3

Rome, Christianity, and Barbarian Memory in Titus Andronicus

Abstract: This chapter challenges the critical consensus that the setting of Titus Andronicus is a-historical. Although agreeing that the setting cannot be precisely pinpointed, the chapter argues there are significant clues in the play’s rhetoric and referentiality to Shakespeare intending the play to be set in the third century, before Rome’s conversion to Christianity under Constantine. The chapter examines the crucial role of the barbarian Goths, who, if they had been after Constantine, would have been portrayed as conquerors, but in this play are seen as conquered. Arguing that Shakespeare had a sufficiently sure grasp of late-Roman history and the important sources for it to meaningfully set a play there, the chapter argues that Titus pivots around issues of Rime Christianity, band barbarian memory.

1 Late Roman, but non-Christian

( Whether Titus Andronicus is set before or after the conversion of Constantine to Christianity in 312, and whether the Goths depicted in the play are conquerors or conquered, are pertinent to the play’s meaning. Conquering Goths are full-fledged, barbarian memory, Rome-succeeding Goths, of the type mentioned in Kliger’s survey and selectively eulogized in early modern England. Conquered Goths denote a setting when the Roman Empire was still integral and was not yet Christian. Stuart Gillespie’s recent call for a move beyond a “simple, streamlined, often monoglot literary history” that fallaciously contends Greek and Latin texts “appealed only to an elite audience” provides a model for suggesting, conjecturally, that some of the recently printed Latin texts in which this material circulated, as well as their citations by other Elizabethan texts, could have influenced Shakespeare.

As Robert Miola asserts, Elizabethans looked to Rome for “instructive parallels between ancient history and contemporary politics,” parallels that necessarily involved both similarity and difference. Moreover, a Roman play, by definition, excluded Christianity, even though the Roman Empire eventually became Christian. Coriolanus is set too early to interact with Judeo-Christian tradition, as is Shakespeare’s narrative poem set in primordially early Rome, “The Rape of Lucrece.” Julius Caesar, commencing not long after Pompey the Great is vanquished, eschews the most likely means of including biblical material (Pompey conquering Jerusalem). Although Antony and Cleopatra, set mostly in Egypt, could make reference to nearby Palestine and to biblical or Jewish characters, it does not. The one “Roman” play that implicitly alludes to Christianity is Cymbeline by Cymbeline ruling as king at the time of Jesus. Similarly, if less suggestively, Jonson’s 1603 Sejanus: His Fall, whose title character ruled Rome just at the time of the Crucifixion (as postulated by Patristic writers such as Lactantius and Eusebius) testifies to the Christian connection by its very muteness on the subject. So, in a necessarily more complex way, does Elizabeth Cary’s 1613 play of Herod’s dynasty, The Tragedy of Mariam. Shakespeare otherwise avoided the lifetime of Christ in his plays, as well as anything relating to the early history of Christianity. The centuries in which Roman and Christian identities overtly interact with each other were, however, featured by Shakespeare’s contemporaries and collaborators (Fletcher’s semi-historical Valentinian, Fletcher and Massinger’s 1622 The Prophetess—featuring the Emperor Diocletian—and