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The Treatment of Sexual Violence and Reclaimed Agency in Shakespeare's Titus Andronicus and The Rape of Lucrece

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The Treatment of Sexual Violence and Reclaimed Agency in Shakespeare's *Titus Andronicus*
and *The Rape of Lucrece*

A Capstone Project Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements of the Renée Crown University Honors Program at
Syracuse University

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and Renée Crown University Honors
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ABSTRACT

This project explores Shakespeare's treatment of rape and sexual violence in *Titus Andronicus* and *The Rape of Lucrece* through close reading, analysis, and discussion of relevant source material. Critiques of Shakespeare that center around his perceived anti-feminist convictions tend to focus on his morbidly comical depictions of rape and violence against female victims. However, despite their position as victims, Lavinia in *Titus Andronicus* and Lucrece in *The Rape of Lucrece* reclaim revenge on their attackers. Shakespeare deliberately lends his literary eloquence to Lavinia and Lucrece, enabling them to partly avenge the crimes done unto them. By representing these characters as literate women, Shakespeare allows Lavinia and Lucrece to become more than abject victims. Lavinia and Lucrece fight back against the patriarchal structures which would deny them the capacity to resist the wrongs done unto them.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

For the past two years, I have been diligently working on a critical analysis of the treatment of rape and sexual violence in Shakespeare's *Titus Andronicus* and *The Rape of Lucrece*. Although I reference texts written centuries and even millennia ago, I believe that the topic of rape and sexual violence is unfortunately ever-relevant today, especially on a college campus. Lavinia and Lucrece in *Titus Andronicus* and *The Rape of Lucrece* both show acute understanding of the significance of their crimes as part of a larger narrative, and are able to incite and participate in revenge against those who wronged them. My main argument centers around the idea that despite recent scholarly assertions that depictions of rape in Shakespeare are inherently anti-feminist as they seem to discount the victim by producing an often queasily humorous effect, the notion that Shakespeare takes salacious pleasure in these crimes is more complicated and multi-dimensional than some critics allow. Both Lavinia and Lucrece are able to partly redeem themselves through their unbroken capacity and the will to act and the literacy skills endowed to them by Shakespeare.

In the first chapter, I discuss Shakespeare's treatment of Lavinia in *Titus Andronicus*. Central to the plot is a copy of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, a Latin narrative poem comprised of myths. Lavinia, although she has been rendered unable to speak by her attackers, is able to use the copy of *Metamorphoses* to reveal to her father that she has been raped and mutilated. Shakespeare's use of Arthur Golding's translation of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* is essential to my argument, and is referenced at length throughout the first chapter. While a clear allusion to Ovid's work, Shakespeare arguably allows Lavinia more agency than her mythical counterpart.

After Ovid's *Metamorphoses* is introduced, I discuss Shakespeare's dehumanization of Lavinia's rapists, Chiron and Demetrius. Lavinia likens them to "tiger's dam", reinforcing the

notion that their evil and barbaric qualities are inherited. It is important to note that Chiron and Demetrius use animalistic metaphors to describe their crimes as well, as Demetrius remarks:

DEMETRIUS. Chiron, we hunt not, we, with horse nor hound,
But hope to pluck a dainty doe to the ground (2.3.28-9).

Lavinia represented as a doe is a clear indication of her perceived innocence and purity; a stark contrast from her attackers. In the sub-heading *Further Treatment of the Attack*, I compare the language in Ovid's story of Philomela and the language surrounding the rape of Lavinia.

Shakespeare indicates that Lavinia's attackers believe they have a right to Lavinia's body, and implies that rape is a byproduct of war and an indicator of social disorder, thereby coding the crime of sexual assault as an act of chaos.

Next, I move on to discuss examples of Lavinia's preserved agency, demonstrated by her physical will to act and her literacy. Even after she is raped and dismembered, Lavinia still has the will and ability to participate in the gruesome revenge of those who wronged her. Again as tribute to Ovid, Shakespeare draws heavily on his story of Philomela and writes an abhorrent scene in which Lavinia helps feed the bodies of her attackers to their mother. While this act is clearly immensely disturbing, it is done both to display Lavinia's persistence and reclamation of her agency and to reflect the dire state of the Roman Empire. It is important to note that Ovid's Philomela and Shakespeare's Lavinia are only able to participate in their respective acts of revenge because they were endowed with literacy skills which they use to illuminate what has been done to them. Lavinia is both a victim and empowered, restricted by patriarchal ideology while simultaneously demanding back some power and agency by inciting and participating in the revenge against her rapists. The physically stumped Lavinia is able to write in the sand the crime and who was responsible, inspiring her family to take up arms and avenge her. Even

though her male family members assume the responsibility of revenge, Lavinia has a crucial role in her attackers' demise. Born in an inherently submissive role, as the play continues to spiral into disorder, Lavinia is actively present in the gruesome revenge scene in spite of her mangled state, showcasing her strength and resilience. Shakespeare gifted Lavinia the ability of full literacy and the will to act, thus painting her as the embodiment of a character who is not immune to suffering nor a total victim.

I continue arguing my thesis in the next chapter, where I discuss *The Rape of Lucrece*. Like Lavinia, Shakespeare lends Lucrece his "mellifluous and honey-tongued" (Frances Meres) eloquence so she can avenge the crimes done unto her. Shakespeare places an emphasis on the materials and products of writing through the repeated use of words like "blot" and "publish" to describe Lucrece's chastity. Although it is unclear in Ovid's *Fasti* – which Shakespeare drew heavily upon while writing *The Rape of Lucrece* – whether or not Lucrece is literate, Shakespeare deliberately makes sure his Lucrece is literate and makes her literacy an essential aspect of the plot.

Shakespeare also employs ekphrasis, a verbal description or mediation upon a non-verbal work of art, which is distinct from other versions of Lucrece's rape. Lucrece spends a considerable amount of the poem ruminating on a painting depicting the fall of Troy. She aligns herself with the raped Helen and with Troy itself, thus shifting the narrative from a personal account of violation to the rape of a nation. She continuously wonders aloud why she and Helen must be forever tainted as victims of rape, which allows me to draw comparisons between her description of Helen and the speaker's account of Lucrece.

After Lucrece writes a letter to her husband to summon him home so she can tell him about her rape, she begins to transform into a political symbol. I closely analyze the language

surrounding the conversation between her, her husband, and his knights. Lucrece insists on a pledge of vengeance before she reveals her rapist, and reminds the knights that serve her husband that when they took their oaths, they promised to protect women and avenge their harms. Once she has their promise, Lucrece reveals her attacker, and ends her life. Even though she is acting within the patriarchal convention that rape forever sullies women and thus feels the need to take her own life, she makes sure that she will not do so in vain and she will be avenged. Both Lavinia and Lucrece demonstrate a will and ability to act in spite of their misfortune and the inherently oppressive cultures they are operating in. Shakespeare endowing Lavinia and Lucrece with literacy allows them to take control in a situation where it has been wrested from them unwillingly, and thus renders the notion that he is a misogynist indefensible.

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CHAPTER ONE: “PLAY THE SCRIBE” LAVINIA’S RECLAIMED AGENCY IN *TITUS ANDRONICUS*

Introduction

And with a pair of pinsons fast did catch hir by the tung,
And with his sword did cut it off. The stumpe whereon it hung
Did patter still. The tip fell downe and quivering on the ground
As though that it had murmured it made a certain sound (Ovid, Book VI, 709-12).

DEMETRIUS. So, now go tell, an if thy tongue can speak,
Who ‘twas that cut they tongue and ravished thee.

CHIRON. Write down thy mind; bewray thy meaning so,
An if thy stumps will let thee play the scribe. (Shakespeare, *Titus Andronicus*,
2.4.1-4).

Described in these quotations is the mutilation and dismemberment of female victims of sexual violence who have their tongues cut out by their attackers. There is a certain macabre humor in both Shakespeare and Ovid that renders rape risible – the effect of which is simultaneously humorous and disquieting. The image of a dismembered tongue “quivering” and “murmuring” upon the ground is horrifying, yet creates a humorous image because it is so bizarre. The taunts of Demetrius and Chiron are reprehensible, but the image of a literally stumped Lavinia has a queasily humorous effect. By emphasizing the macabre and making light of it simultaneously, Ovid and Shakespeare disturb the readers by seemingly downplaying these violent crimes while also producing a nauseating sense of pleasure. The horrific deeds become comical in a remarkably troubling way which both disturbs and confounds the reader or

audience. It is hardly surprising that Publius Ovidius Naso (40 BCE – 17 CE) and Shakespeare are often vilified by feminist critics by seemingly taking sadistic pleasure in their depictions of violent rape and dismemberment. Ovid's mellifluous Latin verse and humorous tone persists even in instances where women are brutally raped, in instances of taking savage revenge, and when a perpetrator is compelled to eat his own child. While it is true that men also suffer greatly in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, women are uniquely subject to extreme degradations and transformations in which they lose their agency. Ovid's comic energy is often mirrored in Shakespeare's comedies, tragedies, and sonnets. Shakespeare read Ovid during his days in grammar school, and it is clear that he drew upon these contradictory Ovidian sensations of humor and horror. Ovid embraced the violently gruesome and overly sexual in such a way as to simultaneously lull the readers into a sense of comfort and to perplex them. Shakespeare's *Titus Andronicus* recapitulates these profoundly Ovidian ideals and methods, which causes critics (such as Carolyn Asp, Cynthia Marshall, and Derek Cohen) to claim that Shakespeare is adhering to patriarchal norms and robbing Lavinia of any power she may have had. However, the notion that Ovid and Shakespeare take salacious pleasure in these crimes and victimize women is much more complicated and multi-dimensional than critics allowed. Contrary to the accusation that the writings of Shakespeare and Ovid are inherently misogynistic and anti-feminist as they seem to downplay instances of rape and gruesome violence, through his engagement with Arthur Golding's translation of *Metamorphoses*, Shakespeare was able to provide a foundation in his works for literary women to seize relative control over their bodies despite crimes inflicted upon them. Lavinia, in *Titus Andronicus*, is the epitome of a female victim who is able to partly redeem herself through her unbroken capacity to act and her literacy skills. While it ostensibly may appear he is mimicking and enforcing the trivialization of sexual assault, Shakespeare uses

Golding's Ovid in order to equip Lavinia with the means to regain her subjective agency.

Carolyn Asp asserts, "Lavinia embodies in a grotesque literal extreme the patriarchal wish that women remain silent and obedient to male commands and interpretations, without expressing desires of their own, subsumed under male goals and values" (Asp 340). However, as Lavinia clearly demonstrates the abilities to read, write, and even collect the blood of her own attackers, this notion that she is entirely victimized is incorrect.

Central to the plot of *Titus Andronicus* is a copy of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* – a copy that belonged to one woman and is being employed by another. By means of the copy, Lavinia is able to reveal to her father that she has been raped and mutilated like Ovid's Philomela. Shakespeare thus equips Lavinia with the crucial power of expression although she is devoid of speech. The early modern period had extremely low literacy rates, and in ancient Rome where *Titus Andronicus* is set, literacy rates were even lower. Shakespeare allowing Lavinia to read *and* write is significant – as David Cressy points out, only about 10%-15% of women could read in the Elizabethan era, and about 90% were unable to write their names. To put this stark statistic into context, it is worth mentioning that Shakespeare's youngest daughter Judith could not even sign her name (Callaghan 27). While it is more likely that the aristocratic Lavinia would have been literate compared to other women in Ancient Rome, it is still surprising and undoubtedly significant that this detail is included by Shakespeare as such a conspicuous aspect of the plot. It is also important to note that while Shakespeare often drew from sources such as Plutarch or Holinshed, there is no known major source for *Titus Andronicus*. This means that the notion of literate women in this play is likely entirely Shakespeare's invention.

Moreover, Lavinia is not the only literate woman in *Titus Andronicus*; Lucius, who provides Lavinia with the copy of *Metamorphoses* reveals that he received his copy from his unnamed mother who is only once mentioned in the play. He states:

LUCIUS. tis Ovid's *Metamorphosis*.

My mother gave it me (Shakespeare, 4.1.43-4).

Lucius revealing that his copy of *Metamorphoses* was given to him by his mother is not only significant because of her gender, but also due to the nature of gift-giving in Early Modern England. As Felicity Heal states, "Words defined as gifts were often the most precious of all the presents contemporary donors could provide" (Heal 43). The significance of these types of gifts change depending on the status and relationship of the gift-giver and the gift-receiver. Heal emphasizes, "Literacy and classical education encouraged the formalization of advice: from parents to children; from counsellors to monarchs; from friends to one another" (43). Lavinia, in taking the book from Lucius, shares in the gift and thus the knowledge passed down from mother to son, and uses it to illuminate the crimes done against her. Within the scope of this play, there are two literate women; this is a clear indication of Shakespeare's use of literacy in women as a way for them to validate their experiences and bring them to light. While gifting a book does not necessarily mean the giver could read, within the conventions of early modern gift giving the givers of books were often literate as books were primarily gifted as propaganda or advice. The inclusion of this minor detail reveals that not only did these women have access to texts and could read, but they were also able to draw meaning from what they have read.

However, Lavinia's literacy comes at a high price. Unlike Ovid's Philomela, Shakespeare's Lavinia loses both her tongue *and* her hands because her rapists feared she would expose them by writing. Lavinia's literacy is in stark contrast with her loss of voice and power in

her life, and only by referencing Ovid's story of Philomela is she able to exact the revenge she believes she deserves and gain back some degree of agency. Despite Lavinia's clear literary knowledge of Ovid, it is at first difficult for the male characters to understand that she even has the ability and knowledge to reference a specific story in Ovid's work to detail the crimes inflicted upon her. The men do not immediately understand what Lavinia is trying to do because they are bemused in the face of a literate woman trying to convey meaning.

Lavinia is neither an abject victim nor a fully empowered woman who is able to completely circumvent the patriarchal norms that surrounded her, despite the criticisms that treat her as either one or the other. As Amanda Winkler aptly puts it, women's victimization and empowerment "is not an either/or proposition" and that characters like Lavinia can be "both powerful and a victim" (Winkler 86). Lavinia is a multi-faceted and dynamic character who has strengths that show even in times of great distress.

Rape as a Bestial and Subhuman Act

Although there is no known source for Shakespeare's *Titus Andronicus*, it is clear that the main model for the plot is Ovid's story of Philomela, Tereus, and Progne in his sixth book of *Metamorphoses*. Besides the obvious similarities in structure and plot, the language and its significance in *Titus Andronicus* surrounding the rape and dismemberment of Lavinia is undoubtedly in part Shakespeare's tribute to Ovid's tragic tale of Philomela.

Golding's Ovid describes the moment Tereus and Philomela both realize she is in his grasp;

Hath laid hir in his nest, from whence the prisoner can not scape,
The ravening fowle with greedie eyes upon his pray doth gape (Book VI, 659-60).

Philomela is prey to Tereus, and the implication is that “The ravening fowle”, needed to rape her in order to survive, and that this act was unavoidable. Ovid dehumanizes Philomela, calling her prey, which in turn lessens the significance of the crime done against her. Later on, as the crime is being committed,

“She quaketh like the wounded Lambe from which the wolves hore teeth” (Book VI, 669-70).

Through this metaphor which paints the attacker as bestial and the victim as prey, it is implied that the actions taken by both the victim and the attacker are part of nature and thus inescapable. The hunter/prey dynamic when representing instances of rape seems to dehumanize the attackers and thus render the crimes as subhuman. Women in Shakespeare and Ovid are often compared to prey while their aggressors are depicted as hunters. One could argue that this is problematic in itself as it has the potential to liken hunting – which is essential to many species for survival – to the heinous crime of sexual assault, thus diminishing the role of willpower and self-control of the human attackers. This implies rape, like hunting, is innate in both man and beast, and therefore a bestial and feral crime.

These passages compel the reader to wonder whether it is the heinous crimes that all of these characters commit that makes them beast-like in nature, or if they are born inherently animalistic and are in Philomela, Progne, and Tereus’s cases physically transformed to reflect this. Before Lavinia is raped, Demetrius remarks

DEMETRIUS. Chiron, we hunt not, we, with horse nor hound,

But hope to pluck a dainty doe to the ground (2.3.28-9).

Here Lavinia is represented as a doe, an animal often associated with innocence and purity; however, after her rape and dismemberment any of these qualities she may have possessed are

forcibly taken from her by Chiron and Demetrius, and further diminished when she and her father exact gruesome revenge on those who have wronged her by assisting in the murder and cannibalization of her attackers. By the end of both their stories, Lavinia and Philomela both transform from the victims of savage vengeance and become the perpetrators themselves, which shows that they are able of seizing power after being brutally attacked.

However, it is important to note that while Chiron and Demetrius naturalize the crime of rape and dehumanize Lavinia by comparing her to a doe, Lavinia is arguably not an entirely innocent victim. Before she is raped, she boldly says to Tamora,

LAVINIA. Under your patience, gentle empress,
‘Tis thought you have a goodly gift in horning,
And to be doubted that your Moor and you
Are singled forth to try experiments.
Jove shield your husband from his hounds today!
‘Tis pity they should take him for a stag (2.3.66-71).

As she insults Tamora and Aaron, Lavinia exhibits none of the traits of a “dainty doe”. She is bold, brash, and seemingly unafraid to condemn the empress. She also insultingly compares Aaron to a stag, contributing to the dehumanization of characters throughout this play. While Chiron and Demetrius may liken her to a doe because they believe she is docile and innocent, Shakespeare does not seem to agree with this characterization as he endows Lavinia with a strong and biting voice before it is forcibly taken from her. Chiron and Demetrius may act in animalistic ways, but before Lavinia is raped she does not exhibit these animalistic and subhuman qualities given to her by her attackers.

In fact, Lavinia herself contributes to the dehumanization of Chiron and Demetrius when she asks them,

LAVINIA. When did the tiger's young ones teach the dam? (2.3.142).

Here, Lavinia is referring to their mother Tamora as well as insulting Chiron and Demetrius. By calling Tamora a “tiger” and Chiron and Demetrius her “dam”, Lavinia likens the family to animals, which reinforces the notion that their evil and barbaric qualities were passed down to them upon their birth, thus furthering the dehumanization of the perpetrators' crimes. By comparing them to animals, Lavinia could be acknowledging that she is about to be the victim of a subhuman and detestable crime.

Like Tamora, Progne in *Metamorphoses* is also likened to a tiger when she decides that in order to revenge her sister, she will murder and cannibalize her son. Progne sees her son, and

She dragged Itys after hir, as when it happens in Inde

A Tyger gets a little Calfe that suckes upon a Hynde

And drags him through the shadie woods (Book VI, 805-7).

Here, Progne “drags” her “Calfe” into the woods to slit his throat. While both Progne and Itys are likened to animals, it is important to distinguish that a tiger's offspring are not calves, like Golding writes, but cubs. Therefore, it is clear that in this instance, while Itys is represented as an innocent calf, Progne is not only depicted as a vicious animal, but an entirely different species from Itys. By butchering her son, Progne is removed from not only humanity, but her own child as well. The two are likened to distinct species, one predator, one prey, which again highlights the subhuman nature of her violence. However, it is important to note that while the male attackers like Chiron, Demetrius, and Tereus are likened to animals when they commit acts of

violence, Progne and Philomela are as well, implying that in a sense, men and women are both impacted by nature in similar ways and therefore in theory women are able to wrest power from their assailants. While the rapists' humanity diminishes when they commit the violent crimes and they fulfill the bestial descriptions they were given, Lavinia arguably never was like a "dainty doe" to begin with as Shakespeare portrayed her as a rather rude woman with a strong voice.

Further Treatment of the Crimes

The rapes of Philomela and Lavinia are further discussed throughout their respective narratives. Since the very moment Tereus lays eyes on Philomela, he is overtaken by her beauty, and reverts into a "barbarous" being – much like the Gothic attackers in *Titus* – piloted not by reason, but by sexual craving.

King Tereus at the sight of hir did burne in his desire,
As if man should chaunce to set a golfe of corne on fire
or burn a stack of hay. Hir face indeede deserved love.

But as for him, to fleshly lust even nature did him move (Book VI, 582-5).

Here in this passage it is significant that Philomela "deserved love", as it implies that simply by existing and occupying this space in King Tereus's line of sight, Philomela is fated to suffer for her inherent beauty that while completely out of her control, does not exempt her from facing the consequences. The contrast between the phrases "deserved love" and "fleshly lust" serves to diminish Tereus's responsibility for the attack, as it implies the crime was fated to happen. In fact, nature itself is framed as responsible for this crime, Ovid's narrator stating "even nature did him move" serves to yet again show that this act was bound to happen. Philomela is also blamed

for providing “wood to feede his fire” when she hugs and kisses her father goodbye, serving to take away any control Tereus could or should have in his own actions.

Like Philomela’s rape, Lavinia’s rape is seen as a justified reward for her sons by Tamora; it is clear she believes her sons are owed the liberty to satisfy their lust and violent urges on her. Despite Lavinia’s pleas for mercy through death, Tamora tells her

TAMORA. So should I rob my sweet sons of their fee

No, let them satisfy their lust on thee (2.3.179-80).

“Their fee” implies that the right to rape and abuse is a sort of payment or reward included in the spoils of war. This also indicates that rape always accompanies violence, and one without the other is not only uncommon, but unnatural. It also implies that rape is a byproduct of war, which is an indicator of social disorder, which thereby codes the crime of sexual assault as an act of chaos. Shakespeare framing the rape in this way indicates that he is not trivializing it – rather he is illuminating the horrors that occur when an empire is in turmoil.

The indication of a collapse in social order is further expanded on when Shakespeare’s perpetrators or Ovid’s narrator actually mock the ravished and mutilated victims. Chiron jeers at Lavinia to go home and to call for some water to wash her hands, which prompts Demetrius to say

DEMETRIUS. She hath no tongue to call, nor hands to wash;

And so let’s leave her to her silent walks (2.4.7-8).

These few lines among others uttered by Demetrius and Chiron serve a dual purpose; they provide a sort of darkly comical relief, while also drawing attention to the ways in which women could be both metaphorically and literally robbed of their voices. Shakespeare’s attackers

sarcastically mocking the victim as she stands powerless serves a dual purpose, as it momentarily lightens the mood and provides a social commentary on the apparent helplessness of women victims. However, while it is true Lavinia no longer has a “tongue to call” or “hands to wash”, she is still able to bring to light the crimes done against her and help orchestrate the downfall of her attackers.

The metrical form of Golding’s Ovid and Shakespeare’s *Titus* also serve similar purposes in that they use their respective methods in order to impart certain feelings to their readers or audiences – often giving the impression that the authors are trivializing the crimes. While Golding writes in fourteeners, also called iambic heptameter, Shakespeare famously writes in iambic pentameter. Although both are two undoubtedly different styles of verse, they both have the effect of making horrific spoken lines sound musical, sophisticated, or blackly humorous. According to Jonathan Bate, Golding added about 2,500 lines to Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* when he translated it from Latin to English, which also serves to make the writing sound more poetic and sophisticated (Bate xxii). One can conclude that Shakespeare is not only imitating Ovid alone, but Golding’s interpretation and translation of *Metamorphoses*, which has a distinct musical sound that is associated with Shakespeare’s verse. It is also important to note that fourteeners, especially when spoken aloud, sound more comical and musical than iambic pentameter.

Examples of Preserved Agency

While in some instances it is easy to see how Ovid and Shakespeare’s women can lose their agency, it becomes evident later that all is not lost and Philomela and Lavinia are not completely subordinated despite the horrific crimes inflicted upon them. Even when they are made brutal targets of their attackers’ lust and rage, both Ovid and Shakespeare weave in

demonstrations of their power and agency. Immediately after Tereus cuts out Philomela's tongue, forever preventing her from speaking out against him,

The tip of Philomela's tongue did wriggle to and fro,
And nearer to her mistresseward in dying still did go (Book VI, 714-15).

The fact that Philomela's tongue has a sort of belated agency and is still fighting and trying to return to her is foreshadowing her macabre revenge, and shows that even in this horrific instance, she still has the desire and ability to exercise her physical agency – a desire that is also reflected in Lavinia when she eventually writes in the sand with her stumps the names of her attackers.

Both Philomela and Lavinia clearly believe that rape is a fate worse than death, as the two women subsequently beg for death's release rather than continue to live a tainted life. When Lavinia realizes that Chiron and Demetrius are going to rape her, she begs Tamora to kill her instead, lamenting:

LAVINIA. O, keep me from their worse-than-killing lust (2.3.175).

Lavinia plainly states that she would rather be murdered than raped, so she can die with some semblance of purity and innocence left. It is significant that during her last moments she able to use her voice, she is begging for control over her own fate. Despite her dire situation in which she is subject to the whims of men in power, she is still using her speech in order to try and change her destiny.

Interestingly, Philomela does not speak in the narrative until after she is raped, whereas Lavinia only speaks before her rape and dismemberment. However, Philomela while at this point is already sexually violated, still wishes for death,

When Philomela sawe the sworde, she hoapt she should have dide,
And for the same her naked throte she gladly did provide (Book VI, 705-6).

Tereus does not grant her wish, instead cutting her tongue out and continuing to violate her now disfigured body over the course of the following year. Lavinia says the crime of rape is “worse-than-killing” while Philomela is so greatly affected by her rape that “she hoapt she should have dide” and gladly uses what physical agency she has left to position herself in a way that makes it easier for Tereus to cut her throat. Shakespeare endows Lavinia with an identity and a chance to express herself before she is victimized, while Philomela only has a chance to speak for a brief period of time after she is raped – however, both of these women use their voices to beg for death. When neither of these women are granted this relief, they set out not only the death of their attackers, but a grisly and abhorrent scheme that involves parents eating their own children. As Philomela and Lavinia were sexually violated, Tereus and Tamora will both be forced to eat their own offspring as a punitive form of revenge.

Shakespeare and Ovid alike spare no bloody detail in their respective accounts of Philomela and Lavinia’s horrific vengeance. Both Shakespeare and Ovid include some sort of sexual component within their revenge that involves the eating of human flesh that the perpetrators themselves have brought into existence– which illustrates that they understood the crimes against their characters as both physically and sexually violent, and that these crimes are independently significant. The report given by Titus to the audience and the narration of Golding’s Ovid during the revenge of both Lavinia and Philomela are remarkably similar. When Titus reveals to Saturninus that Lavinia has been raped and mutilated by Chiron and Demetrius, Saturninus states:

SATURNINUS. Go fetch them hither to us presently.

TITUS. Why, here they are, both baked in this pie,
Whereof their mother daintily hath fed,
Eating the flesh that she herself hath bred. (5.3.61-3).

Saturninus, upon hearing the accusations of Titus, immediately calls for Chiron and Demetrius to be brought before him, which implies that he has the intention to call for judgment. However, as Titus mentions earlier in the play, “Terras Astrae reliquit”, meaning, “the goddess Justice has left the earth” (4.3.4). Therefore, Titus takes it upon himself to be the agent of justice, and proudly exclaims that he has baked his daughter’s abusers into the meal that Tamora is currently eating. As Lavinia believes rape is a fate worse than death (illustrated when she begs Tamora to kill her rather than be sexually violated), the punishment for her attackers must therefore be gruesome and abhorred.

Golding’s account of the revenge scene in Ovid’s story of Philomela is similarly grisly and also places an emphasis on the consuming of one’s own sexual progeny. As Tereus is eating, the narrator states:

King Tereus sitting in the throne of his forefathers, fed
And swallowed downe the selfsame flesh that of his bowels bred.
And he (so blinded was his heart) fetch Itys hither, sed. (Book VI, 824-26).

As one compares the language, it is strikingly clear that Shakespeare was heavily influenced in this passage when he was crafting Lavinia’s revenge. In both Shakespeare and Ovid, the parents who are forced to eat their own children occupy a position of power within the scope of the narrative. This underscores the atrocities both done by and to them as a representation of social disorder and highlights the injustice of the respective societies in which each story takes place.

Both passages place an emphasis on the important fact that this horrendous act is not just cannibalism, but is also abnormal on a deeper level as it involves incestuous cannibalism – violating two fundamental taboos simultaneously. Shakespeare states that Tamora is “eating the flesh that she herself hath bred” while Golding’s Ovid reads “And swallowed down the selfsame flesh that of his bowels bred”; both authors use the word “bred”, both to continue the rhyme and to remind the reader that this act Tamora and Tereus are partaking in is highly repulsive.

Although gruesome, it is not impossible or even particularly difficult to find a sort of perverse humor in the images Ovid and Shakespeare create – and this is partly what makes their respective writings immensely disturbing. Richard Brucher echoes this sentiment, “The disjunction between the lurid reality of the murders and mutilations and the way the characters talk about them is one of the play’s most troublesome features, and a chief source of laughter” (Brucher 81). Generally, there are key differences between what people perceive to be tragic or comic, but the violent acts in *Titus Andronicus* are so outlandishly exaggerated that they become humorous. This is key, as Brucher says “Our laughter signals our participation in the disorder” (79). At the end of the play when Lucius explains to the audience that Tamora’s body will be thrown to the beasts and birds because her life was “beastly and devoid of pity”, one cannot help but notice that this somewhat logical justification seems out of place compared to the rest of the play (5.3.201). This has the effect of calling the reader or play-goer’s attention to the severity of the collapse of social order in both *Metamorphoses* and *Titus Andronicus* while also highlighting the importance of considering what constitutes as justice.

Shakespeare was keenly aware of how tragedy and society can reflect one another and as Paul Innes remarks, “Tragedy does not disrupt society; instead, a conflicted social world produces tragedy” (Innes 31). This notion is often criticized, famously so by Samuel Johnson,

who asserted “The barbarity of the spectacles, and the general massacre which are here exhibited, can scarcely be conceived tolerable to any audience” (Johnson, 6.364). While there is considerable weight to this remark, these depictions of violence would not have been entirely unbearable, as the English audience was often exposed to public brutality in the form of public criminal executions and hangings. Although the violence in *Titus Andronicus* can be seen as unnecessarily gruesome, one could argue that it is so because it reflects the dire state of the ancient Roman empire.

Literacy and Power

Philomela and Lavinia are only able to participate in the viciously brutal revenge of their attackers because Ovid and Shakespeare equipped them with the literacy skills to illuminate what has been done to them. However, despite Shakespeare being one of the most esteemed writers of all time, his youngest daughter Judith was completely illiterate (Callaghan 27). It is also important to note that since reading and writing were taught separately, only one in twenty women could sign their own name (26). Yet, many of Shakespeare’s fictional women were literate, such as Lavinia, Bianca, and Ophelia. As women were systematically denied opportunities for literacy throughout history, it is especially shocking that in some versions of *Metamorphoses* Philomela is at least somewhat literate, and that Lavinia’s ability to read *and* write is absolutely essential to the plot of *Titus Andronicus* as it is largely what allows her to exact revenge on her assailants.

Jane Marcus claims “the suppression of women’s writing is historically and psychologically directly related to male sexual violence against women, that men have cut out the tongues of the speaking woman and cut off the hands of the writing woman for fear of what she will say about them and the world” (Marcus 80-1). This both figuratively and literally applies

to Lavinia. The inverse of this approach implies that the literate woman could potentially have the power and agency to either protect herself or exact revenge on her attackers by revealing what has been done to her. This is demonstrated by Philomela in *Metamorphoses*, whom Shakespeare draws influence from for Lavinia in *Titus Andronicus*.

In the Golding translation of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, because Philomela is literate is able to reveal to her sister Progne that she has been raped by Tereus. Philomela obtains a white cloth, and:

weaved purple letters in betweene it, which beraide

The wicked deede of Tereus (Book VI, 737-8).

This is significant as it deliberately says "letters", implying that Philomela was familiar with the alphabet and therefore literate. Therefore, Philomela's literacy clearly extends beyond the ability to sign her name, as she is able to describe in some detail to her sister the crimes committed against her by Tereus.

Progne is also able to read and understand the letters Philomela has written her,

And of hir [Philomela's] wretched fortune red the processe whole throughout,

She held hir peace (a wondrous thing it is she should so doe)

But sorrow tide her tongue, and words agreeable unto

Hir great displeasure were not at commaundment at that stound (Book VI, 742-5).

While Philomela's tongue was literally cut out, Progne at this point is unable to speak as well, her tongue not able to produce the words to describe her horror and sorrow at this time. Later she is able to procure the right words to help her sister exact revenge on Tereus; as he calls for Itys,

his son that unbeknownst to him he has just eaten, Progne takes delight in revealing to him where he is:

The thing thou askest for, thou has within (Book VI, 829).

Progne uses her physical voice in order to help avenge her sister's rape and mutilation. While Philomela herself cannot speak, she is still able to convey meaning, as she leaps onto the table and flings the head of Itys into Tereus's face, thus completing her revenge.

However, in other translations of *Metamorphoses*, it is unclear whether or not Philomela and Progne are literate. The Loeb edition, (which has both the original Latin and English translation together side by side) is ambiguous as it states Philomela weaves "purple signs on a white background" and yet Progne "reads the pitiable fate of her sister" (Book VI, 329). The Charles Martin translation, published in 2004, only states that Philomela was able to

weave threads of a deep purple on a white background, depicting the crime (Book VI, 214).

This language is inconclusive, but when Progne receives the tapestry, she "reads her sister's wretched fate", yet again making it unclear whether or not Philomela and Progne were literate, as "reading" can and is often used to mean "to consider, interpret, discern" (O.E.D.). For example, one can "read" the emotions on another's face, so whether or not the sisters in the Martin version are literate is unclear. Despite the uncertainty in the Loeb and Martin editions, it is indisputable that in the Golding edition – the edition which Shakespeare would have read and drawn inspiration from – both Philomela and Progne were literate, as they can both read and understand letters.

Regardless of whether or not Ovid originally intended for Philomela and Progne to be fully literate, Shakespeare makes Lavinia's literacy an essential aspect of the plot of *Titus*

Andronicus. An important function of Lavinia's ability to both read and write is that it is assumed by both Chiron and Demetrius, her attackers. While Philomela lost her tongue, Lavinia's rapists made sure to butcher her hands as well, for fear that she would expose them by writing. This implies that Lavinia's literacy was either known or assumed by her attackers beforehand.

Upon seeing the deflowered and dismembered Lavinia, Marcus immediately references Ovid's story of Philomela, saying

MARCUS. A craftier Tereus, cousin, hast thou met,
And he hath cut those pretty fingers off
That could have better sewed than Philomel (2.4.41-3).

Marcus mentions how Philomela was able to expose Tereus by using her sewing ability, but it is again uncertain whether or not she weaved letters or a depiction of the crime. There is also a tinge of irony in these lines, as later when Lavinia is leafing through *Metamorphoses*, Marcus does not immediately understand why she is doing so, and just assumes she is going mad. Marcus is able to understand the way in which Philomela exposed her attacker because she did so through sewing, a feminine ability, but he is bewildered when Lavinia tries to convey meaning by using a text. In Emily Detmer-Goebel's "The need for Lavinia's voice: *Titus Andronicus* and the telling of rape", she points out "Marcus, who immediately spoke of Philomela when he first saw her, fails to read Lavinia's use of the same source" (Detmer-Goebel 85). Although Lavinia's literacy is assumed by her attackers, she is not expected to be literate in the same way men are; she is not assumed to have read the classics.

After her attack, one could argue that Lavinia herself is seen as a text to be read and interpreted by the men in her life. As Titus is lamenting Lavinia's state, he refers to her as

TITUS. Thou map of woe, that thus dost talk in signs (3.2.12).

Clearly, a "map" like Lavinia should be read and interpreted, and is meant to be a passive object. Marcus and Titus both suspect she has been raped, but are still shocked when she herself reveals it. Marcus sits Lavinia down and shows her how to write in the sand without using her hands. The actor or actress who is playing Lavinia is then instructed by the stage directions to take the staff in her mouth, and write by guiding it with her stumps – hardly a passive act (4.1.78). By maneuvering the staff with her mouth, the audience is gruesomely reminded of the loss of her tongue and thus her voice. However, that she is able and willing to use her disfigured mouth and stumps to depict her horrific experience conveys to the audience and the reader that Lavinia is unbowed. Coppélia Kahn asserts that even though Lavinia is restricted by patriarchal ideology, she still has power – "instead of inciting her kinsmen to revenge, she becomes part of the ritual her uncle leads..." (Kahn 66). Even in spite of the patriarchal society Lavinia operates in, she is still able to obtain some power and agency in that she is an active participant in the revenge of her attackers.

Lavinia writes "*Stuprum*. Chiron, Demetrius" – the Latin word (rather than the vernacular) for rape and the names of her attackers (4.1.79). Shakespeare including this Latin word for his primarily English audience serves as an allusion to Ovid, as he originally wrote in Latin and actually included this word in *Metamorphoses*, in the story of Callisto and Jupiter. By using this specific word, Lavinia aligns herself with classical Ovidian characters in order to convey meaning to Marcus and Titus. Scholars of Shakespeare such as Detmer-Goebel believe the use of this particular word, instead of "raptus", was deliberately chosen by Lavinia in order to

further explain the outcome of her attack. Detmer-Goebel states “Lavinia’s ‘Stuprum’ is suggestive not only of her sense of shame; it also testifies to the consequence of her defilement” (Detmer-Goebel 86). As this word was only used once in *Metamorphoses* and Callisto became pregnant as a result of her rape, Detmer-Goebel believes that this is evidence to show that Lavinia has fallen pregnant and is using her extensive knowledge of Ovid to depict her rape as well as the consequences. If true, this would be another example of just how well-versed Lavinia is in Ovid’s work.

The raped and maimed Lavinia continues to use what she has left of her physical abilities to expose her attackers, thus setting in motion the violent actions for the rest of the play. Titus and Marcus only decide to help Lavinia avenge her attack after they read what she has written in the sand; as Detmer-Goebel states, “Lavinia’s telling of rape is valued because men need to know and not because her experience counts” (Detmer-Goebel, 87). Immediately after she writes in the sand, Marcus says

There is enough written upon this earth

To stir a mutiny in the mildest thoughts (4.1.85-6).

He and Titus are instantly ready to take up arms and avenge Lavinia’s attack, and are willing to go even further and kill the “traitorous Goths” (4.1.94). The men may “need to know” but they presumably never would have if not for Lavinia’s telling of her own rape and mutilation, which illustrates the power she has specifically because she is literate.

Titus and Marcus’s Assumption of Responsibility

As Titus processes what has been done to his daughter, he states

TITUS. go get a leaf of brass,

And with a gad of steel write these words (4.1.103-4).

As there are two literate women in the play, it is baffling that at first the men do not understand why Lavinia is trying to find a specific page. This again reinforces the notion that in *Titus Andronicus*, women are the producers and the sources of text, and the men are the interpreters – even if the text itself is written by a man. Once he reads what Lavinia has written, Titus has the desire to make Lavinia’s *experience* permanent and well-known by carving it into brass, and includes her as an active figure in his revenge against the Goths. Lavinia’s presence in the passionate and grisly revenge of her attackers and their mother in spite of her mangled state showcases her strength and resilience.

As Chiron and Demetrius are within his grasp and Titus is explaining to them how he will be revenged in grisly detail, he says

TITUS. For worse than Philomel you used my daughter
And worse than Procne I will be revenged (5.3.198-9).

As well as serving as another allusion to Ovid, much is revealed about Titus’s understanding of Lavinia’s rape. As rape and abduction were seen as the same crime, one could be raped “from” someone else; that is to say that in this case Lavinia was raped by Chiron and Demetrius from Bassianus, her betrothed. Chiron and Demetrius had to kill Bassianus in order to satisfy their lust on Lavinia, because she was not seen as her own person, rather a transactional item that had a rightful master. Asp claims that “Instead of having power herself, Lavinia functions as an object to be used by powerful males within the Symbolic Order to cement alliances and maintain a surface of order” (Asp 336). The Lacanian concept of the “Symbolic Order” asserts that the elements of culture and civilization such as ritual, convention, law, and language are coded as

masculine because they have been historically under control of the patriarchy (335). While it is certainly true that Lavinia is born into this inherently submissive role and her rape is used as justification by Marcus and Titus to attack the Goths, as the play gradually spirals into disorder and chaos, she transgresses her given position in order to exact revenge. Asp, while correct that Lavinia is operating in a patriarchy, fails to take into account Lavinia's own role and agency in her attacker's demise. The retribution to her fate is only set into motion when Lavinia herself reveals the nature of her attack. The multitude of deaths that occur at the end of the play might not have been conceivably possible if Lavinia did not exercise her literacy skills and what is left of her bodily agency in order to write the names of her attackers in the sand and collect their blood. Titus and Marcus take over ownership of Lavinia's misfortune and interpret her actions and experience in a way that leads to her death, but Shakespeare unquestionably gives Lavinia the power to let her make decisions involving her own fate by endowing her with the abilities to read and write and the willingness to use her disfigured body to exact revenge.

The notion that Lavinia is clearly operating within these patriarchal norms is again reinforced in the end of the play, when Titus takes her life. Significantly, Titus stabs and kills Lavinia before he informs Tamora that she has just eaten her own sons and kills her. Titus exclaims

TITUS. Die, die, Lavinia, and thy shame die with thee,
And with thy shame thy father's sorrow die (5.3.46-7).

Titus clearly states that once Lavinia is dead, he will no longer feel any sorrow, because her existence as his raped daughter is the primary cause of his grief. This causes one to wonder if Titus is more concerned with her redemption or the ending of his own misery. He also robs Lavinia of any satisfaction she may have felt upon witnessing Tamora's death, which again

reinforces the idea that Titus is more concerned with his own motives for revenge than his daughter's. However prevalent this patriarchal ideal that dictates that once women are deemed impure they lose their worth, Lavinia throughout the narrative strives to make her experience known, remembered, and revenged.

Conclusion

Coppélia Kahn states “If, in [Patricia Klindienst] Joplin’s interpretation, the chaste woman is the sign of her father’s or husband’s power, when that woman is raped, such power is mocked, challenged, diminished (1984: 33-4). Through revenge, it can be restored” (Kahn 67). Chiron and Demetrius mock Lavinia after they rape her, sarcastically compelling her to “play the scribe”. Lavinia does just that – she uses her bloody and disfigured body to write the names of her attackers in the sand, thus setting in motion the gruesome revenge plan in which she plays a key role. By doing so, she is able to restore some of the power Chiron and Demetrius took from her.

Lavinia is able to “play the scribe” despite her stunted figure because she has the will to do so and is, more importantly, literate. Robert Pattinson aptly remarks “Not every society has chosen to use literacy in the same way, but literacy is always connected with power” (Pattinson viii). Golding’s Philomela and Progne are able to begin their revenge only because the former could write and the latter could read. Shakespeare drew influence from this and endowed Lavinia with the ability to read and write so that she could properly express the personal violation upon her body.

While Shakespeare is often perceived as yet another misogynistic writer who reinforces the patriarchic notion that women are powerless and unable to express their own desires, Lavinia

utterly defies this idea. Shakespeare wrote Lavinia in a way that allowed her to be both a victim of savage violence and still have the power and agency to seek and carry out retribution for the crimes committed against her. Despite low literacy rates for women in the Ancient Roman empire and the early modern period, Shakespeare gifted Lavinia the ability of full literacy and the will to act. Lavinia is therefore the embodiment of a realistically dynamic, adaptable character who is both not immune to suffering nor a total victim subordinated under patriarchal values.

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CHAPTER TWO: “LET FAIR HUMANITY ABHOR THE DEED”: LUCRECE’S RECLAIMED AGENCY IN *THE RAPE OF LUCRECE*

Introduction

“Nor shall he smile at thee in secret thought,
Nor laugh with his companions at thy state;
But thou shalt know thy int’reast was not bought
Basely with gold, but stol’n from forth thy gate.
For me, I am the mistress of my fate,
And with my trespass never will dispense,
Till life to death acquit my forced offence” (1065-1071).

Lucrece in the above quotation decides she will not end her own life until Tarquin’s crimes are illuminated and it is clear her chastity was forcibly taken from her. She asserts that she is “the mistress of my fate”, illustrated when she writes to her husband to summon him home, has it sworn to her that she will be avenged, and takes her own life. Published in the same year as *Titus Andronicus*, Shakespeare’s *The Rape of Lucrece* invites a similar interpretation which illustrates that Shakespeare’s perceived anti-feminist ideals are more complicated than they appear. While he is hardly the first to publish the crimes done to Lucrece, Shakespeare’s account of the rape is distinct from others as Lucrece’s literacy plays a major role in her revenge. Ian Donaldson’s claim that *The Rape of Lucrece* is “a poem of remarkable yet sporadic brilliance” (Donaldson 55) is also indicative of the ways in which Lucrece gathers her scattered thoughts and eloquently turns them into a compelling plea for justice. Through her ability to

write and Shakespeare's inclusion of the painting of the fall of Troy, Lucrece takes a personal crime and makes it public, thus solidifying her revenge and successfully renders her blameless.

Publishing Rhetoric

To shun this blot she would not blot the letter

With words, till action might become them better (1323-1324).

Shakespeare lends Lucrece his "mellifluous and honey-tongued" (Frances Meres) eloquence so she can avenge the crimes done unto her. "Blot" is used in this couplet as both a stain on her chastity and a stain on the letter itself. Lucrece's rape is considered a blot which is likened to an impurity on a letter, which furthers the idea that Shakespeare was keenly aware of the significance of Lucrece's literacy as an outlet to express how she has been wronged. Like Tarquin's mark on Lucrece's chastity, a blotted paper is forever changed. In order to combat this, Shakespeare endows Lucrece with both a rhetorical and written eloquence and brings it to the foreground, allowing her to act as a counterweight to her status as a silent victim.

Shakespeare's emphasis on the materials and products of writing helps Lucrece to articulate the crimes done to her body. Shakespeare uses the word "blot" throughout the poem, highlighting Lucrece's uncertainty and unease; as the O.E.D. defines "blot" not only as an ink stain, but as "A moral stain; a disgrace, fault, blemish" (O.E.D.). According to the O.E.D., the first usage of the word occurred in Chaucer's *Parson's Tale*:

But lat no blotte be bihynde, lat no synne been vntoold (O.E.D.).

Lucrece has no intention of letting Tarquin's sin go untold, and uses ink to pen a letter to her husband to summon him home; she turns the indelible blot into ink and writes on her own behalf.

Shakespeare recognizes the ever-present cultural convention that rape sullies women and thus gives Lucrece the fluency in order to incite revenge on Tarquin.

“Blot” is first used in *The Rape of Lucrece* in order to describe the act of rape on a body as pure as Lucrece’s. Tarquin himself acknowledges this; as he is going to Lucrece’s chamber, his thoughts are narrated as such:

Fair torch, burn out thy light, and lend it not
To darken her whose light excelleth thine;
And die, unhallowed thoughts, before you *blot*
With your uncleanness that which is divine (190-193).

Tarquin recognizes the crime he is about to commit is “unhallowed” – a stark contrast to the “divine” Lucrece – and yet he still carries it out, desecrating Lucrece’s sacred chastity. Lucrece has a deep understanding of this stain on her purity, evident when she calls on Opportunity and wishes

To *blot* old books and alter their contents (948).

Lucrece situates herself in this metaphor as a text in which the meaning is altered, and she wishes to ink over the crimes done to her “this dread night” (964). She soon realizes this wish to erase what has been done is futile and decides to write a letter to her husband to summon him home.

Shakespeare’s Lucrece is literate, as she can clearly write, but in Ovid’s *Fasti* it is unclear if Lucrece can read or write due to the ambiguity of the language. It is narrated in *Fasti*:

And now the day had dawned. She sat with hair disheveled, like a mother who must attend the funeral pyre of her son. Her aged sire and faithful spouse she summoned from the camp, and both came without delay (813-815).

As “summoned” could be interpreted in a number of different ways and there is no other evidence throughout the text that may prove Lucrece’s literacy, it is doubtful Ovid meant to include that detail. However, Shakespeare’s Lucrece’s ability to write is essential for her to be able to reveal what Tarquin has done to her so she can clear her name. She orders her servant to

Go, get me hither paper, ink, and pen;

Yet save that labour, for I have them here (1289-1290).

Lucrece having the ability and conviction to speak these words aloud is critical, as other literary women such as Lavinia and Philomela that Shakespeare and Ovid wrote about did not have this privilege. Furthermore, Lucrece stops her servant from fetching the writing materials, as she already had them with her. This implies that Lucrece writes often enough to have the supplies on hand; this proficiency is illustrated with how quickly she writes her succinct letter to Collatine.

However, Lucrece is unsure whether she has the ability to accurately articulate what she is feeling, and is skeptical of whether or not it would matter if she were to disclose her rape. Regardless, she does so despite her uncertainties, all while being aware of the potential futility of speaking. Her maid asks what troubles her, and Lucrece replies

The repetition cannot make it less;

For more it is than I can well express

And that deep torture may be called a hell

When more is felt than one hath power to tell (1285-1289).

“It” refers to the “heaviness” of the rape, which is so troublesome that it seems to physically oppress her. While Lucrece may believe she does not have the ability to tell all she is feeling and appears to be deprived of agency, she has the eloquence Shakespeare endowed her with to write. Although she is concerned that reiterating the circumstances of her violation is useless, she presses on and composes a letter to her husband, urging him to come home.

Lucrece indeed experiences “that deep torture” when she begins to write, but is able to compose both herself and the letter after much thought.

Her maid is gone, and she prepares to write,
First hovering o’er the paper with her quill.
Conceit and grief an eager combat fight;
What wit sets down is blotted straight with will;
This is too curious-good, this blunt and ill:
Much like the press of people at a door,
Throng her inventions, which shall go before (1296-1302).

This passage seems to imply that Lucrece is almost over-qualified to write her ills, as the heinous crime of rape is so beneath her exalted status. She agonizes about writing, struggling with both wit and will – her intellectual understanding of what happened and her emotional response.

“What wit sets down is blotted” by her emotions, and she wrestles with the decision to be concise and blunt or explain the gruesome details. Lucrece believes she feels more than she has the power to tell, represented here by the image of people crowding at a door, all trying to escape at once. However, she actively chooses to keep details out of her letter because she believes articulating them to Collatine in person would move him more. Lucrece not only knows how to write persuasively, she has a grasp on what is better left temporarily omitted.

Ekphrasis in The Rape of Lucrece

For now 'tis stale to sigh, to weep and groan;

So woe hath wearied woe, moan tired moan (1362-1363).

After Lucrece exercises her agency by writing to Collatine, she must wait for him to return home. The sentiment that there is no use weeping echoes a line in Ovid's story of Philomela, which Shakespeare drew heavily on while writing *Titus Andronicus*. In the Arthur Golding translation of *Metamorphoses*, Procne says to Philomela:

Thou must not deale in this behalfe with weeping, but with swordes (Ovid 776).

While Lucrece is aware that in her status and position she is unable to take a sword to Tarquin, she takes up the pen and writes to her husband in order to speak to him and clear her name. Even in taking her own life, Lucrece uses her literacy to wrest agency in a culture and circumstance that deprives her of power.

Lucrece is partially inspired to write this letter after spending a considerable amount of the poem gazing upon a painting depicting the fall of Troy. She identifies with the raped Helen, and ruminates on the painting for quite some time. This use of ekphrasis – a verbal description or meditation upon a non-verbal work of art – (Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms) is distinct from other versions of Lucrece's rape. Lucrece aligns herself with Helen and with Troy itself; the narrative thus shifts from a personal account of violation to the rape of a nation. Lucrece's rape drives Collatine to an anger-driven revenge, he is described at the end of the poem as "Thou wronged lord of Rome" (1818). Here, Collatine's identity as a lord is emphasized over his identity of the husband of a raped woman, which underscores Lucrece as a representation of Rome itself.

This notion is furthered by Lucrece as she contemplates the painting, she states:

Why should the private pleasure of some one
Become the public plague of many moe?
Let sin, alone committed, light alone
Upon his head that hath transgressed so;
Let guiltless souls be freed from guilty woe:
For one's offence why should so many fall,
To plague a private sin in general? (1478-1484).

Lucrece laments the Trojan War, which began because of “the private pleasure of some one”, the rape of Helen by Paris. Both Helen and Lucrece’s rape “becomes the public plague of many moe”, as neither are the only victim of their violations. The use of the word “plague” is historically significant, as when this poem was published it was not uncommon for playhouses in London to be closed due to rampant disease. According to the Arden edition of Shakespeare’s poems, “Sexual sins committed by individuals in private, such as the lust of Paris for Helen, were widely believed to be a major cause of plague outbreaks” (Duncan-Jones, Woudhuysen, 69). This idea coupled with Lucrece’s question “For one’s offence why should so many fall, / To plague a private sin in general?” reinforces the notion that this rape has a greater significance than just a crime on her body. The fact that she does not accept this and actively questions this injustice shows that Lucrece has the agency and the will to bring her attacker to justice.

The similarities between Shakespeare’s depiction of Lucrece and Lucrece’s interpretation of Hecuba, queen of Troy, are worth noting as it further situates Lucrece within a position of political importance. Hecuba’s image is described as so:

Her cheeks with chaps and wrinkles were disguised;
Of what she was no semblance did remain.
Her blue blood changed to black in every vein,
Wanting the spring that those shrunk pipes had fed,
Showed life imprisoned in a body dead (1452-1456).

Hecuba is depicted as someone entirely different than her former self, “no semblance” remains of the woman she used to be before her son’s death. She is “life imprisoned in a body dead”, physically represented by her wrinkles and her now black blood. Lucrece however, while suffering this blot on her chastity, insists that the changes she has endured are only physical. She speaks:

Though my gross blood be stained with this abuse,
Immaculate and spotless is my mind;
That was not forced, that never was inclined
To accessory yieldings, but still pure
Doth in her poisoned closet yet endure (1655-1659).

Lucrece’s “gross” blood and by extension any children she may have had are corrupted by her rape, a crime she considers to be an “abuse”. Lucrece personally recognizes that her body is forever unclean by acknowledging that her very essence of life – her blood – is stained.

However, her mind is still pure since she did not yield to the rape or become an “accessory” by willingly engaging in sexual intercourse. As Hecuba is imprisoned in her own body due to the loss of Hector, Lucrece is trapped in her “poisoned closet”. While her body may be corrupted, Lucrece’s literary agency is untouched, because the rape occurs without her volition. Lucrece’s ability and willingness to write to Collatine shows that what she wants is essential to the plot.

Upon looking at this image of Hecuba, Lucrece finds a problem with the painter's depiction of her. It is narrated

On this sad shadow Lucrece spends her eyes,
And shapes her sorrow to the beldam's woes,
Who nothing wants to answer but her cries
And bitter words to ban her cruel foes:
The painter was no good to lend her those,
And therefore Lucrece swears he did her wrong
To give her so much grief and not a tongue (1457-1463).

Shakespeare though this narration says the painter was "no good" to deny Hecuba a voice within the painting, and he makes it clear Lucrece "swears he did her wrong". Although it is not possible to give subjects in a painting an actual voice, the symbolic representation of a silent woman strikes Lucrece, who believes it is a shame "To give her [Hecuba] so much grief and not a tongue". The synecdochal use of "tongue" to mean "voice" is deliberately done to remind the reader of stories like *Titus Andronicus* or Ovid's story of Philomela where both raped women victims have their tongue cut out so they cannot speak of their crimes.

Shakespeare seems to agree with Lucrece's assertion that her mind is untarnished, and that Tarquin is entirely to blame for her rape. He writes

For men have marble, women waxen minds,
And therefore are they formed as marble will.
The weak oppressed, th'impression of strange kinds
Is formed in them by force, by fraud, or skill.

Then call them not the authors of their ill,
No more than wax shall be accounted evil

Wherein is stamped the semblance of a devil (1240-1246).

Women's "waxen minds" are formed by "marble will", or rather, the will of men. Therefore, women cannot be the "authors" of their ill – they cannot be blamed for wrongdoing against them, as they suffer at the hands of men. However, Shakespeare proves that women like Lucrece and Lavinia can still be authors of their justice – both women write in order to incite revenge on their attackers. The impressionable "wax" of Lucrece's mind cannot be deemed evil. As the weak are oppressed, the waxen minds of women are easily impressionable, but the effect of a "devil" in a waxen mind is by no fault of the mind itself. By using the word "devil", Shakespeare condemns the action done by Tarquin to Lucrece, while simultaneously positioning Lucrece as a pure being tainted by someone unholy.

This likening of Lucrece's purity and misfortune to a wax seal is not exclusive to *The Rape of Lucrece*. When Malvolio receives a letter from Olivia in *Twelfth Night*, he exclaims

MALVOLIO. By your leave, wax. Soft. And the impressure her Lucrece, with which she uses to seal – 'tis my lady! [*He opens the letter.*] (2.5.94-96).

Wax is associated with literacy and letter writing, as it was commonly used to seal letters and other documents. Lucrece is stamped into the wax which seals the letter Malvolio then opens, a metaphorically sexual act that reminds the reader or audience of Lucrece's rape. Malvolio takes note that the wax is "soft", much like the chaste Lucrece, as she begs Tarquin to leave her be.

Lucrece states

O, if no harder than a stone thou art,
Melt at my tears and be compassionate!
Soft pity enters at an iron gate (593-595).

Lucrece is “Soft pity” and enters an “iron gate” likening herself to a prisoner. Like impressionable wax, Lucrece herself is soft. The contrast between the words “soft” and “iron” align Lucrece and Tarquin as opposites, and as Lucrece is repeatedly described as chaste and pure, Tarquin is this the villain.

Malvolio then reads

MALVOLIO. [*reads*] “I may command where I adore,
But silence, like a Lucrece knife,
With bloodless stroke my heart doth gore;” (2.5.107-109).

Olivia likens silence to a “Lucrece knife”, which pains her as much as being stabbed in the heart. While Lucrece commits suicide by stabbing, one could hardly say she is silent throughout the ordeal. Lucrece implores Tarquin to leave her be, and once the crime is committed, she still speaks through her letter and in person to clear her name. As Ovid’s Lucrece does not speak until after her defilement, Shakespeare set a precedent for Lucrece to use her voice to try and motivate mercy. Writing is a way to vocalize what one can or cannot say, and both Olivia and Lucrece capitalize on this shared skill.

Transformation into a Political Symbol

Like Philomela and Lavinia, Lucrece undergoes a transformation from abject victim to an inciter of justice. However, while Philomela and Lavinia physically transform, Lucrece’s body is used by her father and husband as a symbolic representation of impending political turmoil. Her

body is paraded throughout the streets of Rome in order to garner approval for Tarquin's banishment. Gruesome though effective, Lucrece even after her death incites revenge.

Lucrece thinks her suicide through carefully, and ensures that she will be avenged after she takes her own life. Before she names Tarquin as her attacker, she says

'But ere I name him, you fair lords', quoth she,
Speaking to those that came with Collatine,
'Shall plight your honourable faiths to me,
With swift pursuit to venge this wrong of mine;
For 'tis a meritorious fair design
To chase injustice with revengeful arms:

Knights, by their oaths, should right poor ladies' harms.' (1688-1694).

Lucrece insists on a pledge of vengeance before she reveals Tarquin, and reminds the knights that it is embedded in their oaths that they are to protect women and avenge their harms. She simultaneously paints herself as a victim by describing herself as a poor lady and by saying that revenging her would be "meritorious" and deserving of praise. She also reminds the knights that they "came with Collatine", her husband, thus aligning herself with the "wronged lord of Rome" and arguably places herself in a position of political importance.

Lucrece's invocation to the knights is an essential aspect of the plot in order for her to guarantee her revenge – this is also referenced in *Titus Andronicus*. After Lavinia reveals who raped her by writing in the sand, Marcus states

MARCUS. And swear with me – as, with the woeful fere
And father of that chaste dishonored dame,

Lord Junius Brutus swore for Lucrece' rape -
That we will prosecute by good advice
Mortal revenge upon these traitorous Goths,
And see their blood or die with this reproach.

The knights are moved by Lucrece's request and immediately accept her plea for their assistance. However, Lucrece does not immediately take her life after she has their support, she takes time to reaffirm that she is still of a pure mind. She asks

'What is the quality of my offence,
Being constrained with dreadful circumstance?
May my pure mind with the foul act dispense,
My low-declined honour to advance?
May any terms acquit me from this chance?
The poisoned fountain clears itself again;
And why not I from this compelled stain?' (1702-1709).

Lucrece questions aloud what offence she could have committed to be victim to this "dreadful circumstance", and asks if she can be free of guilt. Her "pure mind" is juxtaposed with the "foul act", leaving her with a "compelled stain". Lucrece already has the promise from the knights that she will be avenged, but believes she must take further steps to convince those around her that she is only poisoned by circumstance, and blames her suicide on Tarquin:

She utters this: "He, he, fair lords, 'tis he
That guides this hand to give this wound to me."

Even here she sheathed in her harmless breast

A harmful knife, that thence her soul unsheathed (1721-1724).

Lucrece's "harmless breast" is what stirred Tarquin to violate her when he grasps her bosom as she lies sleeping, so it is fitting this phrase is used to once again reaffirm Lucrece's innocence before her suicide. Despite her unfortunate circumstance, Lucrece does all within her power to reaffirm her purity and ensure she will not die in vain.

Conclusion

In a letter from Diderot to his mistress, he describes how the philosopher Leibniz wrote of a pyramid of globes in Memphis. When asked by a traveler what the globes represented, the priest said that the globes were all possible worlds, and that the most perfect world was on top. The curious traveler climbed to the top of the pyramid, and in the perfect globe he saw Tarquin raping Lucrece (France 85). The historical legend of Lucrece's rape is significantly viewed as the fall of a Roman monarchy, which may be partly why the abhorrent rape is depicted in Leibniz's globe. By exiling Tarquin and his family, the monarchical system of government was changed to elected consuls, forever changing Roman history.

Like Lavinia, Lucrece's rape has a larger significance which she recognizes and insists is publicly avenged. Shakespeare's decision to make Lucrece's literacy essential to Tarquin's downfall gives her an agency other versions do not – although the outcome is always the same, Shakespeare equips her with the means to operate as the "mistress of her fate". Shakespeare understands the unfortunate cultural idea that rape defiles women, but works around this by gifting Lucrece his literary fluency and likening her to Helen and Hecuba of Troy. Lucrece, not entirely a victim nor wholly powerful, shapes her own identity. Shakespeare's sympathetic

portrayal of Lucrece is based not only on her victim status, but includes the fact that she is learned and highly articulate. That Lucrece retains her agency as a literate woman despite being a victim of sexual violence makes the argument that Shakespeare is a misogynist problematic if not indefensible.

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