At least five distinct plays were published and performed in seventeenth-century Europe that told the story of the Roman general Titus Andronicus whose triumphant return to Rome spells the beginning of a violent cycle of revenge that causes the empire to disintegrate. Today, of course, the dramatic material is practically exclusively known in William Shakespeare’s version that was first published in the Quarto edition of 1594, and held the London stage for at least two decades. Yet it was not in Shakespeare’s version all early modern audiences knew the play. By 1620, when Titus Andronicus had already been mocked as old-fashioned by Ben Jonson, Shakespeare’s play had largely lost its appeal to London audiences. Exactly at that moment, a German play was published, Eine sehr klaegliche tragoedia von Tito Andronico und der hoffertigen Kayserin (A Very Lamentable Tragedy of Titus Andronicus and the Haughty Empress), in a playbook of English players who travelled the continent and had translated and adapted Shakespeare’s play. This play in turn, was adapted by a Dutch associate of the English players, Adriaen van den Bergh, who published his Dutch version, Andronicus, in 1621. That third play is regrettably lost,
but it was followed by fourth, Jan Vos’s Aran en Titus, or wraak en weerwraak (Aran en Titus, or Revenge and Counter-Revenge) which Vos wrote in Dutch for the Amsterdam theater in 1638. Finally, Titus returned to England in the Restoration, when Edward Ravenscroft published his version of the tale in 1687 as Titus Andronicus, or the Rape of Lavinia, which had already been performed in 1678.

Of these five plays, Jan Vos’s version, which deviated considerably from the others, was undoubtedly the most successful in its own time. Following its first performance in Amsterdam in 1641, it became by far the most popular play in the Dutch Republic, and maybe even in Northern Europe as a whole. Performed at least 100 times in the Amsterdam theater, it continued to hold the stage well into the eighteenth century. The printed text ran through at least 34 editions (see illustration 1), and was translated into Latin (as Aran et Titus, mutua vindicatio, in 1658) and German (various translations). The Dutch version was also taken abroad by the famous Dutch playing company of Jan-Baptist van Fornenbergh to be performed at the courts of German and Swedish princes. It was in Vos’s heavily adapted version, then, that most European audiences became acquainted with the Titus material. In terms of contemporary impact, Aran en Titus has a stronger claim to being a major landmark in seventeenth-century theatrical history than Titus Andronicus.

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7 Edward Ravenscroft, Titus Andronicus, or the Rape of Lavinia: Acted at the Theatre Royall, A Tragedy (London: J. Hindmarsh, 1687).


10 For the history of Van Fornenbergh’s playing company, which was much influenced by English actors, see: Ben Albach, Langs kermissen en hoven: Ontstaan en kroniek van een Nederlands toneelgezelschap in de 17de eeuw (Zutphen: Walburg Pers, 1977).