

Shakespeare's Idea of Love and Chastity in *The Rape of Lucrece*

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ABSTRACT

The Rape of Lucrece came after *Venus and Adonis* and is a rather different poem. Though it also brings to light the theme of chastity which was already a part of *Venus and Adonis* and would follow in *The Phoenix and the Turtle*, these three poems have love at their centre. *The Rape of Lucrece* however seems to raise some dispute regarding the issue of chastity. Though most critics believe that Lucrece is blameless, some argue that she invites the rape. Shakespeare's poem is open to many interpretations and he leaves it to the reader to decide the reality of the problem. Therefore, this present paper seeks to define Shakespeare's idea of love and chastity in *The Rape of Lucrece*.

Keywords: love, chastity, sexual desire, physical and spiritual darkness.

Some scholars have considered Shakespeare's poems as "essentially pre-modern." (181 Danielle Clarke, for instance) This is so because the their presentation of love and the love conventions they employ are different to modern notions of love, desire or sexuality, even if they seem to resemble them. But these conceptions of love have been so beautifully handled by Shakespeare in his poetry that they can easily travel across their pre-modern forms. Shakespeare was a genius born before his time, and we tend to read his poetry in the context of his own time hence there is much confusion in interpreting his poetry as well as the meaning of love in it. Danielle Clarke writes: "... they are not an easy reading and consistently confound." (181) She goes on to

tell us that love, for Shakespeare, is generally not “an unequivocally pleasant condition; it is not even a single emotion but rather oneness of oppositional and often competing impulses and drives. Love is multi-faceted, emotionally complex and involves its sufferer in a complex web of desires and deceptions.” (Clarke 181-182) But love follows “perceptions of beauty” and is often ephemeral in nature and is fulfilled through sexual desire. Hence, according to Clarke, for Shakespeare, love arises for the sake of sexual appeasement. Clarke’s view could be true to a large extent for Shakespeare’s poems but it is not what can be taken to be always true for Shakespeare’s work as a whole.

The poems of Shakespeare often foreground the destructive consequences of love for the lover. This is what a number of Elizabethan poets felt about love. Such a view of love can be found in all the narrative poems of Shakespeare as well as most of his sonnets – where there is love there will be betrayal and suffering. In almost every poem the lover finds himself or herself caught in a situation that s/he cannot completely control. The discourse arising from the love poems also suggests this kind of trap in which lovers find themselves.

When Venus finds her dead lover she is disgusted and her consciousness is “like a king perplexed in his throne” (line 1043), as it seems that a psychological rendering has happened. Like the prior poem, Lucrece continually links promptly insinuated deeds with assertions which appear unbeatable. Burrow hints that “the greatest difference between the two poems is that in Lucrece gender roles are almost oppressively conventional: a feminine eloquence that cannot move a male will is pitted against an appetite that simply sees and seeks to take what it wants.” (96) He describes that Lucrece’s abundant style, and pithy eruditeness is completely incapable to preclude Tarquin’s assault: “The cedar stoops not to the base shrub’s foot, / But low shrubs wither at the cedar’s root.” (lines 664-7) Further, he indicates that “Lucrece is full of paradoxes and does not simply

succumb to orthodoxy in its representations of gender relationships: Tarquin becomes a 'captive victor that hath lost in gain' (line 730) as a result of the rape and is rendered passive by his enslavement to passion." (96)

Catherine Belsey chooses this text to discuss "textual analysis as a research method" because she finds in this painting much possibility of interpretation and textual analysis. The painting like the poem, the theme of which it shares, opens up debates. *The Rape* can be seen in opposition to *Venus and Adonis*. John Roe writes:

Sexual desire, which aggressively yet also touchingly and humorously characterised Venus, returns to its familiar role as the preoccupation of the male; chastity, so is ill-suited to the improbably coy Adonis, recovers its conviction in the person of Lucrece... *Lucrece* is a poem of interiors, of physical and spiritual darkness. (22-23)

Whereas *Venus and Adonis* is a poem of "the fresh outdoors, which salutes procreative energy even as it recognises its inevitable shortcomings" (Roe 23) *The Rape* is rather different. The three poems just mentioned are all in some way or other related to theme of love. Besides, they seem to be addressed to Shakespeare's patron, the Earl of Southampton. The kind of love they contain is naturally one that knows little fulfilment. Hence each of these poems acquires some kind of complexity that is difficult to explain.

Tarquin has been compared with Macbeth. Both murder innocent sleep; Macbeth actually murders the sleeping Duncan whereas Tarquin murders Lucrece's sleep. Tarquin, after the rape, repents and feels guilty quite as Macbeth does. But in the case of *Macbeth* Shakespeare focuses on the hero and reveals the plight of the one who has done the criminal act. In *The Rape* we are taken to victim instead. The poem focuses more on Lucrece after the rape. Most critics believe that this poem is written to vindicate the heroine. In the case of *Macbeth*, the hero purges his guilt inwardly as he falls back upon the actions of his fate. In the

poem the purgation emanates from Lucrece, who ultimately sheds her own blood. We are left guessing whether she considers herself a counterpart in the guilt. She may have been forced to become a sacrificial victim. Whatever case, the poem has a truly sad and dark universe. It can rank with Marlowe's "Hero and Leander" as well as *Venus and Adonis* – all of them as well as so many other Renaissance poems were love poems. In this age, when the Middle Ages were over, and the Renaissance made the individual significant in society, love became a very common theme in poems. It was a subject into which the individual would delve subjectively and hence Renaissance England became a nest of singing birds, each presenting love.

The Rape is a poem with a moral perspective and it is necessary to discuss Lucrece's "self-slaughter" and her reasons for this tragic end. Saint Augustine had already attacked the Lucrece of classical legend. A truly clear conscience had nothing to fear. According to Saint Augustine, if Lucrece were truly an innocent victim she should have not committed suicide. If she were innocent then she committed a crime by killing someone innocent. But that was Augustine's response to the classical legend. Shakespeare paints a slightly different picture of Lucrece by trying to place her in an ancient society, "in which pollution, even of an utterly innocent family member, brings shame to the family, shame which the victim's death is believed to cleanse." (Roe 23) However, Shakespeare was writing in a Christian culture, as John Roe points out the supreme importance of the individual soul. The Classical Roman tradition gave greater importance to the family and allowed suicide in some cases.

The post-structuralist critic Joel Fine man believes that part of the problem lies with Collatine's hyperbolic praise of Lucrece. If he had not boasted about the beauty, Tarquin may not have been filled with such profane desire. Thus the problem does not lie with Lucrece but rather with her husband who heaps praise

after praise on his wife's chastity. Tarquin's crime is then diverted to some extent on Collatine.

A feminist response to this poem would clearly focus on the guilt of Tarquin. In a rape a woman is at loss and hence to say anything against Lucrece would be misreading the poem. In Ovid's poem Lucrece is represented differently than she is in Shakespeare. In the earlier poem, Lucrece hardly speaks after the rape. But Shakespeare's Lucrece is able to put up her case strongly. As a result Brutus, the founder of the Roman Republic, leads the rebellion against Tarquin's father, the King of Rome. Interestingly, the woman's case is taken up by males in Shakespeare and hence this poem is more feminist than Ovid's poem. Catherine Belsey is totally with Lucrece and considers her innocent. She seems to make Lucrece a pure victim of rape:

Though she resists with all her might, Lucrece experiences the rape as shameful. There is no question that Tarquin takes position of Lucrece's body by violence and against her will. She planned and reason but her eloquence does not deter him. Instead, he interrupts her in mid – sentence, stamps on the light, and gags her with her smoke to prevent her crying out

"The wolf hath seized his prey, the poor lamb cries,
Till with her white fleece her voice controlled
Entombs her outcry in her lips' sweet fold.
For with the nightly linen that she wears
He pens her piteous clamours in her head,
Cooling his hot face in the chasest tear
That even modest eyes with sorrow shed" (93)

(lines 677-683)

Belsey comparing the creation of Lucrece by writer's such as Ovid and Chaucer comes to the conclusion that she is pure, innocent, faithful, helpless to resist Tarquin's tyrannical action. From Belsey's interpretation it seems that Shakespeare wanted us to see how even the most innocent marital love can be destroyed by an evil seeming man like Tarquin. Rape is a crime in society. Shakespeare's imagination could often go beyond

society in which, fair is foul and foul is fair, and nothing is either good or bad but thinking makes it so. Hence in this poem Shakespeare pities what is socially correct against what can be seen as natural. If Tarquin has come all the way to see Lucrece, he is obviously in the grips of lust which ends in the rape. But there are critics who feel that Lucrece shares in the guilt. This dark poem could be raising questions about what the nature of true love is, in this context where a rape happens to transpire. If there were no rape would Lucrece remain as chaste as she is in the poem? Shakespeare's mind often brought up chastity, cuckoldry, and extramarital love or the fear of it. Had Lucrece not been a Roman, a country which valued self-respect and honour, she may have behaved a little differently. But this is pure speculation.

A poem such as *The Rape of Lucrece* thus puts the social against the natural. Men have greater freedom in society than women, particularly the societies of the time preceding Shakespeare. Lucrece's husband is also to be blamed because he boasts; and discusses his wife with another male. This kind of behaviour can lead to a rape as indeed it does in this poem. It can lead to the arousal of lust as happens in the case of Tarquin. A husband who discusses his wife with another male cannot be credited with perfect love for his wife. If his love is not perfect and complete, it is possible that even her love for her husband is not perfect. But being a woman she is not as free to express her feelings for her husband. There seems to be something wrong with the way in which Collatine thinks. The way he praises Lucrece to a man who is higher in social status than himself shows that there is something basically wrong with him. Though the poem does not mention Collatine's desires to rise in life by praising his wife's virtues to Tarquin, this could have been behind his psychology in doing so. In Shakespeare's plays,

particularly the tragedies love lessens after marriage. This could have happened in the case of Collatine and Lucrece too. Constancy in love is not easily found in marriage. There is a difference between what society expects and what the individual does after marriage.

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