

**Discovering American Values in Shakespeare's *Titus*:**  
**"All the water in the ocean can never turn the swan's black legs to white."**  
**(*Titus Andronicus* IV:ii)**

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## **INTRODUCTION**

The core of vengeance remains static because it generates more of the same; violence creates more violence. Moreover, Shakespeare's play *Titus Andronicus* is important to the lives of our students because it portrays vengeance with the imagery of violence, its only dimension. The play projects the message that confounds America today, and that is revenge leaves destruction in its wake and nothing more. In an interview with Julie Taymor, the director of the 1999 film production of *Titus*, says, "Our entertainment industry thrives on the graphic details of murders, rapes and villainy, yet it is rare to find a film or play that not only reflects on these dark events but also turns them inside out, probing and challenging our fundamental beliefs on morality and justice" (Eby). For example, the American public pays homage to films like *The Godfather* and to the current series titled *The Sopranos* which proves a hit as a Showtime series reflecting the blood, gore, and violence associated with the passion for settling scores. To the point, Taymor's portrayal of violence parallels the present violence in America; for instance, our daily news coverage of the McVeigh execution and the bombing of the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma remind the students of the predictable nature of retribution. In America's present state of law and order, the line between justice and vengeance often dissipates. Furthermore, one reviewer said, "The ultimate message of the film suggests that no matter what the day, what the time, what the era, violence, revenge, murder, and atrocity will always exist and remain relatively the same" (Neoromeo). Julie Taymor's *Titus* is an interpretive body of work committed to the world of our students; subsequently, the student will find this play far more engrossing because it is housed in the theater of their time, the Special Edition DVD in glorious 5.1 surround, as opposed to a theater of the vanished past.

Taymor's adaptation of *Titus* is a mirror for twenty-first century America. As a consequence of Taymor's direction, the audience witnesses a battle between rivals set in an array of 1940s, 1950s, ancient Roman, and Fascist European architecture, costuming and iconography. The anachronisms deliver the message that vengeance and retribution have not changed throughout history, nor should we expect any change. Moreover, the anachronisms were apart of Shakespeare's own production. According to a review posted October 11, 2000 from Stratford, England, drawings of the 1590s production of *Titus* display Shakespeare's use of Medieval gowns, Elizabethan outfits and Roman togas. In addition, the reviewer asserts, "This blurring of historical eras is a quality of Renaissance literature, art and drama across the board" (drn5). The reviewer reminds us that the Elizabethan dramatists were not "pedantic history majors," and to the contrary, the Victorians staged Shakespeare's plays strictly to time period. In response to the

mixing of the surreal and extreme realism, another reviewer says, “In a time when the lines between fantasy and reality become blurred, Taymor’s *Titus* takes an uncompromising look at the saturation of violence in our lives, and in the lives of our children” (Mical). The relevance of *Titus* is that it explores a deadly flaw within our American society.

Literary historian and critic Dan Meyerson asserts the notion that William Shakespeare’s influence upon other artists continues to be immeasurable. Without Shakespeare, the works of Joyce, Dostoyevsky, Hugo and Dickens would not have been what they were. Artists and composers have turned to Shakespeare as well, and his plays are the source of much great art and music. Poet Ben Jonson said, “He was not of an age, but for all time!” and in the same spirit of Jonson and Meyerson, we turn to Shakespeare in the high school English forum. Nationwide, the classroom anthologies house *Romeo and Juliet*, *Julius Caesar* and *MacBeth*. In addition, the College Board’s Advanced Placement Literature Exam annually cites Shakespeare’s plays for stylistic analysis. Our campus is the Michael E. DeBakey High School for the Health Professions, a magnet program comprised of largely gifted and talented students who face the Advanced Placement exams before graduation. 100 percent of our students will enroll in AP classes like English, physics, biology and calculus. Subsequently, this college prep student grapples with the structure, the stylistics and the historiography of Shakespeare’s work. As a result, our teachers require workable resources and reference guides when selecting a play and when determining worthy approaches to the material.

There are some important issues at stake when considering an author who requires the amount of time and study as the Renaissance playwright. It is difficult to know an exact mindset behind any work of Shakespeare; accordingly, Dan Meyerson’s literary guide said that Shakespeare not only represented Elizabethan political values but was said to have subverted them as well. He has been called a cynic, a Machiavellian, a Tudor propagandist, a philosopher and a man without a philosophy of life. More to the point, Shakespeare, says Meyerson, “portrays the essence of the human soul and thus gives us a way to know ourselves” (5). He succeeded arguably in the most popular medium of his time, and so his greatest achievement proved the public audience. Therefore, attempting a work reflective of an age of Rome requires prior knowledge of the setting, the politics, the culture, and the people.

## **BACKGROUND NARRATIVE**

Known as part of a blood genre, *Titus Andronicus* presents the Roman general Titus returning triumphantly from the defeat of the Goths. The play is unrelated to any part of Roman history although its fictitious battle mirrors the historical conflicts that existed between the Romans and the competing tribes of the Ostrogoths, Huns and Visigoths. At the start, Titus sacrifices Queen Tamora’s oldest son Alarbus to appease the ghosts of his own sons who died in battle; “Religiously they ask a sacrifice; / To this your son is markt; and die he must, / T’appease their groaning shadows that are gone” (I.i). Titus

taxes Tamora with the cost of her child even though she has suffered the loss of 18 of her 20 sons; obviously, Titus sees equity and justice in vengeance. Predictably, Queen Tamora becomes Titus' mortal enemy. She and her lover Aaron the Moor, a man filled with violent loathing for the Romans and the Goths, will plot against Titus' family. For instance, Tamora's surviving sons will cut out the tongue and cut off the hands of Lavinia, the innocent daughter of Titus. Aaron then blames the mutilation of Lavinia on Titus' two sons, who are then decapitated by the Goths. Eventually, the Moor, who is buried up to his chest and left to starve to death, only regrets not having committed more evil. Violence begets greater violence as the sons of the Goth queen are slain by Titus and are subsequently fed to the queen in a pie.

### **The American Adaptation of *Titus***

An American value inherent in Julie Taymor's 1999 production of *Titus* is the ever-present public rage at the corruption of those in power. Our students' contempt for politicians is no longer connected to Watergate, but to the voting ballot scandal of the recent presidential election and to Monica-gate. They now view our presidents as capable of moral ineptitude and buffoonery, and like George C. Scott's portrayal of Patton, they see Titus, a general lost to his absurd devotion to the ancient protocols of war. The audience traditionally sympathizes with the suffering of such tragic characters like Hamlet or Lear, but the audience will find themselves distant from Titus because he proves foolishly isolated from himself, from his children and from the other members of his political world. Titus is a fallen leader who lacks spirituality. Hence, *Titus* is not a tragedy but a black comedy of a leader stymied by his loyalty to convention and unmoved by any sentiment other than revenge. As a result, Taymor's dark, comedic approach to the violence helps to cushion or deaden the blows inflicted throughout the play.

Shakespeare's portrayal of the conflict between the Romans and the Goths embodies the political condition reminiscent of American history. According to the sixteenth century play, the Goths were simply Barbarians void of civility and the Romans suffered the task of conquering the savage tribe. However, historian Brian Tierney explains that the Romans dismissed the Goths residing in their Roman colonies as rightful citizens of the Empire. As a result, the minority or sub culture proved restless and at odds with the government. Civil outbreaks persisted instead of assimilation; similarly, the Native American, African American and Asian American have experienced the injustices of the early Goths of the Roman Empire because they were also denied a political voice or protection from financial inequity. According to Brian Tierney's research on Rome, the Goths were exploited and treated as slaves by the Romans who promised protection from the rising Huns. To the point, one interesting review of Taymor's film focuses on the design of Queen Tamora's costume because she bears a strong resemblance to the Statue of Liberty. The Goth queen supports a diadem like the statue; as an American icon of freedom for the immigrants reaching Ellis Island, the statue, like Tamora, serves as a beacon for the waves of new immigrants to the shores of this country.

Another American icon is suggested in the portrayal of Titus' daughter Lavinia. Once Queen Tamora suffers the slaughter of her son by Titus' sons, she sets out to avenge his death. She teams up with Saturninus, the son to the late Emperor of Rome and newly crowned Emperor. While in the arms of Aaron the Moor, the Goth Empress of Rome is discovered by Lavinia and her fiancé Bassianus. Tamora calls upon her nearby princes to avenge her for Lavinia and Bassianus, she contrived, had plotted to tie her up and leave her to the "Thousand fiends, thousand hissing snakes, / Ten thousand swelling toads" (II.ii). Believing their mother's wild tale, the princes take Lavinia away to torture her. Furthermore, Lavinia's pleas for mercy fall on unfeeling Tamora who responds, "Remember, boys, I pour'd forth tears in vain / To save your brother from the sacrifice / But fierce Andronicus would not relent: / Therefore, away with her, and use her as you will; / The worse to her, the better loved of me" (II.ii). The princes ravage Lavinia and leave her suffering without her hands and tongue. The play simply stages Marcus Andronicus on stage when discovering his niece cowering from the brutal attack. More to the point, Taymor portrays Lavinia on a jagged stump amidst a wasteland of dead trees and mud. Lavinia's hands have been replaced by twigs, but in a slow circling camera motion, she is seen holding the hem of her petticoat down as the princes howl and taunt her. One reviewer draws the metaphor of the American icon Marilyn Monroe who stood holding her hem against the rising steam of a street grate (Smith). The seductive nature of Monroe is suggested in the victimization of Lavinia.

Racial tension and conflict are personified in Aaron the Moor, the evil antagonist whose only regret is that he cannot live to commit more crime. "Tut, I have done a thousand dreadful things / As willingly as one would kill a fly; / And nothing grieves me heartily indeed, / But that I cannot do ten thousand more" (V.i). Aaron is the ultimate villain because he is not Roman and he is not white; he proves to be the dreaded enemy who roams free of alliance. He lacks loyalty for everyone except his newborn infant. While newly married to the emperor Saturnius, Tamora has Aaron's child in secret. Aaron is committed to saving the child from certain destruction at the hands of the Romans who will inevitably discover their dark secret. Although Aaron takes pride in his violence and killing, he reveals his Achilles' heel in his newfound devotion for his son. "Come on, you thick-lipt slave, I'll bear you hence; ...I'll make you feed on berries and on roots...and bring you up / To be a warrior and command a camp" (IV.ii). This is a very interesting element of our antagonist, because he proves devoted to his child while Titus righteously killed both his son and daughter. The topic of Aaron can prove worthwhile when studied as a part of American culture. The "one drop rule" was an American practice that still intrigues the students. Shakespeare and Taymor conclude the play with the survival of the "beige" offspring. So, the question posed is whether this will prove an optimistic ending or simply a doomed generation born to violence and mayhem.

Harold Bloom's text of literary criticism, *Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human*, provides short, accessible essays on each of the Bard's plays. Although Bloom's opinion

of *Titus Andronicus* is scathing and irreverent, he offers some helpful insight into the construction of the antagonist, Aaron the Moore. For example, he wrote of the play, "...it was a howler, and expected the more discerning to wallow in it self-consciously. If sadomasochism is your preferred mode, then *Titus* is your meat" (79). Bloom goes on to compare Shakespeare to Stephen King, as a horror-film maker "unleashed on the Romans" (84). Beyond the disparaging criticism is Bloom's insight to the success of the antagonist as interesting, provocative and even as endearing to the audience. Titus remains distant and far from the audience as his murderous tirade proves more and more unimaginable.

Another approach to the study of Shakespeare explores an era of the Roman Empire and the methods by which the playwright and director chose to represent that epoch. A study of the crash of a once powerful civilization provides the teacher with subject matter ripe for student-led analysis and application. For instance, the Roman experience was mentioned repeatedly in the constitutional debates at Philadelphia. The consequence of Roman centralization had their part in discouraging schemes for a central, rather than federal, government in America. The Roman social struggles reminded American leaders of the need for recognizing and harmonizing the claims of different classes in their own society. Consider for instance the passage from Russell Kirks' *The Roots of American Order*:

Rome's legacy of law was part of the American inheritance. And the Roman administrative genius, the insights of Cicero and Virgil, the heroic examples of Roman republicans and emperors, all went into the institutions and the cast of mind of the early Americans...Eliot would write in the twentieth century-that so far as we inherit the civilization of Europe, we remain citizens of the Roman Empire. (134)

In its law and in other concerns, the Roman commonwealth held more meaning for the new United States than did any other civilization and political community except the British and their own colonial society.

### **Disclaimer and Strategy for Classroom Viewing**

I do not recommend a classroom viewing of the Taymor's film in its entirety. Many scenes are problematic as a result of the play's violent nature; instead, I recommend only those scenes pertinent to establishing the director's interpretation of Shakespeare's play and the American values present in the iconography.

The DVD Special Edition of *Titus* provides a scene-by-scene index for the play. I recommend viewing Act 1's scene one entitled "Childish Things" because it sets up the 1950s kitchen, the child mad at play with his toy soldiers, both modern superhero and classic soldier. Through a kind of time warp he is transported to Rome as Titus returns

complete with army, military tanks, Roman chariots, Etruscan uniforms, the Goth prisoners and the bodies of his dead sons.

The next scene for classroom viewing could be scenes 2 and 5 from Act 1, entitled “Return to Rome” and “A Head on Headless Rome.” The exposition of the play is clearly established around the return of Titus as a hero, but retiring soldier. He returns victorious from war and in command of his barbarous prisoners. He will be assigned the new leader of Rome, but will decline in hopes of rest. The campaigns of the Emperor’s sons provide terrific imagery for the students’ exploration. The cars, chariots, jazz score, and Fascist costumes and architecture borrow much from twentieth century America. The DVD also provides commentary on the costume designs with actual renderings and descriptions. An interview and scene-by-scene commentary by the performers, director and composer offer insight into the vision of the play.

I would also include scene 7 from Act 2 which depicts Aaron’s strategy and a close look at the antagonist, adulterer and good-father. The depiction of Aaron provides a multifaceted character worthy of discussion. He is clear that he shares no alliance with anyone except himself. Act 5, scene 27 is the last viewing I recommend because it is Aaron’s confession. The transformation of this evil figure might gain the empathy of the students, and it is sure to spark discussion.

### **Viewing *Titus* through a Critical Lens**

I have found that approaching a work as weighty as *Titus* requires a perspective from a specific school of critical thought. For instance, the text we use on our campus is titled *Literary Theories: A Sampling of Critical Lenses*, and we have had much success in understanding the chapters as well as incorporating the information into our assignments for literary criticism. One particular approach to a plot premised on a political ruler and tyranny is explored in terms that the students contend with comfortably. More to the point, the Marxist critic examines the economic and cultural theory of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, especially while considering the following assertions:

1. Materialism -- Each stage is formed by the economic system. For example, most production under feudalism was agricultural, while most production under capitalism was industrial. Under capitalism, a small bourgeoisie formed, and these consisted of the entrepreneurs, both small and large. With the Roman Empire, the students can apply the capitalist system and its inherent class structure.
2. Class Struggle -- Each system can be characterized by the exploitation of one class by another.
3. The Dialectic -- Marx believed that great historical changes followed a triangular pattern of thesis-antithesis-synthesis. For example, the existence of the ruling bourgeoisie under capitalism made necessary the existence of its opposite, the proletariat. The two opposites will conflict until they generate a

new, higher stage (synthesis). The Roman Empire is an interesting testing ground for this theory because it proved incapable of resolving or synthesizing its class conflict.

4. Capitalism -- Marx saw capitalism as the cruelest, most efficient system yet evolved for the exploitation of the working majority by a small class of owners. It was the nature of capitalism for wealth and ownership to be concentrated into an ever-shrinking class of mega-rich. This was one of many internal contradictions of capitalism that would inevitably destroy it. The Roman Empire had its Senate and within this political class stood the wealthy of the people.
5. Working-Class Misery -- It is the nature of capitalist production methods to become more and more technologically efficient, requiring fewer and fewer workers to produce more and more goods. Therefore, capitalism would be plagued by bouts of high unemployment. As machines made a worker's skill less important, wages would be pushed ever downward. As each worker became simply an appendage of a machine, his job would be less satisfying, and the worker would become more alienated.
6. Class-Consciousness -- Such total exploitation of so many by so few could not last forever. The workers would inevitably develop an awareness of their predicament.

While the students consider the fate of the barbarians in the hands of Roman authority, they may find relevance in the historical background of the Fall of Rome and in addition, have a greater appreciation for the social and economic systems that failed in the empire. Rome's fear and intolerance of a foreign tribe shapes the undercurrent of *Titus*. Ultimately, the Roman political structure is compromised in Shakespeare's play as the emperor takes a barbarian wife. The blood is mixed, the power shifts, and the demise of the empire appears to the audience as certain when Titus holds fast to the archaic traditions that in due course fail to protect his family. Furthermore, the class will find the Marxist approach applicable to American society as the current debates for immigration remain blistering. Anna Deveare Smith's PBS one man play *Fires in the Mirror* can be helpful in igniting discussion about neighborhoods like South Central Los Angeles, California and Crown Heights, New York that are paralyzed by ethnic intolerance and civil unrest.

### **Historical Background on the Fall of Rome**

Like so many minorities throughout American history, the Ostrogoths, Visigoths, Vandals, Saxons, and Franks were perceived by the Romans as barbarians who existed outside the realm of law and religion. To the contrary, the Goth tribes practiced Christianity as discussed in paragraph A.2. They lived according to a code of justice known as the Law Code of the Salian Franks as described in paragraph A.5. Their ability to assimilate into the Roman Empire demonstrated a sense of survival, but servitude under Roman authority resulted in civil revolt, as referred to in paragraph A.3. More to

the point, this research provides an accurate depiction of the disenfranchised state of the barbarians, adding a new dimension to the characters of Titus and the barbarian queen Tamora. The queen appears far more justified in her anger as Titus proclaims justice in the execution of her eldest son.

The historical background on the Fall of Rome will reveal a number of important lessons for the students when considering the play with “critical lenses.” For example, historians used to speak of the murder of the Roman Empire by the Germanic peoples. The following research explores the Germanic “invasions” and/or “migrations” in terms of the nature of Germanic culture and customs and how and why they entered the Roman Empire. It also suggests an answer to the question, “Did the barbarians murder the Empire?” Brian Tierney is the author of two historical texts entitled: *Sources of Medieval History – The Middle Ages* and *Western Europe in the Middle Ages: 300-1475*.

### **A.1. Migration**

The Germanic peoples began to migrate from their northern homelands around 500 BC, and by the first century BC they occupied the region presently known as Germany. Other German tribes settled eastward on the Russian Steppes. These tribes shared some basic tenants of life, such as their language, their penchant for hunting and fighting neighboring tribes for possession of cattle, livestock, weapons and land. The essential organization within the tribes consisted of lordships and kinships where they practiced ties of personal loyalty.

The lordship was voluntary and also a product of warring because it was based on the selection of a leader outside the kinship. The leader promised a share in the new-found wealth for those who offered their loyalty to his command. The kinship was a grouping of various clans as one, single tribe tied by loyalty and perhaps a shared descent from a god or hero.

### **A.2. The Tribes**

The primary differences between the Germans of the East and the Germans of the West became apparent by the fourth century. The Saxons, Suevi, Franks and Alemanni moved south settling along the borders of the Roman Empire as farmers. The Eastern tribes, on the other hand, the Goths, Vandals and Lombards, moved into northwestern Europe as nomads and herdsman. The Goths eventually split into two groups called the Ostrogoths, who settled along the Dniester to the Don, and the Visigoths, who settled along the Danube. Another distinguishing trait was that the Visigoths practiced Arian Christianity while the Ostrogoths practiced the Christianity of the Roman Church.



### **A.3. Assimilation**

The Roman Empire absorbed some of the Germans as *coloni* and as slaves while many served the Roman army. The *foederati* were created as a federated unit of Germanic people protected by the Empire. These were groups of German warriors under a chieftain who fought in alliance with the Empire. The role of the Empire was to protect the *foederati* from the violence of the Huns, but according to Tierney, the Romans took advantage of the Visigoths by treating them as slaves. The exploitation led to civil unrest and revolt.

An important uprising came in 378 at the battle of Adrianople where Valens was killed. The Goths rose again under a king named Alaric I, who led the brutal attack on Greece. Tierney said that Theodosius I (379-395) restored order until 397 by bestowing the title of *magister militum* of Illyricum upon Alaric I, which pacified the Goths and their king. However, in 402 he led the Goths in an attack on Italy, but was stopped by the commander of the Western armies, Stilicho, a Vandal. Tierney said this situation typified the dependence of the Empire on the competence of a Germanic tribe to ward off the attacks of other Germanic tribes. By 406 the border defenses gave way to invasions of primarily Vandals who surged into the Empire. In 409 Alaric threatened to invade Italy again but was bought off until he sacked Rome in 410. He intended to lead the Visigoths into the province of Africa but died shortly after. His successors created a Visigothic kingdom that reached from the Loire to the Straits of Gibraltar. By 429 the Vandals pressed the Visigoths in Spain causing their migration into North Africa in 429.

### **A.4. The Rise of the Huns**

A rise in a new power was centered in the Huns, a Mongolian people who spoke a language of the Altaic group. They were horsemen and archers moving westward after a defeat at the border of China. Their attacks on the Germanic tribes living on the Russian Steppes set an entire wave of migration in action. The Huns, led by Attila (433-453) broke across the Rhine into the Empire in 452. Aetius, the Empress Gala Placidia's general and *magister militum*, succeeded in making an alliance with the Visigothic king, and with an army comprised of Gallo-Romans, Visigoths and other Germans, he defeated the Huns near Chalons. With the death of Attila and with the weakening of his army by pestilence, the threat of the Huns subsided around 454 AD.

The exchange of power in the Empire became considerable. The fifth century saw a line of emperors that ruled ineffectively due to assassination, murder and lynching. By 486 Clovis, the Frankish chief, seized the lands between the Seine and the Loire. Clovis was one of the most powerful German ruler who converted to Christianity. Clovis was a convert, but he was infamous for killing relatives with the hope of securing his own birth line for the throne. His political reign was essentially that of a primitive Germanic monarchy who failed to maintain the administration once held by the Romans. Tierney said that Clovis did not intend to destroy the Roman institutions, but he had no idea how to hold on to them (73).

## **A.5. Early Law**

The Law Code of the Salian Franks was a primitive Teutonic code of law that was handed down by word of mouth. These rules of compensation depict the thinking and sense of justice that characterized the Germanic tribes. For example, the rape of a free girl resulted in the payment of 30 shillings by the accused. If a Frank should plunder a Roman, the fine was 35 shillings. The Chrenecruda was important because it provided for eye-witness testimony and character testimony on behalf of the accused. The wergeld provided a compensation to the victim's family. The codes concerning personal property forbade the woman's right to inherit land. The culture of the Germanic people emphasized war and a warrior ethos, or virtues. For example, the Comitatus or war band was crucial for victory and survival. The codes prevented the destructive force of the vendetta that could certainly tear away at the ties of the family, clan and tribe.

The Ostrogoths crossed the Danube under the leadership of Theodoric who, in 489, established himself as ruler of Italy. Theodoric ran the government with a blend of Roman government and German military. He continued the Roman bureaucracy previously established by the Romans in the provinces and civitates. The Romans maintained the government as the Goths remained involved with the military. But, he was not a Christian ruler because he was an Arian heretic who suffered limited Roman loyalty as a result.

## **A.6. Conclusion and Tierney's Thesis**

The invasions effectively broke the weakened spine of the Roman Empire; as viewed as the only cause of the fall, the invasions prove lacking. The Empire could not in its failing condition withstand the masses that swarmed through the borders nor could the Empire absorb the numbers as they had accommodated and assimilated the Gauls and Britons. The barbarians provided the euthanasia of a terminally ill Empire, not the murder.

## **C.1. Attila the Hun: A Book Review of One of History's Greatest Warriors**

One important aspect of the play is the portrayal of Queen Tamora and her barbarous sons. This image prompts an interesting opportunity to the class to consider research that paints a clearer picture of a commanding figure among the rival tribes was Attila the Hun. His infamy was premised on folklore and biased research, leaving an unfair portrayal of a leader who prevailed in impacting change on the greatest empire of his century. This profile of Attila provides a close look at an infamous warrior and the terrified reaction the Huns created among the barbarous tribes. This section examines how the Hun leader forced a migratory move as a result of marauding violence that ultimately catapulted the final demise for Rome. The research is based on Patrick Howarth's historical text by called *Attila, King of the Huns and the Myth*.

## **B.1. Author's Thesis and other Salient Points**

Howarth asserts that Attila the Hun was not the “blood-thirsty tyrant” of myth and legend, but a leader of military prowess who rose above his contemporaries (16). The author points to the popular image of Attila as a product of maligning literature composed by Roman citizens content with the “prevailing derogatory view of barbarians” (17). Christian historians who condemned the Huns as pagans succeeded these chroniclers. Howarth's thesis is premised on new research that points to the leader as a military commander who exploited existing opportunities and who possessed a vision of conquering “most of the known world” (17).

The research on Attila provides the depiction of a historical figure who proved the culmination of ancestral wisdom and cunning, as referred to in paragraph B.2. In addition paragraphs B.4 and B.5 describe the events surrounding the blackmailing of Rome. Attila was also murderous and treacherous, like Titus, when contending with his own family, as seen in paragraph B.5 Furthermore, section B.3 asserts that the horses and weapons and the Huns guaranteed their military might. This information will be fused together in the lessons designed for presentation and commentary on the world of Taymor's Titus and Howarth's Attila the Hun.

## **B.2. Ancestry of the Huns**

Howarth's second chapter links the Huns to the ancient tribe called the Hsiung-nu, a people identified as causing trouble for China. The Hsiung-nu were horsemen, nomadic and located along the western silk road. In groups comprised of six to ten families, the tribe would travel and settle forming a “kind of social cooperative” (18). From within these cooperatives a leader would emerge founding a dynasty. Howarth said these nomadic dynasties would continue to evolve in size and strength as long as the dynastic ruler was strong. He also said the Hsiung-nu developed in their methods of mobile warfare; consequently, the Great Wall of China was constructed as protection from these marauders (18). Wealth and rations were achieved by acts of plundering for the Hsiung-nu; large territories were traversed for the subsequent increases in livestock, food, weapons, and gold. By the first century BC, the Hsiung-nu suffered a significant defeat by Chinese rulers. The tribe effectively disappeared from Chinese records (18).

Like the Hsiung-nu, the Huns were an amalgamation of nomadic warring tribes who, similar to the Hsiung-nu, insisted on tribute from threatened or conquered tribes. The tribute was paid in the form of gold, silk, and female slaves. According to Howarth's research in recent archeological finds, new evidence supports the conclusion that the Huns were located along the silk roads in China, and in the Soviet Union, as well as in North Africa and even in England. As the Hsiung-nu, the Huns were skilled horsemen and bowmen. The migration west for the Huns was the result of temperature change, a “general lowering temperature in northern Europe” (19). As a reaction to the lower temperatures, the various steppe tribes migrated westward and closer to the sea. In

addition to the climate change, a dry cycle occurred driving the steppe nomads westward in search of food. Huns drove refugees ahead of their own tribes. Howarth suggested that the refugees were seeking some means of escape from the military might of the Huns, as well as an escape from their frightening appearance. This appearance can be attributed to the strange helmets, armor and horses ridden by the Huns (19).

### **B.3. The Unique Breed of Hunnish Horses**

Unique to the Huns were the horses. These animals were unlike the large plow horses or the fast stallions of the European landscape. The Hunnish horses were quick and capable of traveling up to one hundred kilometers a day. This breed was 20 centimeters shorter than the typical horse. They also possessed “excellent hooves” that could endure difficult terrain and long distances without shoeing. In addition, they could find food under snow. The horse had large heads, bulging eyes, elongated nostrils, broad jaws and rigid necks. Their manes hung to their knees and their backbones curved. They had strong shinbones and small feet and the “soft parts were hollow” (19). Their bodies were angular, without fat and “the leanness was striking” (19). Howarth also recalled that in some Hunnish graves of the warriors a horse’s skull could be found. One grave in particular had two identical skulls (20).

The Huns were noted as great horsemen and were remembered as capable of sleeping in the saddle, of eating in the saddle and of living in the saddle. “Other commentators, like Count Zosimus, wrote of Hun riders and horses being nailed or soldered together. One even stated that ‘not even the centaurs grew closer to their horses than they did’” (20). The Huns might have been the inventors of the stirrup; although, Howarth points out that the Sarmatians were credited with the invention. Nevertheless, the Huns improved the effectiveness of their skills with the stirrup.

As bowmen, the Huns were equally skilled. Their equipment was better than the Romans’, whose bows could only be drawn a few centimeters. The Huns, on the other hand, could draw their bows 20 to 30 centimeters. As a result, the Huns could launch their arrows up to 300 meters and kill an enemy at 150 feet. Howarth said that reflex bows have recently confirmed the veracity of these statements. For example, he said that at 50 meters these bows could pierce a wild boar (21).

Howarth compared the advancing strategies of the Huns to the “blitzkrieg.” In other words, the warriors would move in ordnances of 500 to 1,000 men approaching in zig-zag formations. At times they would appear to be retreating and would quickly turn towards the enemy, stand in their saddles and darken the sky with arrows. Carrying up to 30 arrows per man, the warriors would require supplies from a “kind of mobile ordnance factory consisting of mounted workmen who traveled with the warriors” (21).

#### **B.4. Huns Demand Ransom from Rome**

Chapter five discusses the first ruler of the Huns, a king named Ruga or Rua. He was strong king, however, he did not succeed in galvanizing or consolidating the various Hunnish tribes. A first-hand account of Ruga was in 422 AD when he launched an attack along the lower Danube River. He settled into Thrace with his forces and reached an agreement with Theodosius II; accordingly, the Huns would receive tribute of three hundred and fifty pounds of gold, or twenty-five thousand solidi in exchange for peace. The Romans saw fit to pay the tribute instead of losing manpower to the arrows of the Huns. Howarth also suggested that the wealth would be spent on Roman goods so the loss proved bearable to the Romans.

Ruga died in 434 AD and was succeeded by Bleda, Attila's older brother. Some reports offered that actually Attila and Bleda ruled together; although, Howarth did not offer any evidence to either report. Soon after the death of Ruga, Constantinople suspended agreements with the Huns. Presses at Margus, Bleda and Attila persuaded the Empire to double the annual tribute and to refrain from any alliances with enemies of the Huns. "The treaty of Margus in 435 was for the Huns and unqualified triumph" (37). Howarth asserts that the Huns were exceeding in their demands, not as simple plunder for wealth, but for security as well as economy (37).

#### **B.5. Hunnish Attacks along the Danube**

Attila and Bleda directed their attentions on consolidating their empire in the region of the Alps and the Rhine. By 439 and 440, wars broke out on a number of fronts negatively affecting the Empire. Bleda saw his opportunity for plundering the Balkans. The first assault was at Castra Constantion on the Danube; more to the point, the Huns were clearly in reach of the treaty at Margus. The Huns charged that their graves had been violated and that Roman officials in Margus had taken hostages. Specifically, they charged that the Bishop of Margus was behind the acts of betrayal. Howarth says the Romans did not deny the behavior (38). In 441 the Huns launched an assault on the Danubian frontier of the Eastern Empire. By 442, the Eastern Romans arranged a truce and retreated westward. Attila attacked again in 443 conquering the towns along the Danube; in addition, the Huns drove in the interior of Naissus (Nish or Nis) and Serdica (Sofia), ultimately destroying the \_\_\_\_\_ (39). Attila turned his forces towards Constantinople and took Philippopolis. Attila defeated the Romans in a succession of battles until they reached the sea north and south of Constantinople. The walls of the city kept the archers at bay, so Attila's cavalry pulled back and attacked the forces at Gallipoli, destroying them. By 443 Bleda's campaign was successful and resulted in a peace treaty with the Eastern Empire commanding the payment of arrears for 6,000 pounds in gold and a yearly tribute of 2,100 pounds of gold (41-43).

Bleda died in 443 and different accounts allege Attila's involvement. While some accounts claimed Attila had Bleda murdered, other asserted that Bleda died accidentally

in a hunting accident. What was clear about Bleda's death was that it left Attila sole leader over the Huns.

### **B.6. Progress in the Hunnish Kingdom**

Attila's kingdom was accredited with the innovation of saddles, bridles, swords measuring 120 centimeters long, copper and bronze vessels, as well as ceramics of Chinese influence. The Huns had a "military ruling class or aristocracy," and according to Howarth's research, they were no more cruel than other invading tribes. The Hun language remains an enigma because it cannot be traced to its original group of languages. "Procopius described the Huns as 'absolutely unacquainted with writing and unskilled in it to the present day'" (43). Their religious practices involved the sacrificing of horses, the lacerating of their faces and the warding-off of evil with totems (43).

A second campaign led by autocratic Attila was launched against the Eastern Roman Empire in 447, and to was much bigger than the previous campaigns under Bleda. Previously, the Huns followed the same strategies as commanded by Ruga; the horsemen would commit lightning strikes by soldiers who appeared quickly from nowhere, advance, retreat and return in a blitzkrieg of arrows (49). To the contrary, these strategies worked effectively in sparsely inhabited areas, but Constantinople was quite different and required a new strategy. Attila commanded an "expeditionary force" comprised of Germanic and Iranian peoples. An ecclesiastical chronicler, Calinicus described the campaign; the Huns in Thrace were strong enough to conquer one hundred cities. "There were so many murders and blood-lettings that the dead could not be numbered" (49). Howarth supported this statement with another account that alleged that the Huns had not historically attacked monasteries or "desecrated the graves of saints" until 447 AD (49).

Attila engaged in battles along the Utus River. He devastated the Balkan provinces, driving southward to Greece, but was stopped at Thermopylae. A three-year period of negotiations occurred between Attila and Theodosius II. The Roman chronicler Priscus of Panium visited Attila in Walachia in 449 and recorded his observation in a text called the *History of Byzantium* (66). Within the firsthand account of Priscus' encounter with Attila is a description of the ruler. Attila was a short, squat man with a large head and deeply set eyes. He had a flat nose and a thin beard. Attila ate only meat off a wooden spoon and out of a wooden bowl while his officers used silver platters (67).

### **B.7. Roman Evacuation**

At the end of the three-year period of negotiations between Attila and Theodosius II, a new treaty was reached; the Eastern Romans were ordered to evacuate the territory south of the Danube and a continued tribute of an unknown nature was to be paid (99). In 451, the time of the Hun's invasion of Gaul proved an interesting chapter. Attila was on friendly terms with Aetius the Roman general who was considered the real ruler of the West in 451 (101). The invasion into Gaul as possible because of the "contest between

Attila and Aetius” (101). The Huns did not follow the same route previously cut by the conquering Visigoths who moved through Arras, Amien, Reims, and Paris reaching Orleans and Tours. Instead, they followed an ancient road along the riverbeds taking them through Verdun, Reims and Paris (101).

Howarth could not determine or uncover a motive for Attila’s invasion except to say Attila’s goal was probably to reach Toulouse. Along the way a curious event of prophecy reportedly took place adding to the myth of Attila. On his approach to Toulouse, it was feared by the Parisians that he would sack the city, but according to the vision of a young local, it was foreseen that the “scourge of the city” Attila would spare Paris. The vision proved correct. Attila announced his objective in the West was the Visigoth kingdom and that he had no quarrel with Valentinian III (102). Aetius asked the Visigothic king Theodoric I to combine their forces in the defensive attack on the Huns. Attila advanced to Aurelianum (Orleans) and gained a foothold inside the city, but the combined forces turned Attila back. Consequently, King Theodoric I was killed and Attila faced his first and only defeat (105).

### **B.8. The Invasion of Italy and the Death of Attila**

In 452 the Huns invaded Italy. Attila sacked Aquileia, Patavium (Padua), Verona, Brizia (Brescia), Berhomun (Bergamo), and Mediolanum (Milan); Aetius could not stop them. Famine and pestilence in that year prevented Attila from crossing the Apennines. In 453, Attila intended to attack the eastern Empire. Marcian refused to pay the subsidies agreed upon by his predecessor, Theodosius II. Before the invasion could begin Attila took a new bride. On the night of their wedding, Attila suffered a burst artery and “suffocated by a torrent of blood” (138). The mourning was marked with descriptions of “Male followers (who) cut off much of their hair and gashed their faces so that the great king should be lamented, not by the cries of women, but by the blood of the warriors” (139). His body was reportedly placed in a coffin with gold, silver and iron and buried secretly. The gravediggers were killed to protect the secret whereabouts of the corpse. Howarth speculated that the burial site was most probably at sea since the grounds had never been uncovered. His sons who effectively divided the empire succeeded Attila.

### **C.3. Critique**

Howarth’s text is in some ways a disappointment in that the author does not offer clear evidence to the conclusions drawn throughout his chapters. For example, the evidence about the unique horses of the Huns portrayed vivid details about the behaviors and physiology of the breed. For the most part, this success can be attributed to the work of a specific veterinarian’s work and reporting. To the contrary, the evidence is vague and essentially nonexistent when Howarth says over and over that recent archeological finds prove the movements of the Huns and their ancient ties to the Hsuing-nu. Howarth does not reveal what these finds specifically uncovered, or who the archeologists were or how these finds differed in their discoveries from previous digs. Howarth wanted to separate

the man from the myth, but his research is still laden with the work of hearsay reporting, biased chronicling and unclear sources. In addition, the text proved inconsistent with other historical texts in some of its dates for several of the assaults and invasions. Howarth does not offer an explanation for the inconsistencies.

## **Strategies for Lesson Planning**

### ***The Box***

This lesson provides for the students' skills in drawing conclusions about a character's personality. Various elements of the character's psyche will be observed and represented through written word and artistry.

The students will view Taymor's scenes 7 and 27 of *Aaron the Moor* while referring to their copies of Shakespeare's actual play. For each standard, the students will integrate both Taymor's imagery and the original lines of Shakespeare when completing this assignment.

The students will design a box enhanced with artwork and quotations representing each of the following standards: 1) character's pathos, 2) character's ethos, 3) character's logos, 4) imagery related to the attitudes revealed by the character, 5) a family crest designed to represent the background information on the character, and 6) an American icon that relates to the character, his behavior, or his conflict. Inside the box, the student will enclose the title and lyrics of a song that reflects the student's interpretation of Aaron.

### ***The Power Point Presentation on the American Iconography***

This lesson allows the class to demonstrate their understanding of the icon and its connections to the play. It also allows for a creative opportunity for the students' interpretive skills in designing their own iconography.

The students will design a power point presentation that displays various examples of American iconography from Taymor's *Titus* alongside original text that pertains to the character, event or commentary being represented as well as the student's original iconography created for various depictions of Attila the Hun accompanied by research provided within this unit or new research.

Each frame will have an example of the icon downloaded from an internet source or from a scanned source. Next to the icon will be a passage from Shakespeare's original text that depicts or reveals some quality about the person, period or object the icon represents.



In addition, the students will review either new research, extended research or the research provided on Attila the Hun. Their goal is to design their own iconography depicting qualities of the man, his time period, or events from his life. Students may work at home or on campus and will have the semester to complete this project according to the length restraints decided upon by the teacher.

### ***The American Icon Collage***

This lesson provides an opportunity for the students to demonstrate their interpretive powers and their skills of perception when identifying popular American iconography. Through written expression, the student will have the opportunity to express the impact symbolic language has had on our lives. In addition, the student gets the chance to design his own icon for the ages.

Using a display board, or a large box, or a mobile, the students will exhibit images of the American icons that surround us today. This lesson displays the students' understanding of the various types of icons, and in a written essay, the student will discuss the impact some of these icons have had on their lives. The essay will consider whether the student's perceptions have been shaped by these icons, or if purchasing or public opinion have been altered by the presence of these icons. In the essay's conclusion, the student will design a new icon for the twenty-first century, and it must be an icon with positive meaning for American society.

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This letter discusses the anachronisms within Taymor's *Titus* and the evidence that Shakespeare staged the play in similar fashion.
- Eby, Douglas. "Interview with Julie Taymor." 20 Aug 2000.  
<http://members.aol.com/dougaseby/jtaymor.html>.  
This interview is fascinating because the director discusses her artistic efforts and her interpretations of the original text as she prepared for both Broadway and Hollywood.

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This letter addresses the impact of violence on our lives today and suggests its relevance to Taymor's attempts at contending with the violence of the play. He qualifies Taymor's work as she remains true to the predictable violence of vengeful acts.

Neoromeo. IMDb: E-mail. 16 March 2001. <http://us.imdb.com/CommentsShow?120866>.

This letter speaks to the static nature of vengeance, asserting that it has never changed throughout time and is therefore an important lesson for study.

### ***Teachers Bibliography***

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This is Bloom's collection of criticism on Shakespeare's work, its recent staging and film direction. He is dangerously opinionated, to the point, and quite funny.

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This California professor has toured with two one-man shows on the precarious nature that represents so many of our neighborhoods today. Deveare-Smith focuses on the Crown Heights uprising and the people who surrounded the violent clash between the Hasidic Jews and the Caribbean Blacks of the New York neighborhood.

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This text revises the myth and folklore for interesting research on the ancestry, life and progress of Attila the Hun.

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This text tracks the origins of American political philosophy and ideology to Rome. Kirks' research can lend a helping hand to distinguishing between Roman and American values.

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The DVD provides the play, scene-by-scene commentary by the director and the performers, literary criticism and review, as well as an interview with the director at Columbia University. The advantage to the DVD format is that the teacher can quickly manipulate the presentation with fast editing from act to scene.

Tierney, Brian. *Sources of Medieval History- The Middle Ages*. Boston: McGraw-Hill, 1999.

This reference text provides primary sources from the Middle Ages, like the tribal laws, and payments of retribution.

Tierney, Brian. *Western Europe in the Middle Ages: 300-1475*. Boston: McGraw-Hill, 1999.

This text surveys the various causes for the demise of the Roman Empire and the subsequent rise of the Middle Ages. Tierney argues that the fall was premised on several socio-political-economic problems, and that a single problem like the invasion of the barbarians did not guarantee the final hours of the empire.