters shall beseege thy brow" (Sonnet 2), and very often accompanies mental as well as physical deterioration:

Pray, do not mock me:
I am a very foolish fond old man,
Fourscore and upward, not an hour more or
less;
And, to deal plainly,
I fear I am not in my perfect mind.
King Lear (II.VII.70-4)

While Shakespeare depicts Lear's sudden transformation from king to fool owing to old age, the actual transition is somewhat more complex. Modern critical studies on gerontology and care ethics state that the exact age at which one may be considered old is relative at best. There are many variables besides chronology that determine the rate and magnitude of aging in an individual. What one may know for sure is that old age is an abstract concept that encapsulates the ideas of dislodgment, disempowerment and impeachment. In a way it has nothing to do with age, it is an experience that is endured by all human beings at some point in their lives. Even though it is a universally shared human experience, an individual's enterprise and ability to endure in the face of dire circumstances is what sets the individual apart. My paper attempts to study the idea of aging and its relationship with agency and identity in Shakespeare's play *Titus Andronicus*.

Titus Andronicus is one of Shakespeare's earliest tragedies and in it, Shakespeare presents a very unique idea of old age. Titus is unlike any of Shakespeare's protagonists. The play starts with his retirement from combat. He has served Rome faithfully as a heroic general for ten years, all the while upholding the values that society of the time holds sacrosanct - honor, courage, and tradition. It is for the sake of these values that he gives up the crown and the opportunity to rule over Rome. Growing old for Titus seems to be almost a matter of choice - he wishes to be free of the duties that he had thus far considered sacred. His voluntary journey towards gerontological maturity is hindered by the death of his sons and the rape of his daughter. Personal tragedy, in his case obstructs this path to aging - he assumes agency and seeks revenge tirelessly with the fervent vigor of youth as he orchestrates revenge and emerges as a tragic hero who, unlike the more complex Hamlet, is a man of action.

L. Wardlaw Miles in his essay "Shakespeare's Old Men" says that in Shakespeare's plays "Each [age] group fulfills its dramatic function. The role of age

is comedy, of youth, tragedy. And so generally in Shakespeare's earlier plays. However, the young people affect us they hold the front and center of the stage. The old men make us laugh from its background" (Miles 1940: 287). Miles does concede that the aged may indeed be bestowed with dignity enough for tragedy. For the aged, dignity is only possible through speeches that teach patience in the face of suffering or through words of angry protest that demand justice. It has further been pointed out that the literature seldom deals with the experience of getting old or aging even though it may feature characters who are advanced in years. "Aging has happened, but rarely happens" (Jewusiak 2019: 21). One sees either the man who is about to age or the old man himself - the transition between these is often overlooked. This paper argues that Titus stands as an exception from the others in this category as not only does the audience witness him aging through the course of the play, but also witnesses him reclaim his agency. He does not disappear into the background but hold the reader/audience's attention till the tragic end.

In the first scene, when the audience is introduced to Titus he is at the height of his power. Elected by the people of Rome to serve as Emperor, he is seen as a seasoned warrior who has been at war for ten years and has already lost twenty-one sons to the battlefield. Titus's stoic resolve to serve his country and relinquish his progeny for a greater cause becomes interesting later in the play where he wavers between his love for his children and his loyalty to the crown. Despite a life encumbered with heavy losses, it is the events of the play, i.e., the death of his son and the rape of his daughter that ultimately cause him to question his belief systems. Towards the middle of the play, he can be taken as a quintessential old man riddled with contradictions that accompany the failing faculties of old age. He strikes his son down and murders him without remorse for opposing him in the first act and does not even mourn this death. Later however, when the king holds his sons captive Titus amputates his own arm for any hope of their safety. This is the first of several instances in which Titus displays traits that are contradictory to the disengagement theory of gerontology. Instead of escalating his disassociation with bonds of society, politics and flesh, Titus's age only perpetuates and heightens his fondness for his remaining children.

Discussion

An interesting point is the focus of language on the corporeal and physical - the play seems to study the effects of time on the body as the physical form remains the focal point. This is done through language that describes dismemberment, amputation, and other forms of extreme physical endurance and hardships. Also, interesting to note are the epithets applied to him in the opening scene.

Here he is the 'noble' and 'brave' warrior and yet later, as he waives the right to the throne, in a matter of few scenes, the only epithet applied to him is 'old'. It is also in the very first scene that we encounter evidence of Titus's failing body. Titus is extremely self-aware and wants only longevity and honor for his daughter and surviving sons. He refers to his feeble body, despite sufficient evidence to the contrary and claims that his body shakes with age and feebleness and denounces the crown that he may have to give up 'To-morrow' on account of his impending death. An increased deliberation on one's mortality is a common preoccupation with the geriatric population. However, his refusal to accept a position of power is not to be mistaken to powerlessness but rather a deliberate attempt to distance himself from work and enjoy the well-deserved rest that he has earned with age. Further, he seems aware that with his age his relevance in the social and political spheres must diminish.

Give me a staff of honour for mine age,
But not a sceptre to control the world;
Upright he held it, lords, that held it last.
(*Titus* 1.1.201-203)

These lines highlight not so much his inability to command a kingdom but rather his unwillingness and disinterest. In Shakespeare's *King Lear* a failing body comes with a distinct lapse in judgment. So too, seems to be the case with Titus. Despite being aware that his daughter is betrothed to Bassianus he crowns the younger brother, Saturninus, the emperor and attempts to wed his daughter to him just because Saturninus fancies it. Such frivolous and impetuous misjudgments and reckless oversight are indication of senility. Indeed, Titus ages before our own eyes instantaneously. Not only does he attempt a hasty betrothal of his daughter, and murders his son who tries to oppose him, he also naively believes that Saturninus has forgiven him for this public insult.

Titus as an aging individual seems to be vacillating between disengagement and gerotranscendence.¹¹ His acceptance of the death of twenty-one sons as well his murder of one is in stark contrast to the time when he defends his sons Quintus and Martius against the charge of murder. He wishes at that point, not to please the king, nor does he seem to prize his honor as much as he did before but bends his 'feeble' knee and sheds tears to appeal for their innocence. It is ironically in his old age that he feels the greatest sense of bereavement and the strongest attachments. "For two and twenty sons I never wept" (*Titus* 3.1.10). He makes an eloquent appeal to the tribunes who take his sons away. He beseeches them to have mercy on his sons out of pity for his age "And for these bitter tears, which now you see / Filling the aged wrinkles in my cheeks -" (*Titus* 3.1.6-7). His grief reaches a deeper abyss when he is presented with his daughter's body horribly

disfigured and raped. His reaction to the brutality acted upon Lavinia marks a turn in Titus. He contemplates briefly self-inflicting the same wounds upon himself but later thinks better of it. His response to the overwhelming grief comes in the form of laughter instead of tears as he vows revenge upon the perpetrators. Adversity regenerates him and the tragedy he sees desensitizes him even more than his many years in the battlefield.

In an essay titled "Cognitive process and aging," Paul Verhaeghen states that age does not change a person's cognitive powers. "Put simply, changes over the adult lifespan tend to be quantitative, not qualitative" (Verhaeghen 2011: 159). Verhaeghen means to say that the person does not change in essence just because he grows old, he merely becomes slower, less stable and agile. Arguably, therefore, Titus is the same in old age as he was in his youth, it only takes him longer to act now than it did then. He possesses still, the skills of a soldier and general, he needs only to put it to good use.

His anger is not blind and self-destructive but carefully brooding over ideas for its release. "Let us, that have our tongues, /Plot some device of further misery,/To make us wondered at in time to come" (*Titus* 3.1.134-36). His management of grief had so far been through what Bowlby calls "Absent grief", i.e., with a stoic resolve that emerges out of a "prolonged absence of conscious grieving." Bowlby says that "the bereaved's life continues to be organized much as before. Nevertheless, he is apt to be afflicted with a variety of psychological or physiological ills" (Bowlby 1981: 137). Under the veneer of the resolve hides a sea brimful of violent anger which Titus plans to unleash upon the wrongdoers.

The inactivity of old age transforms into the active quest for vengeance; patience turns to thoughtful conspiracy and the feeble aged man is once again a warrior ready for battle. Titus becomes acutely aware that life holds no respite for him. His body yearns for rest as he laments the battles that are still to be fought. "When will this fearful slumber have an end" (*Titus* 3.1. 251)? Even though he is ready to give his hand and his life up as oblation, circumstances seem to demand ever more from him. So great is the strain that Marcus fears, that Titus seems to grow increasingly senile and lose grasp over reality. "Alas, poor man! Grief has so wrought on him, /He takes false shadows for true substances" (*Titus* 3.2. 79-80). Indeed, his reactions are far from the realm of normativity. He laughs when he should cry, he reads into his mute daughter's signs and he rejoices over the death of a fly. And yet, as it turns out, there is a method in his madness; a spark of youthful vengeance in his senility. One way of explaining Titus's eventual resolve is the study by Lindenberger and Baltes titled "Intellectual

Functioning in Old and Very Old Age: Cross-Sectional Results from the Berlin Aging Study” that demonstrated that the individual’s ability and speed of processing information suffers a steady decline after a certain age (Lindenberger and Baltes 1997 :412). Titus reacts with anger but it is an anger that slowly builds up in his psyche, making it arguably more dangerous. Titus gradually progresses from pleading and ‘petitioning’ through arrows and tears to butchering and large-scale massacre.

Titus put on a performance - one of a feeble old man and uses it as ends to his means. It would, however, be misguided to state that his senility is a sham the way Hamlet’s madness was. It may be said that through his grief, the downward trajectory of his aging faculty is broken. And while one may say that Titus is seen to reverse the irreversible effects of aging through sheer resolve, it would be more accurate to consider that Titus is still aging, he has only managed to use his advanced years, his unassuming appearance and his fragility to his own advantage, i.e. to dissemble and deceive. Titus seemingly gains a steady control over his cognitive and physical faculties. So sure is he of his own stability of mind and body that he manages to dissemble the queen Tamora by beguiling her into believing that he had become senescent. “But we worldly men/ Have miserable, mad, mistaking eyes” (*Titus Andronicus* V.ii.65-60). To dissimulate thus is only possible when one is certain of one’s own sane un mistaken vision. Tamora is successfully deceived and falsely believes herself in control owing to Titus’ frailty, “For I can smooth and fill his aged ear/ With golden promises; that, were his heart / Almost impregnable, his old ears deaf, / Yet should both ear and heart obey my tongue” (*Titus Andronicus* IV.iv 100-103). asks her sons to stay with Titus and treat him like the larger society treats a senile old man “Yield to his humour, smooth and speak him fair” (*Titus Andronicus* V.ii.85). Margaret Ann Wilson in her thesis on “Social Cultural Aspects of Aging” makes a distinction between the Pre-Industrial and Contemporary views of the society on aging and the aged. According to her research, because of the values on which the pre-industrial society was based, it was customary for the aged and elderly to be respected members of the community. In contrast to that, with the advent of industrialization and the break-up of the family unit the once respected elderly individual is treated (mostly) like a child or an inferior (Wilson 18-30). Tamora’s insistence on humoring the senile Titus does not befit the age in which the play is staged. The purpose that it serves is twofold. First, it sets the stage for Titus’s final rise to former glory as a war hero and second, it antagonizes Tamora in the eyes of the audience even further.

Despite Titus’s own surety, the audience, especially the contemporary audience is a little less convinced

of his stability. His fondness for his family manifests late in his life and despite his best efforts he loses what he holds dear. Nevertheless, the audience witnesses him murder his own progeny twice in the duration of the play. The second time it is his own daughter Lavinia as she has lost her honor and should not live on as a painful reminder of the fact. Titus’ reasoning as well as his actions reveal his now tenuous grasp over sanity. He does not merely kill his enemies but in an attempted emulation of classical revenge tragedies he grinds their bones into paste and feeds them to their mother. His pathological grief coupled with his forced social and political alienation and isolation makes him disengage with his sense of empathy. Titus develops an amoral outlook towards life and its various aspects. It becomes easy for him to rationalize even when his rational cannot be fully trusted.

Conclusion

For Titus, aging is not a linear process but rather a complex interwoven web. He vacillates continually between fragility and vitality; strength and frailty; a sound mind and the mind of a man driven insane by grief. Titus proves that ageing is a biological process but it has several social, political and psychological implications. It is a complex cultural concept that cannot be understood simply. Titus emerges as a misfit among the common stereotypes of aging in literature, just like the play is a misfit among Shakespeare’s later, more mature and less gory plays.

Conflict of Interest

The author declares no conflict of interest in the conduct of this research.

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Endnotes

ⁱ Latin for “remember that you have to die” - “Memento Mori Definition & Meaning.” Merriam-Webster, Merriam-Webster, www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/memento%20mori. Accessed 7 Oct. 2023.

ⁱⁱ Latin for “seize the day” taken from book 1 of the Roman poet Horace's work *Odes* (23 BC) and popularized by metaphysical poets. “Carpe Diem Definition & Meaning.” Merriam-Webster, Merriam-Webster, www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/carpe%20diem. Accessed 7 Oct. 2023.

ⁱⁱⁱ As in case of Cumaean Sibyl who had to gift of immortality but not eternal youth. She grew old indefinitely and has been mentioned in Eliot's *The Wasteland* as a shrunken shadow of a woman who whispered her wish to die to any passerby who would care to listen.

^{iv} A theory that states that as an individual approaches the end of life, he inches towards acceptance and a greater degree of satisfaction towards life. It is a shift from the rational to a metaphysical view of the world.