

**“Being constrain’d with dreadful circumstance”: The Violence of Identity
in Shakespeare’s *The Rape of Lucrece***

In William Shakespeare’s poem *The Rape of Lucrece*, feminine identity demands the concept of violence. As Simone de Beauvoir has written and Coppélia Kahn has applied to Lucrece: “Representation of the world, like the world itself, is the work of men; they describe it from their own point of view, which they confuse with the absolute truth” (Kahn 27). The major representation in the text is the metaphor of the human body as a city, “[emphasizing] the protective and enclosing function of the body—the way the body surrounds the soul and wards off danger,” as one critic puts it (Maus 70). This analogy is one Augustine had long before adopted in *City of God*, in which he encourages all to remember that “even while a prisoner and enduring...bodily torments,” man “might yet enjoy the blessedness of a virtuous soul” (Augustine Book 1, Chapter 15). “Then let them recognize,” he continues, “that true virtue by which a city also may be blessed. For the blessedness of a community and of an individual flow from the same source...” (Augustine Book 1, Chapter 15). In using the metaphor of the city, Shakespeare emphasizes the vulnerability of the woman, a “never-conquered fort” (482).

The poem’s ecphratic stanzas, in which, after spending a long while examining a painting of the Greek victory over the Trojan metropolis, Lucrece states that “so [her] Troy did Perish,” is the most vivid exploration of woman as city. Appropriately, it is also in this section of the poem when she has the revelatory realization that solidifies her decision to commit suicide. Her identity, as she understands it, is constructed through a masculine method of definition to be embodied in the virtue of her chastity, but Tarquin’s violent act has made this virtue irretrievably lost. Her sudden “insight,” or so she perceives it to be, while studying the painting, combines with this loss of identity to completely divide her self, a division which she can only mend at the

moment she takes her life and achieves self-reunification. She is unable to understand chastity— itself the product of a masculine ideal of femininity—as something that is upheld in one’s soul and not in one’s physical body, and her own “polluted prison” cannot possibly house such a virtue of purity (1726). However, although it is a virtue based both on bodily and psychological purity, chastity is predicated on the concept of physical and mental violence as well, as it so easily can become the subject of conflict among men or between men and women. Lucrece appropriates the violent masculine powers of identification because of the specific way in which she kills herself. By plunging into her feminine body the identifiable object of masculinity—the “[harmful knife] sheathed in her harmless breast”—she literally assumes the masculine identity that had been figuratively forced upon her by the male-dominated Roman society in which she existed. By recreating Tarquin’s act that took away her chastity and thus her identity, she becomes the sword that drives the Tarquins out of Rome—literally out of the city itself, and figuratively out of her body through her “stain’d” blood, “since Rome herself in them [both] doth stand disgraced” (1743, 1833).

Shakespeare’s adaptation of the tragic story of Lucretia, written in 1594 during his obligatory hiatus from playwriting as the Black Plague forced all the London theaters to close, was just the most recent addition to a substantial list of versions of the renowned legend. Livy, Ovid, Chaucer, Gower, and many others had already produced written sources relating the tragedy of the Roman woman. Lucretia was the wife of Collatine, who was kin to and a soldier alongside Sextus Tarquinius, the prince of Rome. During the Roman siege of Ardea, Collatine and other “principal men of the army,” as the Argument preceding the poem names them, were in Tarquin’s tent, each praising his wife’s superiority over the others’. They decided to journey back to Rome to see for themselves whose wife was the most virtuous, and Lucretia was found

spinning with her women-in-waiting while the other wives were caught dancing or engaging in other fanciful activities. Tarquin was captivated by Lucretia's beauty, and after departing back to the camp with the rest of the men, "shortly after privily withdrew himself, and was (according to his estate) royally entertained and lodged by Lucrece at Collatium" (Arg. 24-26). That night he stole into Lucrece's bedchamber, raped her, and fled her house the next morning. She eventually sent letters to Collatine and her father Lucretius, who both arrived in the company of other men to find her distraught and in mourning. She made them promise to seek revenge against him at fault, and only afterward told them what had happened, revealing Tarquin's name immediately before plunging a knife into her breast. Her suicide resulted in the Tarquins being banished from Rome and the state government altered from kings to consuls.

Shakespeare's poem is markedly innovative because it is the only version in which Lucrece has a real voice, and a bold one at that. As with Lady Macbeth, Rosalind, Juliet, and every other significant female character in his catalogue, he was exploring the concept of identity when developing the character of Lucrece. However, unlike (in particular) those three outspoken feminine characters, all of whom Lucrece equals in her command of language, her identity is one that is given to her by men, and is thus the result of a masculine method of definition. The masculine lens through which the feminine ideal is constructed names chastity a highly laudable virtue, and is the attribute upon which Lucrece's identity is shaped. However, chastity in its simplest form is a woman's complete subservience to one man, thereby making Lucrece's masculine-constructed identity further structured around a masculine-constructed virtue. Given the previously stated notion that chastity itself is predicated on a concept of violence, Lucrece's identity really becomes structured around the potential conflict between men.

This dilemma is most easily explained through a closer examination of her position as Collatine's wife, which equates her position as his personal property. The very first line in which she enters the poem introduces her as "Collatine's fair love, Lucrece the chaste," establishing her character as a wife whose honor and fidelity are so unparalleled that she can be appositively referred to as "the chaste" (7). Some critics argue that it is Collatine's "ownership" of her that is at the heart of "the headlong fury of [Tarquin's] speed," but to make this statement requires one to ignore the abundance of accusations Tarquin himself makes, similar to (501):

My will that marks thee for my earth's delight,
Which I to conquer sought with all my might;
But as reproof and reason beat it dead,
By thy bright beauty was it newly bred. (487-490)

Thus, although it is not the overarching reason Tarquin cannot leave Lucrece untouched (her beauty is more often given), it is very much a component of her identity in its inherent connection with chastity. Collatine himself is said, as he initially described the unrivaled chastity of Lucrece to Tarquin and the other soldiers, to have "unlock'd the treasure of his happy state; / What priceless wealth the heavens had him lent / In the possession of his beauteous mate" (16-18). Even after she has killed herself, he and Lucretius begin a heated argument over "who should weep most, for daughter or for wife," since they both are suffering the loss of her life (1792):

The one doth call her his, the other his,
Yet neither may possess the claim they lay.
The father says, "She's mine." "O, mine she is,"
Replies her husband, "do not take away

My sorrow's interest, let no mourner say

He weeps for her, for she was only mine,

And must only be wail'd by Collatine." (1793-1799)

It is no wonder, then, that Lucrece sees her identity as utterly dissolved after Tarquin rapes her and violates her chastity, taking away the only quality she can recognize in herself as able to serve as the foundation for her distinct self. She too saw herself as Collatine's "stock," though she does not call herself this till after Tarquin has "by strong assault bereft" Collatine's "honor[, that] lay in [her]" (1063, 835, 834). The very nature of a chaste woman is that she is the "happiness enjoy'd but of a few / And if posses'd, as soon decay'd and done / As is the morning's silver melting dew / Against the golden splendor of the sun" (22-25). However, "posses'd" must be inferred to signify *by another man*, as it is made so clear throughout the poem that Lucrece is "posses'd," and distinctly by Collatine (23). Therefore, having now been "posses'd" by two men, Lucrece suddenly finds herself with no identity whatsoever to maintain. Her chastity has been identified by those who have named it as a virtue, that is, the men outside of her who cannot see her soul. So despite her own oath that her mind remains "immaculate and spotless," as it "was not forc'd [nor] never was inclin'd / To accessory yieldings," and is unquestionably "still pure," she is unable to see this statement as the exact proof that she is still upholding her chastity (1656-1658). In her eyes, the one defining characteristic of her very self is now reduced to "the story of sweet chastity's decay," no longer a living quality within her (808).

Augustine, again in *City of God*, devotes several sections to Lucrece during his discourse on suicide, which he staunchly names a sin against God, the giver of life, with no exceptions. In regards to rape, when "lust [is] gratified on the body of another," he asserts that "while the will remains firm and unshaken, nothing that another person does with the body, or upon the body, is

any fault of the person who suffers it,” and thus shame or the feeling one has sinned after being raped is not necessary and should not warrant suicide (Augustine 25). If the victim feels compelled to take his or her own life, “that act which could not be suffered without some sensual pleasure, should be believed to have been committed also with some assent of the will” (Augustine 25). Chastity is a virtue “of the soul, and has for its companion virtue the fortitude which will rather endure all ills than consent” to suicide (Augustine 26). Concerning Lucrece, therefore, he states that “perhaps she is not there” among those who committed suicide though guiltless, “because she slew herself conscious of guilt, not of innocence?...what if she was betrayed by the pleasure of the act, and gave some consent to [Tarquin], though so violently abusing her, and then was so affected with remorse, that she thought death alone could expiate her sin?” (Augustine 29). To Augustine:

...since she killed herself being subjected to an outrage in which she had no guilty part, it is obvious that this act of hers was prompted not by the love of purity, but by the overwhelming burden of shame. She was ashamed that so foul a crime had been perpetrated upon her...and...was seized with a proud dread that, if she continued to live, it would be supposed she willingly did not resent the wrong that had been done her. She could not exhibit to men her conscience, but she judged that her self-inflicted punishment would testify her state of mind... (Augustine Book 1, Chapter 19)

Shakespeare takes it upon himself to refute Augustine’s doubts about Lucrece’s innocence and actually turns the blame upon men like Augustine who extol the value of chastity as so praiseworthy a virtue (or as a virtue at all) (Augustine 29). Lucrece realizes the irrevocability of her chastity once Tarquin violates it, and decides she must end her life because

“the crow may bathe his coal-black wings in mire, / And unperceiv’d fly with the filth away, / But if the like the snow-white swan desire, / The stain upon his silver down will stay”; in other words, her “immaculate and spotless mind...Doth in her poison’d closet yet endure,” with no chance of its escape without her taking action first (1009-1012, 1656-1659). Twice does Lucrece become a swan, the association being just one example of the pervading animal imagery in the poem, with both instances occurring within narrated stanzas. It is a metaphor that persists even up to the moment when she is finally forced to explain what happened to Collatine: “And now this pale swan in her wat’ry nest / Begins the sad dirge of her certain ending” (1611-1612). For even after she wills her “soul and body to the skies and ground,” she is persistently searching for a way to recreate her identity, an admittedly understandable pursuit, as an identity is not something most experience losing, particularly in such a violent way, and in her despair the simultaneous selflessness she feels is at the very least overwhelming (1199). Clearly, even when she is not vocally naming self-conceived subjects upon which she could resituate her identity, the narrator prevents her from ever completely giving up on that goal by inserting objects of potential association throughout the text.

Unknown to Lucrece, however, is that as she does vocally, and violently, confine her virtue to her death when she says, “Mine honor be the knife’s that makes my wound,” she is actually foreshadowing the moment at which she will finally establish a real, solidified identity (1201). In that moment she defies the very masculine limitations that are stopping her from adopting any other objects of association for her newly-founded identity. At this point, though, she feels compelled to merely resign herself to death, the only logical option she can comprehend. And, since “woe hath wearied woe, moan tired moan” during her nightlong

lamentation, after she sends the letters calling for Collatine and Lucretius to come to Collatium she finds a “means to mourn some newer way” (1363, 1365).

She does this by visiting a painting depicting the Greek siege of Troy in which there are “a thousand lamentable objects,” which cause her to “feelingly...[weep] Troy’s...woes” (1372, 1492). The ecphratic verses in which the narrator describes on what Lucrece is “[spending her eyes],” are wrought with violent imagery, related through language that mirrors how Tarquin is described before he violates her (1457). The stanza which reads:

From the walls of strong-besieged Troy,
 When their brave hope, bold Hector, march’d to field,
 Stood many Troyan mothers, sharing joy
 To see their youthful sons bright weapons wield,
 And to their hope they such odd action yield
 That through their light joy seemed to appear
 (Like bright things stain’d) a kind of heavy fear

is written in stark contrast to an earlier description of Tarquin’s veins as he approaches Lucrece asleep in her bed (1429-1435). They are then referred to as “obdurate vassals fell exploits effecting, / In bloody death and ravishment delighting, / Nor children’s tears nor mothers’ groans respecting,” as they “swell in their pride, the onset still expecting” (429-432). Most significant about the section of the poem Lucrece spends at the painting is the identification she makes with “despairing Hecuba” (1447). “In her,” the narrator elaborates, “the painter had anatomiz’d / Time’s ruin, beauty’s wrack, and grim care’s reign,” concisely applying to the image of Hecuba three equally apt descriptions of Lucrece (1450-1451). The illustrations of Lucrece immediately before and just after her suicide are foreshadowed in the depiction of Hecuba: “Her cheeks with

chops and wrinkles were disguis'd, / Of what she was, no semblance did remain. / Her blue blood chang'd to black in every vein... Show'd life imprison'd in a body dead" (1452-1456). Lucrece appears to be somewhat satisfied with this resemblance, finally able to identify with something, and another woman at that, as opposed to her former attempts at doing so with animals.

These stanzas, however, which seem to offer Lucrece a real association with which she can begin to formulate her own identity, quickly lead to the more important revelatory moment that firmly divides her self (already suffering the blow of lost chastity), and after which she is unwaveringly convinced that she must end her life. It is through this revelation that Shakespeare, as introduced previously, poses an argument against Augustine. In doing so, he questions Augustine's reasoning that allows him so assuredly to denounce the validity of Lucrece's suicide as an honorable one. She has already noted that Tarquin was able to deceive her because he "look'st not like deceit," meaning that "this earthly saint, adored by this devil, / Little [suspected] the false worshipper: / For unstain'd thoughts do seldom dream on evil" (585, 85-87). When "guiltless she securely [gave] good cheer / And reverend welcome to her princely guest," it was because his "inward ill" was through "no outward harm express'd" (89-91). Thus, while looking at the painting and spotting Sinon, the treasonous and treacherous man on whom the Trojan's defeat can be blamed, since he orchestrated the infamous gifted horse catastrophe, she immediately notices that "some shape in [his] was abus'd: so fair a form lodg'd not a mind so ill" (1529-1530). She is baffled. The pivotal stanzas read:

"It cannot be," quoth she, "that so much guile"—

She would have said, "can lurk in such a look";

But Tarquin's shape came in her mind the while,

And from her tongue “can lurk” from “cannot” took:

“It cannot be” she in that sense forsook,

And turn’d it thus, “It cannot be, I find,

But such a face should bear a wicked mind.

“For even as subtile Sinon here is painted,

So sober-sad, so weary, and so mild

(As if with grief or travail he had fainted),

To me came Tarquin armed to beguiled

With outward honesty, but yet defil’d

With inward vice: as Priam him did cherish,

So did I Tarquin, so my Troy did perish. (1534-1547)

Lucrece has discovered that, although she vocalized Tarquin’s inner malicious intentions as hidden behind a virtuous visage after he left her bearing “the load of lust he left behind,” it is the very fact that she was able to recognize his trick but still consider herself innocent that now wholly negates her formerly blameless position (734). She realigns her inability to have seen his wicked interior motives *before* he raped her to be equivalent with her capability of seeing his falseness *afterwards*, and uses this as the exact reason why she should have been able to prevent the crime from ever taking place. In her mind, she has been rationalizing her innocence and her “immaculate and spotless” mind, since her knowledge of the strategy by which Tarquin violated her makes her mind not spotless, but able to comprehend sin. This awareness makes her “[tear] the senseless Sinon with her nails” just as she “desperate with her nails her flesh doth [tore]” after Tarquin fled her bedchamber (1564, 739). Augustine does not consider this notion of

rationalized guiltlessness when working out why Lucrece felt she had to commit suicide; Shakespeare creates an unthought-of alternative that leaves her still as innocent as before the rape, but, again limited by the masculine lens through which she has been forced to view the world, unable to perceive this innocence once she is aware of its rationalized existence.

Having decided, therefore, that “no dame [thereafter] living / By [her] excuse shall claim excuse’s giving,” she eventually is confronted by Collatine, Lucretius, and the men they brought with them to Collatium after receiving her letters (1714-1715). She explains what happened, asking them rhetorically, “What is the quality of my offense, / Being constrain’d with dreadful circumstance? / May my pure mind with the foul act dispense, / My low-declined honor to advance?” (1702-1705). The “dreadful circumstance,” unbeknownst to her or to the men surrounding her during her final moments, is that Lucrece’s self as she is able to understand it has now been utterly split. First her identity was lost with the degradation of her chastity, after which she still saw herself as innocent, but when she convinced herself that she had been rationalizing her innocence, all hope for recreating her identity was lost, thereby dividing her self into two severed halves that, in her eyes, can not be reunited. The masculine constraints on her identity that were always in place have now violently made themselves unmistakably visible to her, and even more so than the reader is likely able to observe. She is evidently aware of her identity as one created by the masculine powers controlling her. She does not yet prove she is able to see any way around their imposed construct of chastity as the only foundation upon which her identity can rest, as this ability that can only be proven with the physical motion of her suicide.

When this motion occurs, she manages to take her own life in such a way that actually appropriates the very masculine constructs of femininity that had been formerly limiting her

from achieving a full understanding. Though suicide is conditionally a violent act in its being an eradication of life, Lucrece's suicide is especially violent, and Shakespeare exacerbates this with bloody language and imagery. Its violence is not just in the manner she acts it out, however, but in its implied magnitude of her turning her abstract and masculine-defined femininity into an identifiable object of masculinity. Revealing Tarquin as the perpetrator of the heinous crime she has just related, her last words are, "He, he, fair lords, 'tis he, / That guides this hand to give this wound to me" (1721-1722). It is on purpose that she alludes to her rapist in her very final moment, as it is conspicuously not his hand that guides the knife, but her own, she already having said to her own hand, "Since thou couldst not defend thy loyal dame, / And wast afeard to scratch her wicked foe, / Kill both thyself and her for yielding so" (1034-1036). Her crediting Tarquin as the invisible force causing her hand to plunge the dagger into her chest is the final piece of evidence that she has been driven to commit this action because of the constraining masculine constructs surrounding her self-awareness. When alone, she can confidently pronounce herself "the mistress of [her] fate," but in front of her husband, her father, and a plethora of other contributors to those very masculine constraints, she must attribute her action to one of their kind as a final attempt to underscore their being at fault.

The narrator describes her suicide using imagery that reappears in the moment when Juliet takes her life in the same fashion (*Romeo and Juliet*, interestingly, written just a year after *The Rape of Lucrece*):

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

Her contrite sighs unto the clouds bequeathed

Her winged sprite, and through her wounds doth fly

Live's lasting date from cancell'd destiny. (1723-1729)

The Latin term for “sheath” is “vagina,” and the imagery of the dagger entering her breast is quite phallic. In this instance, Lucrece becomes the knife itself, unifying her divided self by becoming the sword that results in “Tarquin’s everlasting banishment” (1855). This happens both literally, as his entire family is exiled after Collatine and the other men “show [Lucrece’s] bleeding body thorough Rome, / And so to publish Tarquin’s foul offense,” but also figuratively, as the “black [blood]...that false Tarquin stain’d” bubbles out of her chest “in two slow rivers” around her body (1851-1852, 1743, 1738). She, in this specific masculine action that mirrors exactly the action that took away her identity, regains an identity that furthermore challenges the masculine limitations that she had been suffering for so long and that are at the heart of the need she feels to kill herself. She takes imagery representing the men who had always prevented her from formulating her own self-perceived identity and uses it against them in a moment of self-reunification that, contrary to what Augustine argues, is not obtainable through any other method of living.

Shakespeare’s Lucrece is arguably the most famous Western historical figure he would ever incorporate into his writing, and yet, remarkably, the first character in which he expanded the idea of the lack of a self-constructed identity. Furthermore, it is not that absurd to propose that in her character is this idea of selflessness most fully developed. Therefore, despite how truly and tragically “constrain’d” she has been and still remains, by turning her own fragile, “selfless self” into the tangible, identifiable object of the very knife with which she commits suicide, Shakespeare’s Lucrece surpasses the restrictions of the men in power around her. She is

at last able to assume a necessarily “unsheathed” masculine identity in response to their failed, imposed vision of a feminine self.