

WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE'S THE RAPE OF LUCRECE:  
A DEFENSE OF LUCRECE

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WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE'S THE RAPE OF LUCRECE:

A DEFENSE OF LUCRECE

by

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## ABSTRACT

The Rape of Lucrece has been condemned by many scholars who suggest that Shakespeare lacked a clear and unified vision of his topic. However, an examination of the poem establishes that the poet did have a clear and unified vision of his topic.

In the poem, Shakespeare makes a conscious entry into a debate which had existed between theologians and secular writers concerning the suicide of Lucrece. This debate centred around the ethics of suicide. For Christian theologians, suicide was a damnable sin. Secular writers, however, saw something heroic and noble in it.

Shakespeare, like other secular writers, chooses to defend the virtue of Lucrece and the necessity of her suicide, both of which had been questioned by such Christian theologians as Tertullian, Augustine and Tyndale.

Throughout The Rape of Lucrece, Shakespeare provides artistic justification for the classical matron's suicide. He uses his dramatic adeptness to explore the motivations of the two principal characters -- Tarquin and Lucrece. Shakespeare methodically builds up a case for Lucrece's innocence, stressing that Tarquin must bear the sole responsibility for

his own actions. The poet also provides a biased narrative commentary which supplies the frames of reference needed to judge the motives of Lucrece as admirable and Tarquin as reprehensible. Far from being incoherent and disunified, the poem shows a unity of purpose and design, a unity which centres around the presentation of Lucrece as virtuous and refuting theological claims that she was vain and guilty of adultery.

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## INTRODUCTION

The Rape of Lucrece has been referred to as "the most slighted stepchild of all Shakespeare's works."<sup>1</sup> Scholars and the general public alike have paid little attention to this early work of Shakespeare's.<sup>2</sup> Yet, in its day the poem was popular. Six editions of the poem appeared between 1594 and 1616.<sup>3</sup> One of Shakespeare's contemporaries, four years after the poem was published, praised it for pleasing what he considered was the "wiser sort."<sup>4</sup>

However, since its initial popularity, the poem has been critically condemned by many scholars, who suggest that Shakespeare lacked a clear and unified vision of his subject. Ian Donaldson maintains that the poem "never quite adds up to a coherent whole."<sup>5</sup> James McDuffie Tolbert, in

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<sup>1</sup>E.P. Kuhl, "Shakespeare's 'Rape of Lucrece,'" Philological quarterly, 20, No. 3 (1941), p. 352.

<sup>2</sup>Harold R. Walley, "The Rape of Lucrece and Shakespearean Tragedy," Publications of the Modern Language Association of America, 76 (1961), p. 480.

<sup>3</sup>F.T. Prince, ed., The Poems, The Arden Shakespeare (London: Methuen, 1960), pp. xii-xiii.

<sup>4</sup>Gabriel Harvey, in Vol. 5 of Shakespeare: The Critical Heritage, ed. Brian Vickers (London: Routledge, 1974), p. 458.

<sup>5</sup>Ian Donaldson, The Rapes of Lucretia: A Myth and Its Transformation (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1982), p. 41.

his dissertation examining the sources and antecedents of the poem, concludes that "anyone who reads Lucrece even once can hardly help becoming aware of the jerkiness of movement, disproportion and disharmony of parts, deficiencies in architectural design."<sup>6</sup>

It is unlikely, however, that Shakespeare would have offered his patron, Henry Wriothesley, anything but his best. Shakespeare chooses for the "graver labour" promised to Wriothesley, in his dedication to Venus and Adonis a story which had been told by two literary greats, Livy and Ovid, the story of the rape of Lucretia.

In doing so Shakespeare makes a conscious entry into a debate which had existed between theologians and secular writers for ages. This debate centred around the ethics of suicide. For Christian theologians, suicide was an inexcusable and damnable sin.<sup>7</sup> Secular writers, however, saw something heroic and noble in it.

Shakespeare chooses to defend the chastity of Lucrece and the necessity of her suicide, both of which were questioned by one of the major Christian theologians, Augustine. In choosing to contradict the orthodox Christian view, Shakespeare has indeed chosen a "graver labour." He

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<sup>6</sup>James McDuffie Tolbert, "Shakespeare's Lucrece: Its Antecedents, Sources and Composition," Diss. Texas 1950, p. 364.

<sup>7</sup>Roland Mushat Frye, Shakespeare and Christian Doctrine (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1963), pp. 24-25.

adds to and expands upon his sources, manipulating his poem into a defense of Lucrece. This defense is the unifying factor in the poem.



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Chapter One  
Historical Attitudes Towards Suicide

The term "suicide" was first used in Sir Thomas Browne's Religio Medici (1635).<sup>1</sup> However, long before the coining of the word "suicide", people elected to end their lives in order to escape from what they considered were the unbearable rigours and anxieties of daily life. The terms then used to describe the act of taking one's life were 'self-homicide', 'self-murder' or 'self-slaughter'.<sup>2</sup>

Whatever the term used to describe it, suicide is an act which has been widely discussed and observed from the earliest of times. Many writers have been troubled by the 'psyche' of individuals who would hasten their departure from this world. Jacques Choron, in his study of suicide, has found that the suicidal act has made many writers uncomfortable. He remarks:

The religious man who believes that everyone's life belongs to God resents the suicide's interference with the divine plan. The secularized man objects to

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<sup>1</sup>Roland Wymer, Suicide and Despair in the Jacobean Drama (Brighton: The Harvester Press, 1986), p. 2.

<sup>2</sup>Wymer, p. 2.

suicide as being 'against nature'.<sup>3</sup>

For such writers suicide is a morally repulsive and socially reprehensible act. Others, however, have embraced and encouraged the suicidal act. For them there is something glorious and noble in being able to take one's leave of life when one feels the time is appropriate. Still others allow for suicide only when the conditions and circumstances merit.

The ancient Greek response to 'self-slaughter' can best be described as paradoxical. Some writers commended those who had the courage to choose their time of departure from this life. Others condemned the act and suggested that those who chose this course of action had usurped a decision which only the Gods had the right to make.

Writers and dramatists, concentrating on the dramatic potential of suicide, found something noble and tragic in an individual's decision to end his or her life. In the literature of Greece there are many examples of such suicides. In The Odyssey, Homer describes Odysseus' meeting the dead soul of Oedipus's mother, the 'lovely Epicaste'. Epicaste, when she discovered that she had unwittingly "committed the sin of marrying her son," was so "obsessed by anguish" that she hanged herself.<sup>4</sup> Homer does not condemn her act, rather he focuses

<sup>3</sup>Jacques Choron, Suicide, (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1972), p. 3.

<sup>4</sup>Homer, The Odyssey, trans. E.V. Rieu (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1949), p. 179.

upon the tragic circumstance of her situation. Sophocles, likewise, provides a sympathetic portrait of Jocasta, Oedipus's wife. Sophocles plays up the distracted frenzy of Jocasta just prior to her suicide, as she remembers the past and bewails her fortune:

She hurried, fastening her fingers in her hair.  
There in her chamber, the doors flung sharply to,  
She cried aloud to Laius long since dead,  
Remembering the son she bore long since, the son  
By whom the sire was slain, the son to whom  
The mother bore yet other children, fruit  
Of luckless misbegetting. There she bewailed  
The twice confounded issue of her wifehood --  
Husband begotten of husband, child of child.  
So much we heard. Her death was hidden from us.<sup>5</sup>

The portrait which Sophocles paints is that of a desperate woman who realizes that there is no possibility of correcting the errors which were made unknowingly in the past. The only recourse she has is suicide.

Despite this literary propensity, in Greece, to sympathize with those who committed suicide, Greek philosophers generally condemned suicidal tendencies within individuals. Plato (429-347 B.C.) was one of the strongest critics of suicide. In the Phaedo, Plato's Socrates disallows any reasons for an individual to take his or her own life. Socrates remarks to Cebes that the prohibition against self-slaughter is absolute:

But perhaps you will be surprised if I say that

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<sup>5</sup>Sophocles, "King Oedipus", in The Theban Plays, trans. E.F. Watling (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1947), p. 60.

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this law, unlike every other law to which mankind is subject, is absolute and without exception; and that it is not true that death is better than life only for some persons and at some times.<sup>6</sup>

Plato elaborates on this a few lines later, suggesting that people are not the property of themselves but of the Gods. Therefore, only the Gods can take away life from that which they possess. According to Plato's Socrates, "[man] must wait until God sends necessity upon him."<sup>7</sup> Suicide is an unacceptable alternative.

Aristotle (384-322 B.C.), in a discussion of bravery in the Nicomachean Ethics, argues that suicide is an act committed only by the cowardly:

[Bravery] chooses and stands firm because that is fine or because anything else is shameful. Dying to avoid poverty or erotic passion or something painful is proper to a coward, not to a brave person; for trying to avoid burdens is softness, and such a person stands [in the face of death] to avoid an evil, not because it is fine.<sup>8</sup>

For Aristotle those who are truly brave will withstand temptations to end their lives and will endure the difficulties of life.

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<sup>6</sup>Plato, Phaedo, trans. F.J. Church (New York: Bobbs-Merrill, 1951), p. 6.

<sup>7</sup>Plato, p. 6.

<sup>8</sup>Aristotle, Nicomachean Ethics, trans. Terence Irwin (Indianapolis: Hacket Publishing, 1985); p. 74.

Epicurus (342-270 B.C.), like Plato and Aristotle, also condemns suicide. In a "Letter to Menoeceus", Epicurus discusses the nature of death. During this discussion, he rebukes those who would suggest that death may be a more desirable state than life. Epicurus maintains:

Anyone who urges the youth to lead a good life but counsels the older man to end his life in good style is silly, not merely because of the welcome character of life but because of the fact that living well and dying well are one and the same discipline. Much worse off, however, is the person who says it were well not to have been born "but once born to pass Hades' portals as swiftly as may be." Now if he says such a thing from inner persuasion why does he not withdraw from life?<sup>9</sup>

In Greece, the only philosophical school to embrace suicide was Stoicism. Under its founder Zeno, suicide was advocated as an appropriate means to exit from a life which was meaningless and painful. The Stoic disagreed with the argument that it was against "nature" for an individual to take his or her own life. According to Michel de Montaigne:

The stoics say that to part with life is, for the wise man, even at the height of happiness, to live in conformity with Nature, if he does it opportunely; and that for the fool it is natural to cling to life, although he be wretched, provided that he possesses most of the things which are said to be according to Nature.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>9</sup>Epicurus, "Letter to Menoeceus", in The Philosophy of Epicurus, ed. George K. Strodach (Easton: Northwestern University Press, 1963), pp. 180-181.

<sup>10</sup>Michel de Montaigne, "A Custom of the Island of Cea", in The Essays of Montaigne, trans. E.J. Trenchmann (New York: Random House, 1964), p. 293.

According to Jacques Choron, the Stoics believed that the decision to commit suicide was not a question of moral propriety or impropriety but rather "a rational decision as to what is preferable in the given situation, life or death."<sup>11</sup> A fall and a toe out of joint was reason enough for Zeno, the founder of Stoicism, to end his life at the age of 98.

In the Roman State suicide was not condoned by the authorities and officially the state was against the practice.<sup>12</sup> However, the state was relaxed about its position, especially under circumstances in which individuals were driven to suicide by pain, sickness, or grief.<sup>13</sup> In some public situations, suicide was an acceptable and honourable means of punishment for the individual who had compromised his or her integrity and state laws. In such circumstances suicide was a preferable alternative to remaining alive and dishonouring the family reputation. Suicide, however, also had a practical purpose for the disgraced Roman in that it safeguarded his estate from state confiscation and assured his heirs of an inheritance.<sup>14</sup> However, under Roman law the property of a slave or soldier who committed suicide was confiscated. Such suicides "represented a considerable financial loss to the master or a weakening of the effective force of the

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<sup>11</sup>Choron; p. 115.

<sup>12</sup>Choron, p. 115.

<sup>13</sup>Choron, p. 21.

<sup>14</sup>Choron, p. 22.

Roman armies."<sup>15</sup>

There are various types of suicides which seem to have been acceptable to the Romans. By far the most respectable and under which can be categorized the majority of Roman suicides are those which are "heroic" in nature.<sup>16</sup> The suicide of Roman consul Decius Mus falls into this category. Upon hearing of an oracle which maintained that the battle against the Gauls at Sentinum (295 B.C.) could be won only through the sacrifice of a Roman noble, Mus dashed into the ranks of the enemy thereby offering his life for the benefit of his state.<sup>17</sup> The suicide of Lucrece, as recorded by Ovid and Livy, falls into this category.

It was also permissible for those who were old or sick to take their own lives. Two suicides of this nature are those of Corellius Rufus and Silius Italicus which were "admirably" recorded by Pliny the Younger.<sup>18</sup> However, Seneca suggests this as a recourse for the elderly only when they are enduring pain which can not be cured.<sup>19</sup>

With the appearance of Christianity as the State religion under Emperor Constantine, the Roman attitude of allowing or at least overlooking suicide was not at first attacked. In fact the

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<sup>15</sup>Norman L. Farberow, "Cultural History of Suicide", in Suicide and Attempted Suicide, ed. Jan Waldenstrom et al. (Stockholm: Nordiska, Bokhandeln, Forlag, 1972), p. 34.

<sup>16</sup>Choron, p. 22.

<sup>17</sup>Norman L. Farberow, p. 33.

<sup>18</sup>Choron, p. 23.

<sup>19</sup>Farberow, p. 33.

new religion seemed to embrace the act of suicide as a viable means to enter into eternal bliss. Under the guise of "martyrdom", Christians actively sought out the means by which they could escape the earthly realm which separated them from their God.

In the ecclesiastical history of the Church many examples of this zealotry for death can be found. Apollonia, after she had been beaten and tortured, being "inflamed with a more burning fire of the Holy Ghost," breaks away from her captors and leaps "into the fire."<sup>20</sup> Pelagia, likewise, takes her own life, though the actual method has been debated.<sup>21</sup> The deaths of these ladies are remembered and celebrated on special liturgical days set aside for their remembrance.

In some situations the early Church Fathers advocated and even encouraged suicide. For example, Eusebius (c. 340 A.D.) applauded the behaviour of Domnina and her daughters Bernice and Prosdoce who drowned themselves when threatened with fornication. Domnina tells her daughters that "to surrender their souls to the slavery of demons was worse than all kinds of death and every form of destruction" and "that to flee to the Lord was the only way of escape from it all."<sup>22</sup>

<sup>20</sup>John Donne, Biathanatos, ed. Michael Rudick and M. Pabst Battin (New York: Garland, 1982), 3945, p.141.

<sup>21</sup>Donne, 3965, p. 144.

<sup>22</sup>Eusebius, The Ecclesiastical History, trans. J.E.L. Oulton, Vol. 2 (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1932), p. 290-291.



This zeal for martyrdom and suicide, however, began to be viewed skeptically by theologians. In the fourth century, Saint Augustine became the most outspoken and influential theologian openly to criticize suicide, and his arguments greatly influenced the future policy of the Church concerning suicide. His remarks were so influential that one writer has referred to them as the "locus classicus, the point of departure for all subsequent Christian discussion."<sup>23</sup> Augustine creates the Christian orthodoxy by "asserting that suicide violates the commandment 'Thou shalt not kill'."<sup>24</sup> In his article "Cultural History of Suicide", Norman Farberow sums up Saint Augustine's position:

Saint Augustine produced four arguments to justify the Church's antisuicide stance: 1) no private individual may assume the right to kill a guilty person; 2) the suicide who takes his own life has killed a man; 3) the truly noble soul will bear all suffering from which the effort to escape is an admission of weakness; and 4) the suicide dies the worst of sinners because he is not only running away from the fear of temptation but also any possibility of absolution.<sup>25</sup>

The conciliar meetings of the Church endorsed Augustine's position condemning suicide and instituted penalties to curb the practice. The Council of Arles (452) advocated the confiscation

<sup>23</sup>Michael Rudick and M. Pabst Battin, "Introduction", in John Donne: Biathanatos (New York, Garland, 1982), p. xxii.

<sup>24</sup>Michael Rudick and M. Pabst Battin, p. xxii.

<sup>25</sup>Farberow, p. 35.

of the property of those who committed suicide. The Council of Braga (563) removed from those who committed suicide all religious rites. The Antisidor Council (590) added a series of additional penalties. The sternest ecclesiastical censure of suicide, denial of Christian burial, was enacted at the Synod of Nîmes (1248).<sup>26</sup>

Another theologian who firmly opposed suicide was Saint Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274). Aquinas believed that suicide was a heinous crime which usurped God's sole right over life and death. In the Summa Theologiae, Aquinas, discussing the relative gravity of sins, contends that suicide is an even more heinous crime than murder:

If a man injures himself by damaging goods over which he has a right, e.g. his own possessions, it is less sinful than if he injured another, because he can dispose of these things as he wills. However, in regard to those things over which a man does not have a complete right of disposal, e.g. natural and spiritual goods, it is worse to sin by injuring himself, for suicide is worse than murder.<sup>27</sup>

Aquinas, in the Summa Theologiae, adds to the statements made by St. Augustine in The City of God three new arguments against suicide. These are summed up by Michael Rudick and M. Pabst Battin:

Two are non-Scriptural: that based on "the

<sup>26</sup>Farberow, p. 35:

<sup>27</sup>Saint Thomas Aquinas, Summa Theologiae, trans. John Fearon (London: Blackfriars, 1968), Vol. 25, p. 91.

presumed natural law of self-preservation, and that based on the individual's obligation to the human community; the third, supported by Deuteronomy xxxii 39, is based on the notion of life as a gift from God.<sup>28</sup>

With the dawn of the Renaissance in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, this attitude towards suicide began to change. Increased awareness of the intolerable nature of life because of the realities of poverty and the dismal prospects for the future led many into a state of depression commonly referred to at the time as melancholia. Consequently, there was an increased interest in suicide.<sup>29</sup>

The literature of the Renaissance abounds with discussions, dramas, and poetry on the topic of suicide. Desiderius Erasmus's (1466-1536) The Praise of Folly breaks with ecclesiastical orthodoxy and commends suicide:

Come, then, and suppose a man could look from a high tower, as the poets say Jove is in the habit of doing. To how many calamities would he see the life of man subject! How painful, how messy, man's birth! How irksome his rearing -- his childhood exposed to so many hurts, his youth beset by so many problems! Then age is a burden; the certainty of death is inexorable... But if one ponders upon the evils I speak of, will not -- one approve the example, pitiable as it is, set by the Milesian virgins? -- And yet who are the people that, merely because of weariness of life, have hastened their fate? Were they not the people who lived next door to wisdom? Among them, to pass over such as Diogenes, Xenocrates, Cato, Cassius, and Brutus, there was even Chiron, who though he had the

<sup>28</sup>Michael Rudick and M. Pabst Battip, p. xxii.

<sup>29</sup>Farberow, p. 36.

privilege of being immortal, took the option of death.<sup>30</sup>

Erasmus's remarks are characteristic of the period. There is a sense of melancholia and despair at what life has to offer. Instead of pleasure there is pain, suffering, and disease. For Erasmus, Folly presents the only escape from such an existence -- suicide. Those who have been truly wise have opted out of an earthly existence filled with pain.

Even in Sir Thomas More's (1478-1535) Utopia, there is a place for institutionalized suicide. Individuals who are experiencing pain or who are permanent invalids are given the option by priest and government officials of ending their life or having it ended for them. More relates what is said to the individual:

So why go on feeding germs? Since your life's a misery to you, why hesitate to die? You're imprisoned in a torture-chamber -- why don't you break out and escape to a better world? Or say the word, and we'll arrange for your release. It's only common sense to cut your losses. It's also an act of piety to take the advice of a priest, because he speaks for God.<sup>31</sup>

However, not all individuals in Utopia are allowed to commit suicide. If the priests or government officials consider the reasons for suicide trivial, the individual "forfeits all rights

<sup>30</sup>Desiderius Erasmus, The Praise of Folly, trans. Hoyt Hopewell Hudson (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1941), pp. 40-41.

<sup>31</sup>Thomas More, Utopia, trans. Paul Turner (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1965), p. 102.

to either burial or cremation" and their "body is just thrown unceremoniously into a pond."<sup>32</sup>

Another Renaissance writer to dissent from the ecclesiastical condemnation of suicide was Michel de Montaigne (1533-1592). In "A Custom of the Island of Cea", Montaigne examines philosophical statements concerning suicide. He quotes the Roman stoic Seneca on suicide:

For death is everywhere. A kindly God  
Hath this great law with wisest care ordained:  
That any one can take man's life away,  
But none can stay his death; for countless ways  
Are open unto him who seeks to die.<sup>33</sup>

He mentions others, such as Hegesias and Diogenes, who have advocated suicide. He then explores the critics who have censured those who have chosen suicide. Among them are Virgil, Horace, Lucan, Lucretius, and Plato. Then Montaigne moves on to give examples of those who have opted for suicide -- Brutus, Cassius, Lucius Arruntius, and a variety of others. In concluding his examination, Montaigne makes a brief statement of his position -- "Intolerable pain and the fear of a worse death appear to me to be the most excusable inducements."<sup>34</sup>

This interest in suicide and its consequences is reflected

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<sup>32</sup>Moreau, p. 102.

<sup>33</sup>Michel de Montaigne, p. 292.

<sup>34</sup>Montaigne, p. 303.

in many of Shakespeare's tragedies.<sup>35</sup> Romeo, Juliet, Cassius, Brutus, Othello, Antony, Cleopatra, Hamlet, and Ophelia, all commit suicide. The reasons for these suicides are varied. Unrequited love, melancholia and guilt are but some of the reasons why Shakespeare's characters decide to commit suicide.

Shakespeare is also well aware of the orthodox Christian attitude regarding suicide. In Hamlet, the Church's position is related to the audience through two most unlikely characters -- the two clowns. The fifth act opens with the clowns preparing to bury Ophelia. They question the propriety of allowing her a "Christian burial". The first clown asks, "How can that be, unless she drown'd herself in her own defense?" (Hamlet, 5.1.6). Later the matter is elaborated upon by the Doctor who notes, "She should in ground unsanctified been lodg'd" (Hamlet, 5.1.229).

One of the most comprehensive works dealing with suicide in the seventeenth century was John Donne's Biathanatos. Written in 1608, it was not published until after Donne's death in 1647. Donne surprisingly argues against the Church's orthodox position condemning suicide. Donne explores the various reasons which have been used to depounce suicide -- that it is against the natural law of self-preservation, the law of reason, and the law of God. Donne discovers that a paradox exists in the Church's condemnation of suicide. On the one hand the Church advocates that it is against the law of God and yet on the other hand

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<sup>35</sup>Farberow, p. 37.

praises those "martyrs" who actively sought out their own deaths. Donne also discovers that the scriptural condemnation of suicide is not so easily discernable as clerics would suggest. In the section of Biathanatos exploring scripture Donne notes:

As when I entered into the examination of places of Scripture, it seemed to me to have some weight that in all the judicial and ceremonial law, there was no abomination of self-homicide, so doth it that, in relating the histories of them who killed themselves, the phrase of Scripture never diminishes them by any aspersion or imputation for that fact, if they were otherwise virtuous, nor aggravates thereby their former wickedness, if they were wicked. For my part, I am content to submit myself to that rule which is delivered from Irenaeus, that those things which the scripture doth not reprehend, but simply lays down, it becomes not us to accuse, nor to make ourselves more diligent than God; but if anything seems to us irregular, our endeavour must be to search out the type and signification thereof.<sup>36</sup>

Donne examines each scriptural text which has been cited against suicide. For those which seem to condemn suicide he provides others in which it is not condemned. He refers to those who have committed suicide -- Samson, Saul, Achitophel, and Eleasar. He cites Philippians 1:23, in which the apostle Paul desires to leave this life to dwell with the Father in heaven. Throughout, Donne provides a thorough re-examination of the Church's orthodoxy concerning suicide.

From the Greeks to the seventeenth century and beyond the topic of suicide has provoked much debate. Primarily this debate focused upon the ethics of suicide. For many, including the

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<sup>36</sup>Donne, p. 177.

Christian Church, suicide was not an appropriate response to the difficulties of life. However, others found something alluring in the knowledge that if life gets too hard and too painful there is a way out.

This background to the historical attitudes towards suicide is an important backdrop for a discussion of Shakespeare's narrative poem, The Rape of Lucrece. The suicide of Lucrece is an important part of the literary treatment of suicide, hers being one of the most famous of classical suicides, which seemed to typify the differing viewpoints on suicide. Secular writers extolled her suicide while theologians condemned it. In writing The Rape of Lucrece, Shakespeare makes his entry into this literary tradition and consciously enters the debate which Lucrece's suicide had provoked.



## Chapter Two

## The Lucretia Debate

One of the most well-known of classical suicides was the suicide of Lucrece. Lucrece, the devoted wife of Collatine, committed suicide after she had been raped by one of her husband's friends, Prince Tarquin. This suicide gained notoriety because of the political upheaval which it caused in Rome. The social outcry against the rape and against Lucrece's death resulted in the expulsion of the Roman monarchy and led to the establishment of the republican system of government in Rome. The story of the rape of Lucrece was recorded by Ovid in the Fasti and by Livy in The Early History of Rome. For centuries following these classical renditions of the rape, Lucrece was lauded as a paradigm of virtue and chastity. She was held up as the perfect model of a devoted Roman wife. Her noble example of self-sacrifice, in order to protect the reputation and honour of her family, was applauded.

For both Ovid and Livy, the reasons for Lucrece's suicide were perhaps obvious. She died in observance of the Roman concept of *pietas*,<sup>1</sup> that concept which stressed the importance of maintaining the honour and dignity of state and family. Yet, to the non-Roman, unaware of this concept or the importance which Roman society placed on it, Lucrece's suicide has sometimes

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<sup>1</sup>Robert S. Miola, Shakespeare's Rome (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), p. 39.

appeared unwarranted and hasty. R. Thomas Simone, remarking on this situation, observes what many others have observed:

Is Lucretia's suicide totally noble, as Livy would have it? Or is the pathos of Lucretia's character even more important, as in Ovid's portrayal? The moral situation of rape appears clear cut, but the suicide seems suspect.<sup>2</sup>

For Christian theologians, Lucrece's suicide did indeed appear suspicious. They questioned the aura of respectability which had been bestowed upon her suicide. They disputed the propriety of her suicide and contested the suggestion that women who were raped have no honourable recourse but to kill themselves. They also insinuated that her motives were far from honourable.

The suicide of Lucrece was used by some theologians as an archetype from which they could condemn all suicides arising out of rape or the threat of rape. They attacked her reputation and assassinated her character in order to dissuade their contemporaries from emulating her example.

One of the first theologians to suggest that Lucrece's motives for committing suicide were not as honourable as they had been represented by Ovid and Livy was the second century ecclesiastic, Tertullian. In Chapter four of To the Martyrs, Tertullian condemns those who chose to put an end to their own lives for what he believes were vain and inglorious motives.

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<sup>2</sup>R. Thomas Simone, Shakespeare and Lucrece: A Study of the Poem and Its Relation to the Plays (Salzburg: Institut für Englische Sprache und Literatur, 1974), p. 14.

Lucrece heads his long list of those who have harmed or killed themselves in order to gain fame and notoriety.

Tertullian accuses Lucrece of committing suicide in order to gain earthly glory and praise. She was, according to Tertullian, "a victim of violence, [who] stabbed herself in the presence of her kinsfolk to gain glory for her chastity."<sup>3</sup> The catalogue of suicides which follows her name is quite impressive, including Mutius, who burnt "his right hand on the altar [so] that his fair fame might include [the] deed", Heraclitus, who "smeared himself to death with cow dung", Empedocles, "who leaped into the fires of Mt. Etna", and Peregrinus, who "threw himself upon a funeral pile".<sup>4</sup>

Tertullian concludes by condemning all those who actively seek to mutilate or kill themselves. In Tertullian's eyes they are cowards. The true heroes, for Tertullian, are those who resist "sword, fire, piercing with nails, wild beast, and tortures for the reward of human praise."<sup>5</sup> He reminds those who may be persecuted that it is far better to endure suffering because it is but "trifling in comparison with the heavenly glory and divine reward."<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>3</sup>Tertullian, "To the Martyrs," in The Fathers of the Church, trans. Rudolph Arbesmann; Emily Joseph Daly and Edwin A. Quain (New York: Fathers of the Church, 1959), p. 24.

<sup>4</sup>Tertullian, pp. 24-25.

<sup>5</sup>Tertullian, p. 28.

<sup>6</sup>Tertullian, p. 28.

The most forceful attack upon the reputation of Lucrece came in the fifth century with Saint Augustine's treatise De Civitate Dei or The City of God. Augustine devotes an entire chapter of his treatise to an examination of the rape and suicide of Lucrece. Augustine disputes the suggestion that suicide was a noble recourse for a woman facing rape. His remarks are directed towards a problem which was facing Roman women after the fall of their city and Empire. Many women were being raped by the barbarians who were taking over the lands previously held by the Roman Empire.<sup>7</sup> Many women emulated the ancient Roman paradigm of virtue and chastity, Lucrece, and committed suicide.

For Augustine, however, suicide was not the answer. Augustine sought to show these women that they did not have to commit suicide. Even though they were raped, Augustine assured them that their innocence and virtue still remained, "it being the testimony of their conscience."<sup>8</sup>

Augustine was not concerned so much with the moral situation which led Lucrece to commit suicide. His interest in the story arises out of the effect that it had on subsequent generations, especially his own. Lucrece was respected by many as a dutiful

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<sup>7</sup>Rowland Wymer, Suicide and Despair in the Jacobean Drama, (Brighton: The Harvester Press, 1986), p. 14.

<sup>8</sup>Saint Augustine, The City of God (De Civitate Dei), trans. John Healey, ed. R.V.G. Tasker (London: J.M. Dent and Sons, 1945), p. 24.

wife who did the noble thing after she was raped -- commit suicide. If Augustine was going to convince the women of his time to remain alive and not succumb to suicidal inclinations, he had to attack the reputation which Lucrece had gained. If he could destroy that reputation, he might be able to convince women who were raped or might be raped by the incoming hordes of barbarians that it was not necessary for them to commit suicide.

Augustine begins his discussion by summarizing the story of Lucrece. He mentions how she was victimized by Prince Tarquin and that "loathing the foulness of the fact that had been committed upon her, she slew herself."<sup>9</sup> Yet, immediately after stating such facts, Augustine calls them into question. He asks, "What? shall we say she was an adulteress, or was she chaste?"<sup>10</sup> For the audience the traditional response would have been "chaste". However, by suggesting adultery, Augustine has begun his task of examining the story in a new and substantially different light than tradition had previously dictated.

Augustine questions why Lucrece punishes herself "so cruelly, having not committed any fault."<sup>11</sup> He observes the imbalance in the punishments of Tarquin and Lucrece. Tarquin pays for his crime with banishment while Lucrece, his supposedly innocent victim, pays with her life. Augustine notes that

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<sup>9</sup>Augustine, p. 23.

<sup>10</sup>Augustine, p. 23.

<sup>11</sup>Augustine, p. 23

Lucrece seems to have paid for her innocence with a very high price:

If it were no unchasteness in her to suffer the rape willingly, it was no justice in her being chaste to make away herself willingly.<sup>12</sup>

Augustine then questions the propriety of Lucrece's suicide by appealing to the laws and judges of Rome:

Suppose then this case was brought before you, and that your judgement was, that the slain woman was not only uncondemned, but chaste, unguilty, and innocent; would you not punish the doer of this deed with full severity?<sup>13</sup>

Before allowing any response, Augustine indicts Lucrece -- "This deed did Lucretia, that so famous Lucretia."<sup>14</sup> Lucrece is guilty of her own murder and, according to Augustine, must be punished to the full extent of the law.

Augustine asks the judges to give their sentence. He knows that they cannot. She is absent. However, Augustine questions why they still extol the murder of so chaste a woman. Why do they keep honouring her for making away with herself? In Augustine's eyes they are lavishing their praise upon a common murderer.

Augustine, however, is not satisfied with accusing Lucrece of murder, a crime which is prohibited by the sixth commandment.

<sup>12</sup>Augustine, p. 23.

<sup>13</sup>Augustine, p. 23.

<sup>14</sup>Augustine, p. 23.

In order to destroy completely the influence which Lucrece's reputation had, Augustine needed to call into question the previous portrayal of Lucrece as an innocent, victim of Prince Tarquin. Augustine suggests that she "herself gave a lustful consent".<sup>15</sup> He believes that her suicide confirms her adultery, "if the murder be extenuated, the adultery is confirmed."<sup>16</sup> Augustine not only accuses Lucrece of breaking the sixth commandment but also the seventh. Augustine thereby reinterprets her motives for doing away with herself, suggesting that she was so grieved at having submitted to Tarquin's advances that she "held it worthy to be punished with death."<sup>17</sup>

The conclusion which Augustine reaches is that Lucrece was both an adulteress and a murderer. In doing so he can conclude that she is not a worthy role model for Christian ladies in a similar predicament. Conversely, Augustine refers to unspecified women who have been raped but chose to live. They still retained the "glory of their chastity".<sup>18</sup> They did not have to commit suicide nor does the Christian woman faced with such a predicament.

Augustine's position regarding suicide and specifically the suicide of Lucrece remained the orthodox attitude of the Church

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<sup>15</sup>Augustine, p. 23.

<sup>16</sup>Augustine, p. 24.

<sup>17</sup>Augustine, p. 24.

<sup>18</sup>Augustine, p. 24.

for centuries to come.<sup>19</sup> It was still the orthodox position held by the Christian church, Roman Catholic or Protestant, in the Elizabethan era. Roland Mushat Frye comments upon the religious attitude towards suicide in Shakespeare's day:

On no theological issue was there such universal agreement in Shakespeare's age as we find in the case of suicide. The Church of Rome has always regarded suicide as a damning sin, while the Protestant view was no less clear and the rejection of Purgatory precluded even the slightest hope for the future state of suicides. Suicide was regarded as a far worse sin than murder, it lowered man below the level of brute beasts; it was an act of cowardice; and it was thought to be a particular[ly] appropriate act which at once epitomized and provided retribution for a life of sin. No one questioned that successful suicide, willfully committed, led to hell.<sup>20</sup>

In the sixteenth century, Augustine's position was repeated by the English reformer and biblical translator, William Tyndale. Tyndale refers to the rape and suicide of Lucrece in his 1528 treatise, The Obedience of a Christian Man.

Tyndale provides no new arguments and is satisfied with repeating the traditional arguments against suicide and specifically against the suicide of Lucrece. Like Augustine, he questions the reputation of Lucrece. He suggests that the

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<sup>19</sup>Jacques Choron, Suicide, (New York, Charles Scribner's Sons, 1972), p. 25.

<sup>20</sup>Roland Mushat Frye, Shakespeare and Christian Doctrine (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1963), pp. 24-25.



"persuasions of her friends made Lucrece chaste."<sup>21</sup> He repeats the suggestions made by Tertullian and Augustine, that Lucrece sought "her own glory in her chastity, and not God's."<sup>22</sup>

Most secular writers, however, did not share this view of Lucrece. Like their classical counterparts, Livy and Ovid, many writers revered Lucrece as the paradigm of virtue and chastity. They saw something noble and admirable in her willingness to die for her family, her honour, and herself. In their representations, Lucrece remains that meritorious woman of virtue and chastity, untainted by the remarks of her religious detractors.

It is with such an attitude that Geoffrey Chaucer (1340?-1400) includes Lucrece among the virtuous women in his Legend of Good Women. Chaucer calls her the "verray trewe Lucrece" and the "noble wyf."<sup>23</sup> Throughout "The Legend of Lucrece", Lucrece is portrayed as a woman who is deeply concerned about the well-being and welfare of her husband. When Collatine is apart from her she plays the role of the dutiful wife who is grieved and worried by her husband's absence:

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<sup>21</sup>William Tyndale, "The Obedience of a Christian Man," in Doctrinal Treatises and Introductions to Different Portions of the Holy Scriptures, ed. Henry Walter (Cambridge: The University Press, 1968), pp. 183-184.

<sup>22</sup>Tyndale, p. 183.

<sup>23</sup>Geoffrey Chaucer, "The Legend of Lucrece," in The Complete Poetry and Prose of Geoffrey Chaucer, ed. John H. Fischer (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1977), p. 645.

Myn housbond is to longe out of this toun,  
 For which the drede doth me so to smerte.  
 Ryght as a swerd hit styngeth to myn herte  
 Whan I theenk on the sege or of that place.  
 God save my lord. I pray him for his grace.<sup>24</sup>

After she has been raped, it is for Collatine that she decides she must die. She will not let the good name of her husband be fouled, "She sayde that for hir gilt ne for hir blame/ Hir husbond shulde nat have the foule name --/ That nolde she nat suffre, by no wey."<sup>25</sup>

Chaucer, however, appears to be aware of the problem of placing Lucrece among his list of "good" women. In the legend he displays some knowledge of the Augustinian commentary on the story. He makes a passing, yet incorrect, observation that "The grete Austyne hath grete compassyoun/ Of this Lucesse that starf at Rome toun."<sup>26</sup>

Perhaps this incorrect observation was Chaucer's way of poking fun at the Christian theologian who had tarnished the character and reputation of Lucrece. This reading would seem to be justified later in the Legend, as Chaucer attempts to "christianize" Lucrece. In one instance Chaucer portrays Lucrece praying, like the dutiful and devoted christian, for God's grace to intervene and save her husband (1731). This is in stark contrast to the portrayal of Tarquin who calls upon his deity,

<sup>24</sup>Chaucer, p. 649, ll. 1727-1731.

<sup>25</sup>Geoffrey Chaucer, p. 651., ll. 1844-1846.

<sup>26</sup>Geoffrey Chaucer, p. 648, ll. 1690-1691.

Jupiter (1806). Chaucer aligns Lucrece with the God of christendom, the God who, according to the theologians, condemned Lucrece for committing suicide.

A contemporary of Chaucer, John Gower (1325-1408), also portrayed Lucrece favourably. In the Confessio Amantis, Gower, like Chaucer, depicts Lucrece as the dutiful wife who is deeply concerned about her husband's welfare. At home, she anxiously awaits news of her husband:

For certes til that I mai hier;  
 Som good tidinge of his astat,  
 Min herte is evere upon debat.<sup>27</sup>  
 (4818-4820)

This devoted wife soon must face the predator who stalks her and attacks, threatening the lives of her kin if she resists. Out of love and duty to her family she does what she must.<sup>28</sup> Despite the circumstances she remains the devoted wife and mother.

Many Elizabethans also tended to regard Lucrece as a classical model of virtue and chastity. Some publishers even chose Lucrece as their firm's emblem. Thomas Berthelet (1540), a Fleet Street printer, had above his door "a large sign of Lucrece making an end of herself."<sup>29</sup> Thomas Purfoote, another

<sup>27</sup>John Gower, Confessio Amantis, ed. Russell A. Peck (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1980), p. 399.

<sup>28</sup>Gower, p. 258.

<sup>29</sup>M.D. Faber, "Shakespeare's Suicides: Some Historic, Dramatic and Psychological Reflections," in Essays in Self-Destruction, ed. Edwin S. Shneidman (New York: Science House,

publisher, also used Lucrece as his firm's emblem.<sup>30</sup>

This sentiment in favour of Lucrece is best expressed in James Yates's Chariot of Chastity (1582). In the following passage from Yates's poem, Lucrece is still the emblem of chastity:

Lo...The Matron slewe her selfe,  
because she would not have:  
A body for her spouse unchaste,  
but brought it to the grave.  
Oh Virgins let this be a glasse,  
to shew you honest life:  
Remember how that Chastitie,  
did rest in her most rife....  
One night Sir Morpheus did leade,  
and then unto me shewed:  
How Lucrece sate in heaven above  
her seate was there bestowed.<sup>31</sup>

Yates does not envision Lucrece in some dark abyss, as might Augustine. Instead Lucrece is seated in heaven, a sign that her virtue and chastity were rewarded, and far away from the hell to which some theologians had condemned her.

Extensive research into Elizabethan attitudes towards Lucrece establish that the public accepted the classical portrayal of Lucrece as the paradigm of chastity and virtue. Summarizing his findings, Richard Levin concludes that Lucrece

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1967), p. 36.

<sup>30</sup>Faber, p. 36.

<sup>31</sup>James Yates, The Chariot of Chastitie, in Essays in Self-Destruction, ed. Edwin S. Shneidman (New York: Science House, 1967), p. 37.

was "accepted at face value" as a praiseworthy character."<sup>32</sup> Further, he notes that "men of the Renaissance could easily escape ... a [negative] perspective and form a very un-Augustinian judgement of Lucrece."<sup>33</sup>

Shakespeare, like many of those around him, shared this un-Augustinian view of Lucrece. Aside from his narrative poem, The Rape of Lucrece, Shakespeare always presents Lucrece favourably in the allusions to her throughout his canon. In all, there are five references to Lucrece or to the Lucretia legend in Shakespeare's plays. These references occur in The Taming of the Shrew, As You Like It, Macbeth, Cymbeline, and Titus Andronicus. In the first two plays, Lucrece is presented as "either a model of chastity or an innocent victim."<sup>34</sup> In The Taming of the Shrew, Petruchio invokes the name of Lucrece as an exemplar of chastity when he examines the virtues he claims to find in Kate. Petruchio remarks, "For patience she will prove a second Grissel, / And Roman Lucrece for her chastity" (2.1.295--296). In As You Like It, Shakespeare again presents Lucrece as the classical emblem of chastity. Orlando, in his poem praising Rosalind, remarks that she has "sad Lucretia's modesty" (3.2.148).

The most concentrated references to the Lucretia legend in

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<sup>32</sup>Richard Levin, "The Ironic Reading of The Rape of Lucrece and the Problem of External Evidence," Shakespeare Survey, 34 (1981), p. 89.

<sup>33</sup>Levin, p. 90.

<sup>34</sup>Levin, p. 91.

the Shakespearean canon occur in Titus Andronicus. This is not surprising given the close proximity of the dates of these two works. Shakespeare drew "upon a common body of material when he was writing these works and [is] interested in each story in terms of the other."<sup>35</sup> In the play, Lucrece is presented as the epitome of chastity. She is the term of reference for the virtue and chastity of the heroine of the play, Lavinia. This comparison between the two women is drawn by one of the play's antagonists, Aaron the Moor. Aaron remarks, "Lucrece was not more chaste/ Than this Lavinia, Bassianus's love" (2.1.108-109).

There appears, then, to have been considerable divergence between the ecclesiastical and secular views of the suicide of Lucrece. In the sixteenth century these differences in opinions opened, according to Rowland Wymer, into wide-ranging moral debates.<sup>36</sup> The rape and suicide of Lucrece was discussed as a "kind of casuistic problem, a matter of legal gamesmanship for canon lawyers."<sup>37</sup> The entire case, Lucrece's "conduct with Sextus Tarquinius and her decision to take her life", was "sometimes formally debated pro and contra."<sup>38</sup>

The narrative poem, The Rape of Lucrece, is Shakespeare's entry into this topical debate concerning the propriety of

<sup>35</sup>R. Thomas Simone, p. 96.

<sup>36</sup>Rowland Wymer, p. 98.

<sup>37</sup>Don Cameron Allen, "Some Observations on 'The Rape of Lucrece'" Shakespeare Survey, 15 (1962), p. 90.

<sup>38</sup>Ian Donaldson, The Rapes of Lucretia: A Myth and Its Transformations (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1982), p. 40.

Lucrece's suicide and whether she might have willingly acquiesced in the advances of Tarquin. Shakespeare stands solidly behind those who defend Lucrece's reputation.

He structures his poem so as to emphasise the treachery of Tarquin and the innocence of Lucrece. In the first half of the poem, Shakespeare examines the psyche of the rapist. He presents the portrait of an individual who realizes the consequences of his actions but is driven by his lust to ignore country, family, friends, and decency. In the second half, the poet explores the emotional state of the innocent victim and the psychological state which leads her to commit suicide. Throughout the poem, Shakespeare is intent on providing a defense for Lucrece which can withstand previous theological attacks, and it is through his narrative structure that he achieves this end.

## Chapter Three

## The Design of Shakespeare's Defense of Lucrece

The classical authors were not concerned with justifying Lucrece's suicide and innocence to their readers. Ovid and Livy realized that their Roman readers would naturally understand the reasons why Lucrece felt obliged if not compelled to commit suicide. As observed in the previous chapter, the classical authors knew that their Roman readers were brought up under a system which placed a great deal of emphasis upon family honour and duty. Their Roman readers would know the ramifications of the rape of a family member or spouse. The rape would cast a cloud of suspicion over the respectability of the family and the virtue of the victim. The legitimacy of the children might, perhaps, be questioned. The victim, by killing herself, established to all her innocence and fidelity. Consequently, suicide was seen as an appropriate means by which the respectability of the family could be regained. Lucrece's suicide, therefore, was assessed by the Roman audience as a commendable and exemplary act.

However, for those not familiar or not in agreement with this Roman conceptualization of family honour and duty, Lucrece's suicide appeared unjustified. This led many theologians, as examined in the previous chapter, to speculate upon her possible motivations. Many of them suggested that her motives were not as



honourable as the classical authors had implied. They suggested that she killed herself in order to gain notoriety for herself. They also implied that she was not an innocent victim but a reprehensible adulteress.

Shakespeare appears, in The Rape of Lucrece, to be aware that the classical material needed to be expanded in order to refute such theological innuendoes. R. Thomas Simone observes that "the clear morality of the classical writers remains intact, but language, form and emphasis on character promise a deeper investigation of the material."<sup>1</sup>

Shakespeare examines the incident from an entirely different perspective than Livy or Ovid. Livy, in his rendition of the episode involving Lucrece's rape, is more concerned with the historical and political import of the event. He is interested in the event because it typified the abuses of the ruling monarchical house and instigated the uprising which was to end it. The bulk of his treatment, therefore, deals with the tyrannous regime of the Tarquins. This is not surprising considering that Livy is surveying the early history of the Roman nation.

Lucrece's rape is just one of many abuses under the reign of the Tarquins. The past unscrupulous exploits of the house of Tarquin are detailed throughout Livy's work. Tullia's and the senior Tarquin's murder of their former husband and wife are

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<sup>1</sup>R. Thomas Simone, Shakespeare's 'Lucrece': A Study of the Poem and Its Relation to the Plays (Salzburg: Institut für Englische Sprache und Literatur, 1974), p. 37.

enumerated. Their seizure of the throne from the righteous King Servius follows suit. Lucrece's rape, for Livy, is part of this succession of treacherous deeds, a part which would lead the Roman populace to rebel. Livy has little, if any, interest in character development or character motivation.

Like Livy, Ovid's interests do not lie in providing an artistic justification or psychological explanation of why Lucrece felt compelled to commit suicide. Ovid is primarily interested in the historical import of the rape of Lucrece as it related to the progression of the Roman calendar. For Ovid, the Roman calendar was an epitome of Roman history.<sup>2</sup> Therefore, Lucrece's rape is remembered because of the change which it instigated in the governmental system of Rome. This is made clear from the opening line of Ovid's poem, "Now have I to tell of the Flight of the King."<sup>3</sup>

The rape itself is presented as another in the long line of deceptions and acts of treachery employed by the Tarquins. Before the rape of Lucrece even enters the mind of the prince, Ovid describes how he and his father defeated the Gabii. Tarquin tricks the Gabii into believing that he has had a falling out with his father. The Gabii sympathize with the younger Tarquin and eventually make him their leader. However, no sooner is he in power than "he [sends] a friend to ask his father to show him

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<sup>2</sup>James George Frazer, Introduction in Ovid's Fasti (London: William Hinemann, 1951), p. xx.

<sup>3</sup>Ovid, Fasti, trans. Sir James George Frazer (London: William Hinemann, 1951), p. 107.

the way of destroying Gaius.<sup>4</sup>

A contemporary of Shakespeare's, Thomas Heywood, situates his 1609 drama on the rape of Lucrece amid its historical environs. In The Rape of Lucrece, Heywood examines not only Tarquin and Lucrece but a variety of other historical figures. The actual 'rape' of Lucrece plays a minor role in the play. Heywood spends a great deal of time and energy upon presenting the dishonesty and treachery of Tarquin's parents. Brutus, a minor character seen only in the last few stanzas of Shakespeare's poem, becomes a major character in Heywood's drama. As the liberator of Rome, Brutus, not Lucrece, is the hero of the play. Lucrece's rape and suicide, the major foci of Shakespeare's poem, are viewed by Heywood as the final atrocity of the ruling house of Rome, an atrocity which would rid Rome of the Tarquins forever.

In The Rape of Lucrece, Shakespeare minimizes the historical significance of the rape and suicide of Lucrece. The historical import of the event is mentioned in the Argument which precedes the poem. However, in the poem proper, it is relegated to the last seven stanzas. It is only in these last few stanzas that Shakespeare presents the beginnings of the rebellion with Brutus's call to avenge the rape and suicide of Lucrece. The outcome of the rebellion is related in the final two lines of the poem, "The Romans plausibly did give consent/ To Tarquin's everlasting banishment" [1854-1855].

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<sup>4</sup>Ovid, Fasti, p. 109.

Shakespeare, unlike his classical predecessors and Heywood, is not preoccupied with the incident as yet another example of the treachery of the Tarquinian regime or as the precursor of the establishment of the republican system of government in Rome. Shakespeare ignores all the past indiscretions of Tarquin's family and begins his narrative poem 'in medias res'. He concentrates upon the rape itself and the two personalities involved. Shakespeare is interested in the psyche of an individual who would rape a woman and the emotional consequences for his victim.

This was an important move away from the traditional historical handling of the story. In the classical versions the emphasis upon history undermined a sympathetic portrayal of the dilemma which faced Lucrece. The rape of Lucrece was just one episode in the entire historical progression of events. Naturally, the sufferings of Lucrece and the treachery of Tarquin, were not a major consideration for the author interested in relating the historical event.

Yet, a deeper exploration of the inner workings of the two major characters was essential in order to dispute questions raised by theologians about the sincerity and necessity of Lucrece's suicide. Shakespeare, therefore, ignores the historical implications of the events and concentrates upon presenting a realistic representation of the psychological workings of the rapist and his victim. This was indeed a new approach to the poem. Ian Donaldson remarks, "no other version

of the Lucretia story explores more minutely or with greater psychological insight the mental processes of the two major characters."<sup>5</sup>

Shakespeare accordingly constructs his poem around these two characters who form the nucleus of his presentation. He uses his dramatic adeptness, so evident in his dramatic works, to make Tarquin and Lucrece become live thinking and feeling individuals. For critics such as F.T. Prince this was a mistake:

The tragedy of Lucrece is in fact unsuited to direct 'dramatic' presentation; it should be related in the true narrative manner of Ovid or Chaucer, not in the semi-dramatic, semi-rhetorical manner of Shakespeare's poem. If the story is treated at length, and above all if the heroine is given great powers of self-expression, her sufferings become sensational and not tragic.<sup>6</sup>

However, there was a problem with recounting the story in the 'true narrative manner' of an Ovid or a Chaucer, as recommended by F.T. Prince. In the previous classical narratives Lucrece appears to be a stiff, emotionless character. Moreover, her suicide appeared to be a somewhat dubious act. Theologians, acquainted with the classical representations, were not so certain of Lucrece's innocence or virtue.

Shakespeare recognized the weakness in the way the narrative method had been used by past authors. He realized that in order

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<sup>5</sup>Ian Donaldson, The Rapes of Lucretia: A Myth and Its Transformations (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1982), p. 44.

<sup>6</sup>F.T. Prince, Introduction, The Poems, The Arden Shakespeare (London: Methuen, 1960), p. xxxvi.

to present a plausible portrait of the raped woman, her suffering and her sorrow needed to be expressed, not only through narrative commentary but also through her own lips.

He also recognized the need to elaborate upon the despicable nature of the rapist. Previous representations of Tarquin admittedly portrayed an individual gone awry. Yet there was something wanting in these representations. His abhorrent actions are neglected by later theologians such as Augustine, who "turned his questions exclusively on the figure of Lucrece."<sup>7</sup> Shakespeare corrects this by "[scrutinizing] Tarquin as the bearer of Lust, the polar opposite of Lucrece's chastity."<sup>8</sup> Shakespeare's Tarquin cannot go unnoticed.

In his representations of both Tarquin and Lucrece, Shakespeare's exploration of their psychological operations provided a focus which was missing from the previous accounts. He "takes each narrative item and tells what the persons involved saw, thought, and felt."<sup>9</sup> This emphasis upon the psychological functions of the protagonist and antagonist supplied the needed particularities which would justify Lucrece's decision to commit suicide and dismiss any speculations which could have been raised. It also focused the guilt upon Tarquin, the individual who initiated the rape and who incited Lucrece to commit suicide.

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<sup>7</sup>R. Thomas Simone, p. 41.

<sup>8</sup>R. Thomas Simone, p. 41.

<sup>9</sup>T.W. Baldwin, On the Literary Genetics of Shakespeare's Poems and Sonnets (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1944), p. 153.

Shakespeare divides the poem into two major sections. The first section explores the mental processes of the rapist. Shakespeare displays the burning desire which consumes Tarquin and leads him to sneak into Lucrece's bed chamber and ravish her. The second section investigates the emotional consequences for the victim. Shakespeare presents a Lucrece deeply affected and confused by the loss of her chastity.

The shift in focus between these two sections of the poem has caused problems for some critics. They lament that Shakespeare abandons the tragic potential of Tarquin to examine the sufferings of Lucrece. F. T. Prince praises what he considers the "tragically complex character" of Tarquin and criticises the portrayal of Lucrece as the tragic heroine. Prince remarks, "after the [rape], Lucrece becomes the tragic heroine; but we are never wholly convinced that she deserves the part, and the more we ponder the more clearly we see why she does not."<sup>10</sup> John Dover Wilson complains, "it is, in fact, the tragic potentialities of Tarquin's role that make the second, and longer, half of the poem so unsatisfying."<sup>11</sup> Sam Hynes likewise, complains:

it is an obvious weakness of the poem from this point of view that the subsequent

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<sup>10</sup>F.T. Prince, p. xxxvi.

<sup>11</sup>John Dover Wilson, ed., *The Poems* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969), p.xxii.

suffering of Tarquin is ignored, that he leaves the action just at the point where he begins to interest us -- it is as if we saw the last of Macbeth at his Act II exit.<sup>12</sup>

Hynes goes on to try to present an argument maintaining that "the significant rape is the rape of Tarquin's soul".<sup>13</sup>

The suggestion that Shakespeare fails because he neglected to follow through on his study of Tarquin contains within it a fundamental misunderstanding of what Shakespeare attempts to do in the poem. Shakespeare's presentation of Tarquin is far from admirable and does not give the slightest indication that he wants the reader to sympathize with Lucrece's rapist. A meticulous examination of the presentation of Tarquin shows that the poet is not interested in the tragic potential within him. Rather, the poet explores the inner workings of Tarquin's mind to establish his guilt and Lucrece's innocence.

The two sections of the poem are unified by a biased narrative voice which comments and moralizes upon the thoughts and actions of Tarquin and Lucrece. The narrator operates like the chorus in a Greek tragedy.<sup>14</sup> He commends Lucrece and chastises Tarquin for what he attempts to do and then does. Nowhere does the narrator attempt to justify or sympathize with

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<sup>12</sup>Sam Hynes, "The Rape of Tarquin," Shakespeare Quarterly, 10 (1959), p. 453.

<sup>13</sup>Hynes, p. 453.

<sup>14</sup>Rolf Soellner, "Shakespeare's Lucrece and the Garnier-Pembroke Connection," Shakespeare Survey, 15 (1982), p. 7.



Tarquin's actions.

This structure works well in presenting a defense of Lucrece against the theological claims that she died to achieve future glory and that she willingly consented to Tarquin's advances. Before Lucrece is even introduced, Shakespeare has portrayed Tarquin as despicable and loathsome. His narrative commentary has directed the reader to a negative assessment of the character of Tarquin. By the time Lucrece is introduced the sympathy of the reader is already directed towards her. She is the 'weak mouse' (555) that has been pounced upon and captured by the night-waking cat (554). Her suffering and emotional displays only serve to enhance the sympathy which Shakespeare has already directed towards her.

Some scholars have nevertheless condemned the poem as being structurally defective. They assert that it never "adds up to a coherent whole"<sup>15</sup> and suggest that there are "deficiencies in [its] architectural design."<sup>16</sup> F.T. Prince argues "that Shakespeare had a clear vision neither of his subject nor of the treatment which would have fitted it."<sup>17</sup> John Dover Wilson agrees with Prince's conclusions, remarking that, "it would have been surprising, then, if Shakespeare had managed to achieve the same degree of unity and coherence as he has in Venus and Adonis,

<sup>15</sup>Ian Donaldson, p. 41.

<sup>16</sup>James McDuffie Tolbert, "Shakespeare's Lucrece: Its Antecedents, Sources and Composition," Diss. Texas 1950, p. 364.

<sup>17</sup>F.T. Prince, p. xxxvi.

and he certainly did not."<sup>18</sup>

These scholars, however, are mistaken in their assertions that the poem is structurally defective. Shakespeare's vision of his subject and the treatment which fits it is clear. His presentation and dramatization of the figures of Tarquin and Lucrece provide the necessary background to clear Lucrece of the charges levelled at her by such theologians as Saint Augustine. As well, his presentation provides one of the strongest vindications for Lucrece in the intellectual debate between theologians and secular writers.

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<sup>18</sup>John Dover Wilson, p. xxii.

## Chapter Four

### The Presentation of Tarquin

The Roman emphasis upon family duty and honour led many women who had been raped to commit suicide. Suicide was seen as a means by which the honour and reputation of the victims's family could be protected against malicious innuendoes.

Lucrece lived up to this Roman emphasis upon honour when she committed suicide. She had sacrificed her own life in order to protect the honour and reputation of her family. She was regarded as a heroine and extolled as a paradigm of virtue.

With the coming of Christianity, the notion that women who had been raped should protect the family's honour by committing suicide slowly began to be questioned. At first, some Christians repeated the classical prescription for self-slaughter. However, as Christianity developed, theologians seriously questioned the classical thinking regarding suicide. They began to suggest that women who were raped need not commit suicide. They argued that women who were forcibly raped still maintained their chastity and honour, "it being the testimony of their conscience."<sup>1</sup>

However, for Christian theologians, there remained the problem of Lucrece. Many individuals continued to praise her faithfulness and extol her suicide. Many women continued to

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<sup>1</sup>Augustine, The City of God, trans. John Healey (London: J.M.Dent, 1945), p. 24.

imitate her actions. In order to convince those individuals that suicide was not necessary the public support of Lucrece's suicide had to be reversed.

Theologians realized that the only way they could achieve this was by undermining the reputation which Lucrece had acquired over the ages. They had to cast suspicion upon her reputation. They had to persuade their Christian audience, in the event of rape, to re-examine the prescription for suicide which had been part of their Roman heritage.

Consequently, theologians directed the majority of their remarks toward Lucrece, playing down if not ignoring Tarquin's part in the events. In some of the theological commentaries, Tarquin's name is not even mentioned.

In To the Martyrs, Tertullian acknowledges that Lucrece was "a victim of violence,"<sup>2</sup> but he never refers to Tarquin. Tertullian is not interested in the crime which Tarquin has committed. He is much more concerned with Lucrece as an example of an individual who committed suicide so that her "fair fame might include this deed."<sup>3</sup>

Augustine, in The City of God, briefly mentions that Lucrece was raped by Tarquin. According to Augustine, she was "forcibly abused by Sextus Tarquinius, son to Tarquin the

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<sup>2</sup>Tertullian, "To the Martyrs", in The Fathers of the Church, trans. Rudolph Arbesmann et al. (New York: Fathers of the Church, 1959), pp. 24-25.

<sup>3</sup>Tertullian, p. 25.

Proud."<sup>4</sup> He does not deny that "Tarquinius' son offered her force." Yet, Augustine is not concerned with the crime Tarquin has committed.

Despite these references to Tarquin, Augustine's interest lies solely upon Lucrece. He fervently tries to dissuade Roman women from imitating Lucrece by attacking her reputation, her character and her motives. He insinuates that Lucrece gave Tarquin a "lustful consent."<sup>5</sup> He suggests that she committed suicide because she was "covetous of glory."<sup>6</sup>

Augustine goes so far as to distort the events making Lucrece into the criminal, by accusing her of adultery and self-homicide. He plays down Tarquin's part in the rape. Tarquin's responsibility becomes overshadowed and under-rated by Augustine's obsession to destroy the reputation of Lucrece.

However, in The Rape of Lucrece, Shakespeare corrects this propensity to undermine or dismiss the relevance of Tarquin. He also rectifies any suggestions that Lucrece, not Tarquin, was the guilty party.<sup>6</sup> Shakespeare does this by concentrating upon the rapist in the first third of his poem.

Any plausible defense of Lucrece had to explore and elaborate upon the role which the rapist played. It is Tarquin who begins the process of events which would compel Lucrece to take her own life. It is with Tarquin, therefore, that

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<sup>4</sup>Augustine, p. 22.

<sup>5</sup>Augustine, p. 23.

<sup>6</sup>Augustine, p. 24.

Shakespeare begins his defense.

Using his dramatic expertise to present a realistic portrait of Lucrece's rapist, Shakespeare allows Tarquin to voice his thoughts and express his feelings directly. Altogether, there are eight places where Tarquin is allowed to speak in his own voice, so as to establish the innocence of Lucrece and emphasize Tarquin's responsibility.

The classical renditions of the rape and suicide were not very firm in maintaining that Tarquin, throughout his attack, had to force himself upon Lucrece. Both Livy and Ovid suggested that Lucrece "consented to her rape under duress."<sup>7</sup> This left open the possibility, at least in the minds of some theologians, that Lucrece accepted Tarquin's advances and therefore wilfully committed adultery:

Shakespeare, in his presentation of Tarquin, makes sure that Lucrece's rapist had to use force throughout. Shakespeare's Lucrece does not succumb to Tarquin's advances as she had done in the classical versions, nor does she give 'lustful' consent as suggested by Augustine. Even in Tarquin's first speech, long before the rape occurs, the poet makes it clear that Tarquin will have to 'force' himself upon Lucrece. Tarquin remarks, "As from this cold' flint I enforc'd this fire, So Lucrece must I force to my desire" (181-182).

Shakespeare has Tarquin, in his speeches, remind the reader

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<sup>7</sup>S. Clark Hulse, "A Piece of Skilful Painting in Shakespeare's Lucrece," Shakespeare Survey, 31 (1978), p. 15.

of this throughout the poem. In one of his later speeches, Tarquin tells Lucrece, "this night I must enjoy thee./ If thou deny, then force must work my way:/ For in thy bed I purpose to destroy thee" (512-551). The poet uses the personal pronoun and the possessive pronoun of the first person to emphasize that it is Tarquin, and only Tarquin, who wishes and desires to rape Lucrece.

In the seventh of Tarquin's speeches, Shakespeare compares the 'force' which Tarquin must use to an ocean storm, a force with which many an Englishman was all too familiar. Lucrece's pleadings do not dissuade her would-be rapist. Instead, her protesting "swells" his "uncontrolled tide" (645). He, the "salt sovereign" (650), is intent on tasting her, the helpless shore, and eventually he does.

This emphasis upon the force which Tarquin has to use against Lucrece is the focal point of his last speech in the poem. Tarquin rejects all Lucrece's pleas and arguments, requiring her to "Yield to my love: if not, enforced hate/ Instead of love's coy touch, shall rudely tear thee" (668-669). Tarquin, the raging storm, now becomes the raging beast, and after this threat we hear from him no further. He follows through with his threat to rape Lucrece and all is vividly told to the reader in the voice of the narrator.

In emphasising the violence which Tarquin has had to use, Shakespeare challenges any insinuation that Lucrece succumbed, fainted, or willingly acquiesced in Tarquin's

advances. Shakespeare's Lucrece does not succumb to Tarquin's enticements. Her resolve remains firm, causing the rapist to use force throughout.

An important and significant Shakespearean addition to the story is the debate which Tarquin has with himself before he enters Lucrece's bed chamber. Tarquin deliberates upon whether or not he should go ahead with his plan to rape Lucrece, weighing the consequences which such an action might have.

Some scholars speculate that Shakespeare was attempting to mold Tarquin into some type of tragic hero. They argue that Tarquin's debate is evidence that Shakespeare has provided his rapist with a conscience. One of the strongest proponents of such a view is Sam Hynes. Hynes compares the poet's treatment of Tarquin to Macbeth and laments that Tarquin's character is deserted just as he becomes interesting.<sup>8</sup>

This debate is one of the most misunderstood portions of Shakespeare's poem. It does not build up Tarquin's stature as a possible tragic hero, nor does it suggest that the rapist had a conscience. Shakespeare, if he had intended to fashion Tarquin into some type of tragic hero, would not have left Tarquin in mid stream to concentrate upon the emotional sufferings of Lucrece.

Critics such as Sam Hynes, F.T. Prince<sup>9</sup> and John Dover

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<sup>8</sup>Sam Hynes, "The Rape of Tarquin," Shakespeare Quarterly, 10 (1959), p. 453.

<sup>9</sup>F.T. Prince, Introduction, The Poems, The Arden Shakespeare (London: Methuen, 1960), p. xxxvi.



Wilson<sup>10</sup> who argue that Tarquin is an underdeveloped tragic hero contemplate what might have been. However, it is fruitless to imagine Tarquin as some sort of tragic hero. Shakespeare does not develop the character in this direction. Instead, he turns his attention towards Lucrece, and this we must conclude was his intention.

A closer scrutiny of Tarquin's debate will show that Shakespeare is not attempting to fashion Tarquin into some type of a tragic hero. In actuality, throughout the debate Tarquin provides the basis on which the reader is later to judge his actions. As Tarquin continues to deliberate, he incriminates himself further and demonstrates that Lucrece was an innocent and helpless victim of his raging desires.

As Tarquin ponders over his desire to rape Lucrece, he continually judges himself severely. Douglas Bush notes, "like the villains of the plays he leaves nothing unsaid in the way of self-condemnation."<sup>11</sup> He affirms that his thoughts are "unhallow'd". He calls them "vile" and "base". Later, he stigmatises his plan as "shameful" and "hateful" (240). After Tarquin has raped Luorece, his words come back to haunt him since he has provided the reader with a moral framework within which to judge his actions.

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<sup>10</sup>John Dover Wilson, ed., The Poems (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969), p. xxii.

<sup>11</sup>Douglas Bush, "Shakespeare: Venus and Adonis and The Rape of Lucrece," in Mythology and the Renaissance Tradition in English Poetry (New York: Pagent, 1957), p. 152.

If, as some critics suggest, Tarquin has a conscience, it is not a conscience which is overly concerned with his victim. Throughout his debate, Tarquin is entirely self-centred. As he ponders raping Lucrece, he is unconcerned with how she might feel or be affected. Instead, he contemplates the consequences of the rape for himself. Coppelia Kahn notes:

He is primarily concerned, not with the moral quality of the rape nor with the harm it will do to Lucrece specifically, but with the possible damage it may cause to his status as a nobleman of honourable reputation.<sup>12</sup>

He fears that it will shame his "knighthood" (197). He acknowledges that "[the crime] will live engraven on his face" (203). He worries about the possibility of Collatine discovering and preventing his "vile purpose" (220).

Through Tarquin's debate, Shakespeare transfers to Tarquin the traditional accusation levelled against Lucrece by many theologians. These theologians suggested that Lucrece committed suicide in order to gain notoriety for herself. However, Shakespeare makes certain that it is Tarquin, not Lucrece, who is shown to be concerned with reputation.

Throughout the debate, Tarquin is preoccupied with the effect the rape will have upon his reputation. He is anxious lest the "scandal will survive/ And be an eye-sore in [his] golden coat" (204). He foresees that some "loathsome dash" (206)

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<sup>12</sup>Coppelia Kahn, "The Rape of Shakespeare's Lucrece," Shakespeare Survey, 9 (1976), p. 54.

might be contrived by heralds.

Tarquin, in the course of his debate, does contemplate the effect his actions might have on his family. He notes that it will be a "foul dishonour to my household's grave" (198). He foresees that his posterity "shall curse [his bones]" and "wish" that he had not been their father (209-210). The poet wants the reader to understand Tarquin's act not only as a horrendous deed but also as a betrayal of the Roman ethic of pietas, of duty to one's family honour.

Moreover, by raping Lucrece, Tarquin destroys himself in the process. He recognized in the course of his debate that he will gain nothing by raping Lucrece and might possibly lose everything. He asks, "who buys a minute's mirth to wail a week, / Or sells eternity to get a toy" (213-214). In going through with the deed, Tarquin in essence willingly destroys himself, if not physically at least spiritually. He commits a species of suicide. Sam Hynes has misunderstood the tenor of Tarquin's debate when he suggests that by raping Lucrece Tarquin rapes his own soul. Granted, Tarquin's soul is destroyed, but it cannot be classified as "rape" because destruction comes from within. Tarquin's act is a form of suicide, in which he destroys himself and his family and in the process loses his soul. Lucrece also commits suicide, but her suicide is not destructive but constructive, for in the process she saves her family and protects her soul from corruption. Lucrece's suicide is a form of self-sacrifice.

Shakespeare also emphasizes in Tarquin's debate that Lucrece and her family had given Tarquin no motive to retaliate against them. Several times, Tarquin acknowledges that he has no reason, no excuse, to justify what he intends to do to Lucrece. He admits that Collatine has done nothing to him which deserves such behaviour. He notes:

"Had Collatinus kill'd my son or sire,  
Or lain in ambush to betray my life;  
Or were he not my dear friend, this desire  
Might have excuse to work upon his wife,  
As in revenge or quittal of such strife:  
But as he is my kinsman, my dear friend,  
The shame and fault finds no excuse nor end."  
(232-238)

As he lets his desires rule him, Tarquin realizes, "Why hunt I then for colour or excuses?" (267). He can find no excuses because Shakespeare knows that he has none.

Ironically, the poet also has Tarquin act as a character witness on Lucrece's behalf, indirectly building up a portrait of Lucrece as a dutiful wife. Reflecting upon how concerned Lucrece was about Collatine's wellbeing, Tarquin notes that she "gaz'd for tidings in my eager eyes, / Fearing some hard news from the warlike band / Where here beloved Collatinus lies" (254-256). He describes how she even "trembled" with "loyal fear" (261) until she was reassured of her husband's safety. Yet, he proceeds with his plans in full knowledge of the likely consequences:

"I see what crosses my attempt will bring,  
I know what thorns the growing rose defends;  
I think the honey guarded with a sting:  
All this beforehand counsel comprehends.

But ~~will~~ is deaf, and hears no heedful friends."  
(491-495)

In the fourth of Tarquin's speeches, the poet invites religious condemnation of Tarquin. He begins to pray but stops as he realizes that "the powers ~~to~~ whom I pray abhor this fact:// How can they assist me in the act" (349-350). Instead of turning back, Tarquin goes on, resolving to abandon his traditional deity and calling on "love and fortune" (351) to be his new Gods. Shakespeare leaves it cloudy as to whether Tarquin is abjuring Christian or pagan powers. He is simply concerned to show that what Tarquin does in dismissing his traditional deity is another in his long line of betrayals. Like Claudius, Tarquin can affirm that "the blackest sin is clear'd with absolution" (354) but he takes no action to avoid the occasion of sin.

In one of Tarquin's speeches, Shakespeare even has Tarquin voice the Augustinian claim that Lucrece may have led him on and given a "lustful consent." He suggests that Lucrece's colour and eyes betrayed her: "the fault is thine, / For those thine eyes betray thee unto mine" (482-483). However, throughout this speech, Tarquin's suggestion is betrayed by his use of the first-person pronoun and by the emphasis he places on having to scale Lucrece's fortress. Even though Tarquin attempts to implicate Lucrece, he continually admits that it is he who must act and he who must force himself upon Lucrece.

Later in the poem, the poet even has Tarquin inform the reader about the traditional Roman emphasis upon family duty and

honour. This information was missing from the classical renditions and was overlooked by theologians. While making the traditional threat to kill Lucrece and her groom, thereby implicating them in an adulterous situation, Tarquin pleads with Lucrece to submit to him, not for his sake but for her husband's and children's sake. He notes the consequences for Collatine and his children:

"So thy surviving husband shall remain  
 The scornful mark of every open eye;  
 Thy kinsmen hang their heads at this disdain,  
 Thy issue blurr'd with nameless bastardy."  
 (519-522)

Again he urges "Then for thy husband and thy children's sake, / Tender my suit; bequeath not to their lot/ The shame that from them no device can take" (533-535). Although Lucrece does not succumb, she keeps in mind how her rape might affect her family and children. Tarquin, in this speech, has given the reader the grounds for Lucrece's later suicide. She does it for the sake of her family.

Shakespeare, throughout the speeches of Tarquin, has Lucrece's rapist incriminate himself. He has Tarquin stress that 'force' must be used against Lucrece. He has Tarquin tell us that there was no justification for him to rape Lucrece. By raping Lucrece, the poet shows that Tarquin deserted his family, his friends, and his Gods to satisfy his lust. Any society, Roman or English, would have regarded his behaviour as reprehensible.

Lucrece, through Tarquin's speeches, is acquitted of the charges that she consented to Tarquin. Tarquin himself admits that he will have to use force, since Lucrece is entirely loyal to her husband and family.

Tarquin's act destroys the lives of many and betrays the morals of Roman society. Lucrece's suicide, on the other hand, protects her family, saves her soul and upholds the moral codes of her society. Through his presentation of Tarquin, the poet has defended the reputation of Lucrece.

## Chapter Five

### The Presentation of Lucrece

Despite the concentration upon Tarquin in the first third of the poem, Shakespeare's interest lies primarily with Lucrece. Once Tarquin has raped Lucrece, the poet turns his attention to Lucrece, who becomes the focal point for the remainder of the poem.

However, before Shakespeare begins his presentation of Lucrece's character, there is a transitional section in which both Tarquin and Lucrece are present. This is an important section because it is in this section that the rape is committed. More importantly, however, it is in this section that the poet demonstrates that Lucrece did not co-operate in the rape. In the classical presentations of the rape and suicide of Lucrece, Ovid and Livy do not even suggest that she verbally protested. In neither version does Lucrece protest or try to convince Tarquin not to rape her. In Ovid's presentation, Lucrece is speechless, "voice and power of thought itself fled from her breast."<sup>1</sup> In Livy's representation of the events, Lucrece again remains unusually silent although there is some suggestion that she did physically attempt to resist Tarquin. However, after Tarquin threatens to kill a slave and accuse her of adultery,

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<sup>1</sup>Ovid, *Fasti*, trans. Sir James George Frazer (London: William Heinemann, 1951), p. 115.



even Livy's Lucrece "yields."<sup>2</sup>

In both instances, it appeared that Lucrece did not attempt to verbally dissuade Tarquin from his plan to rape her. This left open the possibility, at least in the minds of some theologians, that Lucrece might have wanted Tarquin to rape her. However, unlike her classical counterparts, Shakespeare's Lucrece cannot be accused of wilfully acquiescing. His Lucrece does not yield to Tarquin after being threatened. His Lucrece does not remain silent. She pleads with Tarquin and protests what he plans to do. Shakespeare removes any suggestion that Lucrece might have enticed Tarquin or passively co-operated. Some of the arguments used by Lucrece closely parallel those which were used by Tarquin earlier in his debate. Tarquin, in his debate, considered that Collatine was his friend (237). More importantly, Tarquin considered what raping Lucrece might do to his family and his stature as a member of the royal house (197). These arguments are used by Lucrece in her attempts to dissuade Tarquin from his course of action.

During her pleadings, Lucrece reminds Tarquin that Collatine, her husband, is his friend (582). When this line of argument proves unsuccessful, she appeals to Tarquin's self-respect and reputation as a member of the royal house. She reminds him that he will wound his "princely name" (599) and mar his "princely office" (628).

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<sup>2</sup>Livy, The Early History of Rome, trans. Aubrey DeSelincourt (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1966), p. 83.

Shakespeare's repetition of these two arguments is important for it reinforces the impression that what Tarquin contemplates is unfounded and destructive. Twice, in Tarquin's inner debate and in Lucrece's pleadings, the poet reminds the reader that Tarquin, in going through with the rape, is betraying his friendship with Collatine and his responsibility towards his office and family.

However, the poet does not seem content with Lucrece simply repeating the arguments used earlier by Tarquin. Shakespeare establishes, in Lucrece's pleadings, that what Tarquin intends to do is a violation of the trust that naturally exists between a guest and host. Lucrece reminds Tarquin of his obligations as her guest (575). Tarquin's violation of such a trust is hinted at in the classical versions of the episode. In the Fasti, Ovid specifies that Tarquin was "welcomed kindly" by Lucrece.<sup>3</sup> In Livy's History, Tarquin is "hospitably welcomed" and later escorted to the "guest chamber."<sup>4</sup>

Yet, what is hinted at in the classical versions was not necessarily obvious to later readers. Shakespeare, in Lucrece's pleadings, seems aware that Tarquin's obligations to his hostess had to be stressed. Lucrece reminds Tarquin:

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<sup>3</sup>Ovid, p. 115.

<sup>4</sup>Livy, p. 82.

Reward not hospitality  
 With such black payment as thou hast pretended  
 Mud not the fountain that gave drink to thee,  
 Mar not the thing that cannot be amended.

(575-578)

By raping Lucrece, Tarquin repays kindness and hospitality with treachery. Once he goes through with his plans, it cannot be amended.

Later in the poem, Shakespeare points out that Lucrece had no choice but to welcome Tarquin. It was her duty to welcome Tarquin hospitably as a friend of her husband. To do otherwise would have dishonoured her husband. She notes, "coming from thee I could not put him back,/ For it had been dishonour to disdain him" (846-847): Shakespeare is at pains to establish that Lucrece fulfills her duty to her husband in welcoming his friend, and that Tarquin, in raping Lucrece, betrays the obligation he owes to his hostess.

The most important part of Shakespeare's presentation of Lucrece, however, occurs after Tarquin has left the scene. The poet explores the full extent of her grief as she must cope with what has been done to her.

Some scholars have criticized Shakespeare's handling of Lucrece. Robert S. Miola, for example, has suggested that Shakespeare's portrayal of Lucrece is stereotypical and that she, as well as Tarquin, resemble "stiff figures of cardboard and paste."<sup>5</sup> However, Shakespeare's Lucrece can hardly be called a

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<sup>5</sup>Robert S. Miola, Shakespeare's Rome (New York: Cambridge Press, 1983), p. 236.

"stiff cardboard figure." Throughout his portrayal of Lucrece, Shakespeare presents a woman who passionately expresses her emotions as she must cope with her ravishment.

In the classical portrayals of Lucrece's rape, not much is made of Lucrece's emotional state. In Livy's version of the affair, the post-rape Lucrece is described as "the unhappy girl" who cries as her husband arrives home.<sup>6</sup> Ovid ventures a little further, comparing the plight of Lucrece after the rape to that of "a mother who attends the funeral pyre of her son."<sup>7</sup> Ovid does allow his Lucrece to cry, comparing her tears to the water which flows down "a running stream."<sup>8</sup>

However, despite these descriptions of Lucrece's remorse, theologians still questioned Lucrece's motives. Such outward appearances were not enough to convince them that Lucrece's suffering was real or to establish that she did not invite Tarquin to rape her. Despite the classical presentations, it could still be argued with some plausibility that Lucrece committed suicide in an attempt to gain future fame. It could even be plausible, as Augustine has suggested, that she was an adulteress and not an innocent victim.

Shakespeare realized that if Lucrece was to be vindicated, her emotional and psychological sufferings had to be explored in detail. Consequently, after Tarquin has raped Lucrece,

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<sup>6</sup>Livy, p. 85.

<sup>7</sup>Ovid, p. 117.

<sup>8</sup>Ovid, p. 117.

Shakespeare concentrates on constructing the emotional and psychological reality of a woman who has been raped.<sup>9</sup>

Shakespeare presents a Lucrece deeply affected by her rape. After Tarquin has left, Lucrece comes to the realization that she is alone and "alone alone must sit and pine" (795). She seeks fellowship in her grief, "any sort of company -- human, animal, inanimate -- is preferable to solitude."<sup>10</sup> She cannot confront her rapist for he has left. She therefore attacks the forces which she considers have conspired with Tarquin to cause the rape -- Night, Opportunity and Time, thereby venting her frustration while at the same time providing herself with some type of companionship.

Her tirades against Night, Opportunity and Time, along with the Troy-painting episode, demonstrate the extent to which the rape has affected Lucrece. Before the rape, Lucrece is able to plead with Tarquin in a rational and logical manner. However, after the rape, this rationality has disappeared. Laura G. Bromley observes that Lucrece's "loss of an earlier self is demonstrated by her loss of equilibrium."<sup>11</sup> Her post- rape

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<sup>9</sup>Catherine R. Stimpson, "Shakespeare and the Soil of Rape," in The Woman's Part: Feminist Criticism of Shakespeare, ed. Lenz, Carolyn Ruth Swift, Gayle Green and Carol Thomas Neely (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1979), p. 62.

<sup>10</sup>Jerome A. Kramer and Judith Kaminsky, "The Contraries Such Unity Do Hold: Structure in The Rape of Lucrece," Mosaic, 10, No. 4 (1977), p. 146.

<sup>11</sup>Laura G. Bromley, "Lucrece's Re-Creation," Shakespeare Quarterly, 34 (1983), p. 203.

psychological state is "unbalanced".<sup>12</sup>

Some scholars have condemned Lucrece's laments. F.T. Prince argues that these laments "consistently weaken" the poem.<sup>13</sup> Prince believes that Lucrece loses the reader's "sympathy exactly in proportion as she gives tongue,"<sup>14</sup> and he suggests that the most "moving passages are those in which she is silent."<sup>15</sup> In Ovid's and Livy's version Lucrece hardly utters a word. Yet, to the theologian concerned with discrediting Lucrece's suicide, her silence suggested complicity. Shakespeare realized that the emotional and psychological sufferings have to be actualized and this he does through her laments.

She vehemently attacks Night, Opportunity and Time as a means of venting the anger and hatred she feels towards her rapist. Night, according to Lucrece, is an "image of hell" (764), a "black stage" (766), a "bawd" (768), and a "ravisher" (770). She calls Opportunity a "traitor" (877) and a "false thief" (888). She calls Time a "carrier of grisly care" (926), a "base watch of woes" (928), and "virtue's snare" (928).

Through these laments, the poet unequivocally establishes that the guilt for this crime comes from without and not from within. From these deranged tirades it is clear that she did not

<sup>12</sup>Laura G. Bromley, p. 204.

<sup>13</sup>F.T. Prince, ed., The Poems, The Arden Shakespeare (London: Methuen, 1960), p. xxxv.

<sup>14</sup>Prince, p. xxxvi.

<sup>15</sup>Prince, p. xxxvi.

help Tarquin or tempt him in any way. Never does Lucrece suggest that she should share in some of the blame. In her emotional outrage, Lucrece desperately must confront her attacker, or these substitutes, as she comes to grips with the reality of the permanent loss of her chastity.<sup>16</sup>

Opportunity, she believes, allowed Tarquin the occasion to ravish her. She concludes that its "guilt is great" (876). It is in this light that she must declare her verdict against Opportunity:

Guilty thou art of murder and of theft,  
Guilty of perjury and subordination,  
Guilty of treason, forgery and shift,  
Guilty of incest, that abomination:  
An accessory by thine inclination  
To all sins past and all that are to come  
From the creation to the general doom.  
(918-924)

Shakespeare has Lucrece associate what has been done to her with other crimes, so that the criminality of the rape and her innocence as the victim of the criminal act is emphasised. Shakespeare thereby directs any vestige of guilt away from Lucrece.

In her attack upon Time, Shakespeare has Lucrece foresee that she might have to die, while stressing that she is blameless. Shakespeare's Lucrece knows that Tarquin and those forces which aided him will "Be guilty of my death since of my crime" (931).

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<sup>16</sup>Coppelia Kahn, "the Rape of Shakespeare's Lucrece," Shakespeare Survey, 9 (1976), p. 59.

Towards the end of her tirade against Time, Lucrece regains her composure. Shakespeare presents a Lucrece who moves in and out of rationality. Realising that her tirades have accomplished nothing, she dismisses them, "Out idle words, servants to shallow fools, / Unprofitable sounds, weak arbitrators" (1016). She comes to the realization that "in vain [she has railed] at Opportunity, / At time, at Tarquin, at uncheerful night" (1023-1024).

However, this composure does not remain for long. Lucrece again becomes emotional as she preoccupies herself with thinking about the Troy painting. In the Troy picture, she finds yet another way to express her feelings and mourn her lost virtue. For Lucrece, Troy embodies the sense and the magnitude of her loss. She understands what Hecuba must have gone through and is able to "tune [Hecuba's] woes with [her] lamenting tongue" (1465). Hecuba, for Lucrece, becomes a comrade in sorrow.

The Troy painting episode also allows Lucrece to express some of the hatred and anger which she has for Tarquin. When she sees the artist's portrayal of Sinon, Lucrece is reminded of Tarquin who came to her "armed to beguile/ With outward honesty, but yet defil'd" (1544-1545). Lucrece expresses her anger by tearing at the portrait of Sinon, who for her resembles Tarquin, an anger which a person who had conspired with Tarquin would not have felt.

Troy is an important association for Shakespeare. Lucrece's loss of her fidelity to Collatine and the assault which was made



against her, for the poet, are of the same magnitude as the destruction of Troy and those who resided within its walls. Troy and Lucrece both are innocent victims trapped by armed aggressors, with no way out except destruction. In Troy, Shakespeare found the metaphor which was to parallel Lucrece's rape.

After her reflection upon the Troy painting, Lucrece regains her composure. She realizes the danger in immediately publishing Tarquin's name as her assailant, recognizing that his status as a prince of the realm might frighten away those whom she hopes will avenge her rape. Shrewdly, she makes her family and friends promise to avenge her rape, and only after being assured that they will does she name Tarquin as the rapist.

Despite Lucrece's logic in doing things this way, Shakespeare is careful not to make it appear that Lucrece stoically embraced her own self-slaughter. In actuality, the poet portrays a Lucrece who is terrified at the prospect of committing suicide. Her hand quivers (1030) the first time she contemplates it. She even seeks other alternatives: "May any terms acquit me from this chance?/ The poisoned fountain clears itself again,/ And why not I from this compelled stain" (1706-1708). However, she realizes that the stain cannot be cleared and affirms the traditional reason for her suicide, "no dame hereafter living/ By my excuse shall claim excuses's giving" (1714-1715).

This traditional reason did not, however, convince

theologians of Lucrece's innocence. Therefore, the poet makes it clear from what Lucrece has said earlier that this was not her primary motivation for killing herself. She commits suicide to protect the reputation of her family and more specifically the honour of her husband. In the earlier speeches of Tarquin, Shakespeare stressed that Collatine would be affected by the rape of his wife. Tarquin noted that Collatine would remain "the scornful make of every open eye" (520) and that his issue would be "blurr'd with nameless bastardy" (522).

Lucrece realized that whether innocent or guilty, the effect upon her husband and family would be the same. She does not want Collatine to be poisoned with her "attaint" (1072). She cannot tolerate the thought of Tarquin laughing and mocking Collatine's state (1066). Coppelia Kahn is correct in pointing out that Augustine is wrong in calling her "too greedy of praise for she dies not to save her honour but to save Collatine."<sup>17</sup>

However, the poet gives Lucrece a further and perhaps more compelling reason for deciding to commit suicide. He suggests the possibility that Tarquin may have impregnated Lucrece, a possibility which is foremost in Lucrece's mind as she contemplates suicide. Lucrece remarks:

This bastard graft shall never come to growth:  
He shall not boast who did thy stock pollute,  
That thou art dotting father of his fruit.  
(1062-1064)

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<sup>17</sup>Coppelia Kahn, p. 54.

It is essential to the poet's argument that impregnation is a possibility. Saad El-Gabalawy has observed:

The poet appears to be aware that Lucrece's self-slaughter cannot be explained, as a statuesque gesture of Roman self-slaughter. Without clear perception of the distinct possibility of illegitimate offspring, the reader might regard the heroine's suicide as irrational or even wicked, after Collatine's acknowledgement of her suicide.<sup>18</sup>

Never in the remarks of Augustine is the possibility of impregnation considered. By not considering such a possibility, Augustine has left a gaping hole in his line of argument, a hole which the poet takes advantage of in his defense of the classical matron's reputation.

Finally, Shakespeare seems to question the theological assertion that raped women "have the glory of their chastity still within them."<sup>19</sup> For Shakespeare, the rape has left Lucrece polluted and her soul endangered. He presents a Lucrece who is anxious about a soul encased in a corrupted frame, likening her situation to that of a tree which has lost its bark. Without the bark the tree's leaves will wither and decay (1168). Lucrece's soul, without her chastity, will suffer a similar fate to that of the tree if it is not removed from her body.

However, Shakespeare is careful not to make Lucrece appear selfish in her desire to maintain the sanctity of her soul. The

<sup>18</sup>Saad El-Gabalawy, "The Ethical Question of Lucrece: A Case of Rape," Mosaic, 12, No. 4 (1979), p. 81.

<sup>19</sup>Saint Augustine, The City of God, trans. John Healey, ed. R.V.G. Tasker (London: J.M. Dent, 1945), p. 24.

reader is reminded that her soul was kept "for heaven and for Collatine" (1166). Even her reason to save her soul is shown to be self-less. Later, the poet establishes that Lucrece's fears for her soul were justified. After she has killed herself, her blood divides into two rivers, one "still pure and red" (1742) and the other stained black (1743).

In the suicide scene, Shakespeare makes certain that the reader is reminded that it is Tarquin who causes Lucrece to kill herself. The poet does this by having Lucrece emphasize that it is Tarquin who guides the dagger to her body, "He, he fair lords, 'tis he,/ That guides this hand to give this wound to me" (1721-1722). Shakespeare's Lucrece does not commit suicide. She is murdered, albeit in absentia, by Tarquin, who started the course of events which compelled Lucrece to kill herself.

Throughout his presentation of Lucrece, Shakespeare appears to have been preoccupied with presenting a picture of Lucrece which could withstand assaults against her honour and reputation. He corrects omissions in his classical sources and adds the necessary information needed to vindicate Lucrece. He shows that she attempted to convince Tarquin not to rape her. He illustrates that she is deeply affected by her rape. He even demonstrates that Lucrece did not kill herself for her own fame and glory. Shakespeare's Lucrece is a Lucrece whose reputation and innocence cannot be questioned.

## Chapter Six

The Narrative Bias of The Rape of Lucrece

The narrative voices of Ovid's and Livy's accounts of the rape and suicide of Lucrece were not primarily concerned with justifying the Roman matron's decision to commit suicide. For their Roman audience, that would have been self-evident. She died to protect the honour of her family and live up to that Roman concept of "pietas."

Therefore, instances of narrative commentary in Ovid and Livy are rare. Occasionally, their narrative voices do venture to make a passing observation. However, such observations do not forcefully defend or explain the reasons why Lucrece felt that she had to take her own life.

In The Early History of Rome, Livy's narrator seldom leaves his descriptive mode to offer an interpretation of the events which are unfolding. As a historian, Livy is much more preoccupied with providing an accurate account of an historical event. Even when his narrator does venture to interpret, the interpretation does not necessarily help either to defend or explain Lucrece's motivation for committing suicide. For example, when Livy tries to explain that Lucrece could not help but yield to Tarquin, the narrative voice remarks that even "the most resolute chastity could not have stood against [Tarquin's]

dreadful threat."<sup>1</sup> For later theologians, such a remark was not enough to allay suspicions concerning Lucrece's innocence.

Ovid's narrator, like Livy's, seldom ventures to comment upon the events surrounding Lucrece's rape and suicide. When Ovid's narrator does comment upon events, the effect is somewhat puzzling. For example, when Ovid's narrator rebukes Tarquin for raping Lucrece, he asks, "Why, victor, dost thou joy? This victory will ruin thee. Alack, how dear a single night did cost thy kingdom"<sup>2</sup>, appearing more concerned about what the rape will mean for Tarquin and for the Roman nation than what it will do to Lucrece and her family.

In The Rape of Lucrece, Shakespeare's narrative voice assumes an important role, a role which moves from mere description to active involvement. The role of Shakespeare's narrator has been compared, by one scholar, to the role assumed by the Chorus in a Greek tragedy.<sup>3</sup> Like a Chorus, Shakespeare's narrator does not hesitate to comment upon events and personalities.

However, throughout these commentaries, Shakespeare's narrator does not function as an impartial observer. On the contrary, Shakespeare's narrator, from the beginning of the poem

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<sup>1</sup>Livy, The Early History of Rome, trans. Aubrey De Selincourt (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1966), p. 83.

<sup>2</sup>Ovid, Fasti, trans. Sir James George Frazer (London: William Heinemann, 1951), p. 115.

<sup>3</sup>Rolf Soellner, "Shakespeare's Lucrece and the Garnier-Pembroke Connection," Shakespeare Survey, 15 (1982), p. 7.

to the end, is partial, clearly sympathising with Lucrece, continuously affirming Lucrece's innocence and Tarquin's guilt.

Christian theologians had read the classical renditions of the rape and suicide of Lucrece, but to these theologians, the circumstances surrounding Lucrece's rape and suicide were not so clear cut. Christian theologians did not see things with the Roman perspective of the audience of a Livy or an Ovid. Inheritors of a different set of ideologies and morals, they mistook or chose to reinterpret Lucrece's motives.

A biased narrator was perhaps the best solution for the literary apologist. A biased narrator could escort the reader through the poem and provide the appropriate frames of reference within which Lucrece's innocence could be made manifest.

Shakespeare's narrator, throughout the poem, consistently sympathises with the classical matron. At one point, for instance, the narrator asks readers to put themselves in Lucrece's place. Before Tarquin begins to rape Lucrece, he asks the reader to 'imagine' how Lucrece must have felt as she awoke to see Tarquin prepared to rape her. He compares her plight to a nightmare, to something with which the majority of his audience might be familiar. Unfortunately for Lucrece, however, her nightmare is real. He asks his audience to:

Imagine her as one in dead of night  
 From forth dull sleep by dreadful fancy waking,  
 That thinks she hath beheld some 'ghastly sprite,  
 Whose grim aspect sets every joint a-shaking:  
 What terror 'tis! but she is worse taking,  
 From sleep disturbed, heedfully doth view  
 The sight which makes supposed terror true.  
 (449-455)

Several times, Shakespeare allows his narrative voice to chastise Tarquin, even allowing his narrator to lament the affect Tarquin's attack will have upon Lucrece. As Tarquin rapes Lucrece, the narrator exclaims, "O that-prone lust should stain so pure a bed" (684). Later, as Tarquin flees from the scene, the narrator laments "O deeper sin than bottomless conceit/ Can comprehend in still imagination" (701-702).

Throughout the poem, Shakespeare has this narrative voice assume the role of moralizer. As Tarquin heads to Lucrece's bed-chamber, for example, "the narrator establishes a moral interplay between Tarquin's actions and his surroundings"<sup>4</sup>, establishing that what Tarquin intends to do is reprehensible. Tarquin has to use force against the locks which all "rate his ill" (304). The wind wars with his torch and blows smoke into his face (311-312), trying to stop him from getting to Lucrece's room. Even Lucrece's glove seems to tell Tarquin to turn back when it pricks his finger (319). The narrator shows that locks, wind, and the glove abhor his intentions. Yet despite these warnings, Tarquin goes on and in doing so he must accept the blame and

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<sup>4</sup>Jerome A. Kramer and Judith Kaminsky, "These Contraries Such Unity Do Hold: Structure in The Rape of Lucrece," Mosaic, 10, No. 4 (1977), p. 153.



responsibility for what will happen.

The narrator, several times in the poem, points out important moral lessons, lessons drawn from faults found in Tarquin's character, causing him to betray all that is valuable in order to satisfy his carnal desires. The narrator comments on the aim of all humanity:

The aim of all is but to nurse the life  
With honour, wealth and ease, in waning age;  
And in this aim there is such thwarting strife  
That one for all or all for one we gage  
As life for honour in fell battle's rage  
Honour for wealth; and oft that wealth doth cost  
The death of all, and all together lost.

(141-147)

Striving for this goal, sometimes one concentrates upon only one of the aims and in doing so loses everything. This is precisely the mistake which Tarquin makes. He focuses all his energy upon raping Lucrece and in doing so he loses everything. The narrator further observes that Tarquin, in raping Lucrece, neglects what he already has. He notes:

so then we do neglect  
The thing we have, and all for want of wit,  
Make something nothing by augmenting it.

(152-154)

For the narrator, the lesson which can be learned from the story of Lucrece's rape is that one should be contented with what one already has. Tarquin, in greedily seeking to possess Lucrece and satisfy his lust, goes too far and consequently loses all.

The narrator also makes a moral observation upon the control

which men have over women. He seems to dislike the fact that women are sometimes victims to the excessive power which men have. Accordingly, women cannot be held accountable for what happens to them. The narrator notes:

For men have marble, women waxen, minds,  
 And therefore are they form'd as marble will;  
 The weak oppress'd, th' impression of strange kinds  
 Is form'd in them by force, by fraud, or skill.  
 Then call them not the authors of their ill,  
 .....  
 Poor women's faults, they are so fill'd  
 With men's abuses! those proud lords to blame  
 Make weak-made women tenants to their shame.  
 (1240-1244, 1258-1260)

What was done to Lucrece is emblematic of the abuses which women have undergone as a consequence of the undue power which men bear over them. Lucrece is not the author of her own ill.

Shakespeare's narrator, along with moralizing upon the events, also provides information necessary to understand that Lucrece was an innocent victim of Tarquin's uncontrollable lust. The narrator emphasizes that Lucrece was not aware of the raging lust within Tarquin's breast since Tarquin kept his true feelings hidden from her. From the opening stanza of the poem, Shakespeare makes this clear. Describing Tarquin's lust, the narrator notes that this raging fire within Tarquin was "in pale embers hid" (5). Later, the narrator, noting the "reverend" welcome Tarquin gives to Lucrece, remarks that Tarquin's "inward ill no outward harm express'd" (91). He observes that Tarquin's desire was hidden "in pleats of majesty, / That nothing in him seem'd inordinant" (93-94). The narrator stresses that there was

no way that Lucrece could have known Tarquin's true intentions.

Through this narrative commentary, Shakespeare also shifts to Tarquin the theological accusation for which Lucrece was traditionally accused. Many theologians had accused Lucrece of committing suicide for reasons of self-pride and self-glory. According to the English Reformer, William Tyndale, Lucrece was guilty of being too proud and too concerned about her own glory, which he noted, "God abhorreth more than the whoredom of any whore."<sup>5</sup>

However, the narrator demonstrates that it is Tarquin who is led to act out of reasons deeply rooted in pride. It is Tarquin's pride which encourages him to rape Lucrece. As Tarquin considers Lucrece and her husband Collatine, his lust swells and as "their captain, so their pride doth grow" (298). The narrator comments that it is this lust which fuels Tarquin's pride, noting that "while lust is in [Tarquin's] pride no exclamation/ Can curb his heat or rein his rash desire" (705-706).

The narrator also questions the propriety of Tarquin leaving his comrades in Ardea to satisfy his carnal desires. Early in the poem the poet, suggests, through the narrator, that in leaving Ardea Tarquin betrays his friends and his nation. He has neglected "his honour, his friends, his affairs, his state" (45). None of the poet's sources questioned the propriety of

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<sup>5</sup>William Tyndale, "The Obedience of a christian man," in Doctrinal Treatises and Introductions to Different Portions of the Holy Scriptures, ed. Henry Walter, 36. (Cambridge: The University Press, 1968), p. 183.

Tarquin's leaving Ardea. However, for Shakespeare, this is another in Tarquin's succession of betrayals.

It was essential that Shakespeare not leave it uncertain as to how the characters of Lucrece and Tarquin are to be viewed, if he was to counter the impression gained by Christian theologians that Lucrece was guilty of complicity in her rape. Obviously, the classical versions had not been forceful enough in stressing that Lucrece was but an innocent victim of Tarquin's raging libido.

In the classical versions of the story, neither Livy nor Ovid were concerned with how their audience would view Tarquin and Lucrece since they knew that to their Roman audience, Lucrece would be regarded as the innocent and wronged party. Her reputation had long been lauded throughout the Roman empire. Conversely, they realized that to their Roman audience, Tarquin would, as Lucrece's rapist and as a member of the last of the tyrannical royal houses, be viewed negatively.

Shakespeare's narrator cannot take this for granted. Throughout the poem, he continually reminds the reader of Tarquin's guilt. Tarquin is a "false lord" (50), a "faultful lord of Rome" (715), and a "guilty rebel" (715). Even Tarquin's physiology expresses his guilt. His hand is a "guilty hand" (358) and he sweats with "guilty fear" (358).

Conversely, the narrator reminds the reader of Lucrece's virtue, calling her "a treasure" (16), a "jewel" (34), and a "virtuous monument" (391). She is "guiltless" (89), and the

narrator underscores her innocence by comparing her to "lamenting Philomel" (1079).

Philomel was deceived by her sister's husband, Tereus, into believing that her sister, Procne, had died. Tereus tricks Philomela into a "pretended marriage." However, when Philomela learns of his treachery Tereus cuts out her tongue and imprisons her. Eventually, Philomela sends word to her sister via a tapestry. Upon learning of the deceit, Procne kills her son and serves him to Tereus that night for supper. Procne and Philomela flee and Tereus pursues them, but before Tereus can kill them, the Gods intervene and Philomela is turned into a swallow, Procne into a nightingale, and Tereus into a hawk.<sup>6</sup> For Shakespeare's reader, this association with Philomela would have accentuated Lucrece's innocence.

One of the most prevalent groups of images used by the narrator in the poem is drawn from the animal kingdom. Shakespeare transforms the "well-ordered city into the savage outdoors."<sup>7</sup> Tarquin assumes the role of a predatory animal, with Lucrece as his helpless victim. Tarquin is the "grim lion" who "fawneth o'er his prey" (421), the "foul night-waking cat" who holds in his paws the panting "weak mouse" (554-555), and "the wolf" who has seized the crying "poor lamb" (677). Shakespeare shows through this imagery that Tarquin has lost his

<sup>6</sup>Edith Hamilton, Mythology (Boston: Little, Brown, and Co., 1942), pp. 270-271.

<sup>7</sup>Robert S. Miola, Shakespeare's Rome (Cambridge: Cambridge University press, 1983), p. 28.

humanity through an inhuman act. The use of this imagery also strengthens the poet's contention that Lucrece's rapist must force himself upon his victim.

Through his narrative voice, Shakespeare continues to describe the events surrounding Lucrece's rape in terms which suggest violence. He compares the violent assault upon Lucrece to the assault upon the walls of some city under siege. When Tarquin's veins swell, the narrator notes that they are ready for "pillage fighting" (435). As Tarquin prepares to attack, his heart strikes an "alarum" (433). The entire rape episode is described using such military terminology. As Tarquin prepares to rape Lucrece the image of the city under siege is accentuated. Tarquin "scales" Lucrece's walls leaving her "round turrets destitute and pale" (441). The narrator stresses that what is done to Lucrece is a violent and forced assault. Never does Lucrece surrender to Tarquin.

Shakespeare also emphasizes that Tarquin is the criminal. The adjectives used by the narrator to describe Tarquin focus upon the criminal nature of Tarquin's intentions. As Tarquin wakes in the middle of the night, the narrator notes that the majority of people are asleep, "Save thieves and cares and troubled minds that wake" (126). The narrator makes it clear that Tarquin belongs in the category of the thieves. When he leaves his room, Tarquin "steals" away (283). Still later, the narrator calls Tarquin a "creeping thief" (305) and a "thievish dog" (736). For the narrator, Tarquin is the only criminal in

the poem.

The unfavorable presentation of Tarquin in the narrative commentary is high-lighted by the poet's use of imagery drawn from the Bible. Robert L. Montgomery, Jr., has concluded that the poet's "allusion to scripture provides a standard for severe judgement."<sup>8</sup> For the poet, there is a definite and unmistakable contrast between the divinity of Lucrece and the satanic nature of Tarquin.

The narrator calls Tarquin a "devil" (85) and a "serpent" (362). The serpent imagery is especially effective. In Christianity this image is traditionally associated with evil forces and satanic influences. Tarquin, after he has pleaded with Lucrece to give in for the sake of her family, is described by the narrator as a "cockatrice" (540). The cockatrice was a mythical serpent commonly referred to as a basilisk. The basilisk was infamous because it was thought that the beams of its eyes corrupted the individual upon which it gazed.<sup>9</sup> This is an appropriate description given the subsequent emphasis upon the post-rape Lucrece as physically corrupted by Tarquin.

The narrator also suggests that Tarquin, in raping Lucrece, breaks the last of the ten commandments, which states "Thou shalt not covet thy neighbour's house, thou shalt not covet thy

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<sup>8</sup>Robert L. Montgomery, Jr., "Shakespeare's Gaudy: The Method of the Rape of Lucrece," in Studies in Honour of DeWitt T. Starnes, ed. T.P. Harrison (Austin: Texas University Press, 1967), p. 28.

<sup>9</sup>F.T. Prince, ed. The Poems, The Arden Shakespeare (London: Methuen, 1960), p. 92.

neighbour's wife, nor his manservant, nor his maidservant, nor his ox, nor his ass, nor any thing that is thy neighbour's" (Exodus 20: 17).<sup>10</sup> In the poem, the narrator's use of the term "covet" (134) recalls the commandment. This is an appropriate allusion because Tarquin in desiring Lucrece and in raping her does break the commandment against coveting one's neighbor's wife.

Throughout the poem, Shakespeare surrounds Lucrece "like a halo" with the "vocabulary of purity and holiness."<sup>11</sup> The narrator calls her an "earthly saint" (85). She is "holy-thoughted" (384) and the "picture of pure piety" (542). She is continually compared to a lamb. The lamb, for the Christian, is a reminder of Christ who gave up his life in order to save humanity. Lucrece is described by the narrator as the "poor lamb" (677) which has been seized by the wolf. After the rape, the narrator calls her a "wearied lamb" (737). Perhaps the poet makes the association in order to stress that Lucrece, in a similar type of "sacrifice," kills herself in order to protect her family. For her family, her death will save them from disgrace and maintain their reputation.

Through the information given by the narrator, Shakespeare also suggests that Lucrece's husband, Collatine, shares some of the responsibility for the rape of his wife, by having drawn

<sup>10</sup>The Holy Bible, Authorized King James Version (Chicago: Spencer Press, 1947), p. 84.

<sup>11</sup>Coppelia Kahn, "The Rape of Shakespeare's Lucrece," Shakespeare Survey, 9 (1976), p. 49.



Tarquin's attention to his wife. Collatine "unwisely...unlock'd the treasure of his happy state" (15-16). The poet, in suggesting that Collatine is partially to blame, is not attempting to minimize Tarquin's guilt. Rather, by placing some of the blame on Collatine, he establishes that the motives of others should perhaps be explored before the innocence of Lucrece is contested. The narrator also questions why Collatine published "that rich jewel he should keep unknown/ From thievish ears" (33-35). He suggests that Collatine's reasons for exposing Lucrece to public view were grounded in pride. Collatine was proud that he had "sov'reignty" over Lucrece (36-37). Again, Shakespeare has assigned the traditional fault which theologians suggested Lucrece was guilty of to someone else.

The narrative commentary also emphasizes that Lucrece is emotionally traumatized by the rape. As she begins to lament against Night, the narrator remarks that she is "frantic with grief" (762). The laments and the Troy painting, as seen in the last chapter, are manifestations of this grief. In his commentary, the narrator is at pains to convince the reader that her grief is authentic and overwhelming:

Thus cavils she with every thing she sees.  
 True grief is fond and testy as a child,  
 Who wayward once, his mood with naught agrees;  
 Old woes, not infant sorrows, bear them mild.  
 Continuance tames the one; the other wild,  
 Like an unpractis'd swimmer plunging still,  
 With too much labour drowns for want of skill.  
 (1093-1099)

The narrator argues that women who have been raped do not

retain their virtue and chastity. This is opposed to the contention of St. Augustine in The City of God. The narrator stresses that Lucrece does indeed bear a stain as a consequence of the rape. Towards the end of the poem, he states that Tarquin has left his impression upon Lucrece. However, he emphasizes that this is not Lucrece's fault, "No more than wax shall be accounted evil,/ Wherein is stamp'd the semblance of the devil" (1245-1246). The narrator makes it clear that Lucrece has been 'polluted' by Tarquin.

The narrator views Lucrece's suicide as a way in which she can save her soul from the corruption of her body:

Even here she sheathed in her harmless breast  
A harmless knife, that thence her soul unsheathed;  
That blow did bail it from the deep unrest  
Of that polluted prison where it breathed.  
(1723-1726)

Later, the narrator establishes that Lucrece has indeed been physically polluted by describing how her blood divides into two slow streams:

And bubbling from her breast, it doth divide  
In two slow rivers, that the crimson blood  
Circles her body in on every side,  
Who like a late-sack'd island vastly stood  
Bare and unpeopled in this fearful flood.  
Some of her blood still pure and red remain'd,  
And some look'd black, and that false Tarquin  
stain'd.

(1737-1743)

None of the previous versions of the story ever presented the division of Lucrece's blood. This is entirely a Shakespearean

creation.<sup>12</sup> Coppelia Kahn has noted that "the Elizabethans knew from Aristotle that wholesome blood was red while diseased blood turned black."<sup>13</sup>

Shakespeare, however, does not stop with her death. His narrator suggests that Lucrece did not have to endure the fires of hell as some theologians had suggested. Instead, Lucrece appears to be headed for a heavenly reward, "Her contrite sighs unto the clouds bequeathed/ Her winged sprite, and through her wounds doth fly/ Life's lasting date from cancell'd destiny" (1727-1729).

Shakespeare has used his narrative voice to shape and guide an understanding of Lucrece's innocence and Tarquin's guilt. Tarquin is the guilty party. The narrator shows that Tarquin deserts his friends and his responsibilities to rape Lucrece, stressing that Tarquin is liable for the consequences of his uncontrollable desire. The imagery used to describe Tarquin stresses the way in which the audience is to view him. He is like an animal or an invading army forcing himself upon the unsuspecting Lucrece. The narrator makes certain that what Tarquin does will be viewed by the reader as criminal.

Conversely, the narrator continually stresses Lucrece's innocence. She is the helpless prey and the defenseless city. The narrator defends her decision to commit suicide, her contention that she is polluted and her fears for the sanctity of

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<sup>12</sup>Coppelia Kahn, p. 64.

<sup>13</sup>Kahn, p. 64.

her soul being proven by the physical separation of her blood into two rivers. The poet, through his narrative commentary, provides the necessary information and framework needed to defend Lucrece from the theological insinuations against her.

## CONCLUSION

The Rape of Lucrece is Shakespeare's entry into the debate between the theological and secular views of Lucrece's rape and suicide. Evidence within the poem leads one to conclude that Shakespeare structures his poem to answer the questions raised by Saint Augustine in The City of God.

Shakespeare answers Augustine's suspicions about the sincerity of Lucrece. Augustine's suggestion that Lucrece gave a "lustful"<sup>1</sup> consent is refuted in the poem by the emphasis placed on Tarquin's force and Lucrece's earnest pleadings. The accusation that Lucrece wished to gain glory for herself is placed in doubt in Shakespeare's poem through the emphasis on Lucrece's obligation to her husband and family. All that she does is for them, not for herself.

Shakespeare justifies Lucrece's decision to commit suicide by suggesting that Tarquin might have impregnated her. This was something which Augustine had not even considered. Shakespeare shows that if the child is allowed to live, Collatine, Lucrece's husband, will be disgraced. The possibility of a pregnancy provides Lucrece with a

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<sup>1</sup>Saint Augustine, The City of God (De Civitate Dei), trans. John Healey, ed. E.V. G. Tasker (London: J.M. Kent and Sons, 1945), p. 23.

strong motive to commit suicide.

Shakespeare's description of the pollution in Lucrece's blood physically disproves St. Augustine's contention that raped women may still have "the story of their chastity within them."<sup>2</sup> Point by point, Shakespeare establishes Lucrece's innocence and the necessity of her self-slaughter.

Scholarly complaints about the poet's supposed lack of a clear vision, or excessive length are unjustified. Critics such as Arden editor F.T. Prince or Ian Donaldson who argue that the poem lacks unity have failed to recognize the major unifying factor in the poem -- the poet's defense of Lucrece.

The poem coherently and methodically builds up a case for Lucrece's innocence. The presentation of Lucrece throughout the poem shows that she is innocent of any charges which might be levelled against her. She does not allow Tarquin to rape her. She pleads with him to turn back. Shakespeare establishes, through her emotional instability after the rape, that she did not entice Tarquin to rape. Nor can she be accused of adultery because to the end she is loyal to her husband and family. Her suicide, as the poet shows, is not really a suicide. In killing herself she saves her family, her husband and ultimately her soul from destruction.

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<sup>2</sup>Saint Augustine, p. 24.

The presentation of Lucrece's rapist, Tarquin, shows an individual who is entirely self-centred. He is primarily concerned with satisfying his own desires and he is willing to betray his family, his friends, his deities, and his position to satisfy his libido. His internal debate establishes that he knew the consequences of his actions. He goes to his destruction with his eyes fully open and in a manner he is the one who truly commits suicide.

The biased narrator provides the frame of reference and needed information to establish how Lucrece and Tarquin should be judged by the reader. The narrator emphasizes through the imagery he uses that Tarquin is entirely reprehensible and solely responsible.

Throughout The Rape of Lucrece, Shakespeare has indeed provided "artistic justification"<sup>3</sup> for Lucrece's suicide. Far from being incoherent and disunified, the poem shows a unity of purpose and design, a unity which centres around the defense of Lucrece's virtue from the onslaught of Christian theologians.

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<sup>3</sup>Bickford Sylvester, "Natural Mutability and Human Responsibility: Form in Shakespeare's Lucrece," College English, 26 (1965), p. 510.

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