The Warrior at Home:  
Readjustment and confusion in Titus Andronicus

Trained by long service on the battlefield, Titus is unable to appropriately convert his behavior to peacetime. He constantly misinterprets situations, reframing them in the language and psychology of war. More importantly, he reacts to political and verbal attacks as though they are physical threats, escalating the violence in situations that might be resolved peacefully. The instincts that served Rome so well on the battlefields are now the very impulses that cause Titus so much trouble in peace.

Titus has spent the greater part of his adult life engaged in acts of war. He is proud of this service, and his deeds are acknowledged by the tribunes when they choose him to lead Rome as Emperor. He replies: "Give me a staff of honor for mine age, / But not a scepter to control the world." (1.1.198-199). He knows that he is not up to the challenge, but he doesn't seem to know who should lead Rome. He gives the throne to Saturninas, the principal reason for which is that he is the "emperor's eldest son," (1.1.225); this is very different than saying that he is the most qualified or logical choice. His warrior's mindset defers to the unquestioning tradition of patrilineal descent for lack of better judgments and reasons. The amount of praise that is heaped upon him leads the viewer/reader to believe that he is a good commander, victorious in battle and one would suppose sound in judgment. Given Titus’s accolades, the fact that he makes mistakes so early and often in the play indicates that he indeed has trouble adjusting to a life off of the battlefield.

Titus not only has trouble understanding situations that are new to him, but he continues to treat people as though they are his troops, under his command. This is evident
in the way that he addresses inferiors, aptly demonstrated in his interaction with the clown. At first he seems to be treating him well, even offering him some money to deliver his message, but then when it comes time to deliver that message Titus lays it out in detail like a military order: "at first approach you must kneel, then kiss his foot, then deliver up your pigeons, and then look for your reward." (4.3.106-108). The servant couldn't know that his reward would be hanging, and Titus is surely used to military servants who know that they are taking their lives in their hands in military parleys with the enemy. The episode with the clown is ample evidence that Titus doesn't understand that lives are at stake when they shouldn’t be. The servant had no reason to think that his actions might lead to his death. Titus makes mistakes like the episode with the clown throughout the play; his battle-hardened wisdom is at odds with the politics and practices of Rome at peace.

When threatened, Titus defaults to his impulses and war instincts. A general's reactions on a battlefield must be immediate, and this rarely well for him in peacetime. When threatened verbally, he reframes the words into an attack that he must either defend against or retaliate for. When his son blocks his way in the very first scene Titus sees it as an act of treason in Titus's mind and he deals with it as he would on the field: he dispatches Mutius. He cannot imagine another outcome for this situation, wherein he may have been able to negotiate a resolution with his son or at the very least hear Mutius's reasoning. A warrior certainly can't afford to hesitate in battle, so Titus doesn't even consider it. This is another type of mistake that Titus often makes: misunderstandings that lead to violence because he can't understand that things are not so cut-and-dried in society.

Titus doesn't know how to take criticism or verbal attacks. He feels any attack is a physical one, and he reacts accordingly. He says: "These words are razors to my wounded
heart." (1.1.315). Words are not attacks, they are just words and can be dealt with in many ways without resorting to violence. Some of this language is dramatic hyperbole, but Titus doesn't seem to know any other language or psychology to use. He also calls his brother and sons his "foes" (1.1.367) after they argue with him, again framing what is essentially a domestic dispute in terms of war. Titus later says "this sorrow is an enemy," (3.1.267), showing once again that he doesn't know how to assess situations in terms other than war and fighting. He may have fought in war zones before, but now Rome has become "a wilderness of tigers" (3.1.54) to him, more dangerous than an open battlefield. He can't help but think of his political enemies as real enemies that must be battled straight on.

On the battlefield, he's never had to deal with the vendettas that Aaron, Chiron, Demetrius and Tamora represent. They are enemies, but not in the sense that he meets them in battle and they fight for their countries; that he understands. These people are out to attack Titus directly as an act of pure revenge. Even though Tamora and her sons were the actual enemy in his last war, now they have a personal reason for fighting and the stakes are raised. As a general, it's likely that Titus may have experienced assassination attempts, but this is not referenced; what he likely hasn't encountered are the attacks on his loved ones to get at him indirectly. He can't seem to understand and adapt to this behavior, and he is clearly in a great deal of emotional pain as early as the scene where he pleads with the tribunal: "And for these bitter tears which now you see / Filling the aged wrinkles in my cheeks, Be pitiful to my condemned sons," (3.1.6-7). The powerful sorrow that Titus shows might seem uncharacteristic for such a famous general, used as he must be to the horrors of death as he's lost so many sons in battle. The key difference here is that these sons are not going to die in battle, but in infamy. For a man used to confronting his
enemies head on, his losses in peace-time are much more painful.

The losses continue to mount against Titus, when even the daughter that he believed would never suffer violence is victimized. The pain he feels for her is very acute: "But that which gives my soul the greatest spurn / Is dear Lavinia, dearer than my soul." (3.1.101-102). When Titus's sons died in battle, it was justifiable and even accepted because they died for a reason: ostensibly for Rome and honor. When Lavinia is violated, there is no greater purpose other than to seek vengeance against Titus. He cannot understand this sort of purposeless violence; his warriors mind doesn't comprehend it. In battle, you fight because it is your duty--not because you truly hate the enemy and want to punish them.

Throughout most of the play Titus lacks any real enemy to draw his lines against. He knows that people are trying to hurt him--and he eventually discovers who it is--but because of their social position an outright attack is not possible. He has never had to deal with shades of gray on the field where a person is either an enemy or a friend and can be faced and fought. Instead of weighing his options carefully he decides to ambush them by forcing them to expose themselves, thereby allowing him to use the tools that he does wield: violence. There is little reason to believe that a peaceful resolution would even have been possible, but we still never get a scene where Titus is considering peaceful options. As a warrior it is much simpler for him to manipulate them into a place that allows him to attack his enemies on terms that he is more familiar with. He has never had a reason to consider other options before, and it may be too late for him to start now.

Titus is a man of extremes. His career of war making has taught him to act quickly with the information he is given, and now his world is black and white. When Marcus kills
the fly, it is either "a deed of death done on the innocent" (3.2.56) or a "charitable deed." (3.2.70). In any light going from murder to charity in the span of just 14 lines reveals some quite opposite extremes for something as trivial as the death of a fly. Titus is not accustomed to looking at things in degrees: on the battlefield you have an enemy, and a soldier is not inclined to wonder to what degree the enemy wants to kill you, or how justified the war is. Titus still sees the world as simple, and his options are limited by his training.

Titus is a classic example of what a career of war will do to a person's mind. Even in modern society there is a real difficulty for people who have undergone military training to readjust to a peaceful society. Just as in Titus's Rome, in our culture there are still attacks and deceits; and like Titus's times they are rarely best resolved with combat. Titus was trained to use violence and was rewarded for it for so long that he lost some of the ability to think outside of that training. His unfamiliarity with his contemporary society leads him to mistakes, and then he solves them as a soldier would. When society trains someone to kill, they can hardly expect them to simply act like everyone else upon their return to peace. Titus is no exception to this trend; in fact he represents the confused warrior well.