

Humanities Institute.
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The Rape of Lucrece 1594 Shakespeare

Overview. In 1592 Shakespeare dedicated his fascinating narrative poem, *Venus and Adonis*, to his patron, the Earl of Shaftesbury. Two years later, he dedicates his second narrative poem to the same earl, fulfilling his promise to offer the gentleman a 'graver labour' than the first poem. That 'graver labour' is *The Rape of Lucrece*, published two years after *Venus and Adonis*, and dealing with tragic events and their heavy consequences. We might say that the twin geniuses of Shakespeare, the comic and the tragic, were being exercised in the two long poems with which he opens his publishing career. What is this second long narrative?

Prosody. The *Rape of Lucrece* is a narrative poem of 1855 lines—about the length of a typical act, in a five-act Shakespearian tragedy. (Can we call these narrative poems practice runs for the more involved tragedies that follow them? Can the experiments in erotic dysfunction that mar Othello's existence be foreshadowed in the kind of sexual self-destruction so carefully prepared for himself by Tarquin, in *The Rape of Lucrece*?) Like the prosody of *Venus and Adonis*, that of *The Rape of Lucrece* is formal, unvarying, and studded with heavy rhymes; the formal pattern of *The Rape of Lucrece*, *rhyme riche*, followed the substantial model of ABABBCC, like the earlier model closing with a firm couplet, which gives the stanza its independent stance in the narrative flow. The entire narrative consists of 265 stanzas—one might say that number of mini narrative concepts, each of which throbs with a brilliance of intention which distinguishes Shakespeare's work from that of his peers.

Historicism. Shakespeare's sense for the Roman ancient is the keynote of his first two narrative poems. *Venus and Adonis* takes us to a contextless antiquity, in which the main players are Renaissance-styled, while *The Rape of Lucrece* modernizes extensive passages from Ovid and Livy, which belong to the celebration of the Fall of the Roman Monarchy and the Establishment of the Roman Republic in 509 B.C. A patina of Europeanized antiquity over-lays both narrative poems, which differ sharply, in that, from Shakespeare's plays around English history, and around marginal monarchs, like Titus Andronicus and Cymbeline. The two long narrative poems, with which we are concerned, still fall short of the trenchant humanity of the major plays to come.

Characters

Lucrece;	an honorable Roman woman.
Collatine;	Lucrece's husband, a soldier in the Roman army.
Tarquin;	a Roman soldier, friend of Collatine, who rapes Lucrece.
Lucretius;	Lucrece's father.
Junius	Brutus; a friend of Collatine and Lucretius.
Lucius	Tarquinius, Tarquin the Proud; King of Rome, and Tarquin's father.
Servius	Tullius; father in law of Lucius Tarquinius.
Publius	Valerius; friend of Collatine and Lucretius.

Story

Conversation. The setting is a military engagement of the Roman army in which the Roman monarchy, under the long lasting dominance of the line of the Tarquins, is attempting to fight off the Republican forces in the vicinity of Rome. As the story opens, we are in the midst of a conversation between two soldiers, one Collatine, a soldier in the Roman army, the other Tarquin, a soldier who will eventually give the plays its name by raping the wife of Collatine. This Tarquin, who will thus disgrace himself, and bring to an end the dominance of his monarchical line, is listening as Collatine praises the beauty and virtue of his wife, Lucrece. Not long after, on a matter of business, Tarquin has occasion to stop at Collatine's House—Collatine is away—and to talk at length with Collatine's wife. It is apparent to the listener, that

Tarquin is dangerously aware of the beauty and the charm of Lucrece. The dramatic center of the story opens here.

Night. After dinner, feigning exhaustion, Tarquin retires to his room, while Lucrece goes to her quarters. Not much later, when the house is dark, Tarquin makes his way to the lady's bed, tells her he is going to rape her, and adds that if she resists he will murder her, kill a black slave and put him in bed with her, and thus scatter shame over her posterity. We see that Tarquin is in the end willing to go to the limit, for all the twists and turns of psychological torture that will accompany this man's mind to his ultimate self-destruction. In the end, for there is no great surprise here, Lucrece is raped, stabs herself, calls on the Roman soldiers to avenge her, withholds as long as she can, from her returning husband, the name of the killer, and becomes the sacrificial victim whose death ushers in the end of the Roman monarchy. The bulk of the poem tracks the emotions of the two major players, as vortices gather to suck them into their inhuman destinies.

Inwardness. We can hear the inner dialogue that pulses through the fateful approach of Tarquin to his longed for prey.

*'Even in this thought, through the dark night he stealeth,
A captive victor that hath lost In gain;
Bearing away the wound that nothing healeth,
The scar that will, despite of cure, remain;
Leaving his spirit perplexed in greater pain,
She bears the load of hurt he left behind,
And he the burden of a guilty mind.'*

The reader is invited to imagine 265 stanzas of this amplitude, awaiting the author's deep versatility in recreating the waves of Tarquin's pain, lust—'*rolling his greedy eyeballs in his head*'—and self-doubt rising at times to a suicidal sense of his fatal mission—all these assaults of feeling; while for her part Lucrece has ample time to think on the disaster impending: to send an urgent message to her husband, to appeal for help, to meditate on the shame she will bring to her children, to peruse (at great length) a painted scene which depicts the avenging Greek warriors facing the battlements of Troy, and ruing the fateful day when Helen was raped by Paris and carried away to this distant city. This grand historicizing of her own fate gives magnitude but added anguish to Lucrece's self-reflection. She suffers unimaginable anxiety, as she awaits the execution of the final assault—which comes in good time, and with it brings in the humiliation and annihilation of the line of the Tarquins.

Note. A skeleton account, like the above, gives no idea of the depth and flow of Shakespeare's achievement, in this inward portrayal of the worm of evil, and of its habits of invasion of the personality. To pursue Shakespeare through this emotional labyrinth, as it forms inside both principal characters, is to create in advance the kind of wisdom of guilt, desire and anxiety, which marks the inner lives of characters to be, like Macbeth, Hamlet, or Othello.

Themes

Desire. When Collatine speaks to Tarquin at the beginning of the poem, about his wife's beauty and chastity, he awakens desire in his interlocutor. This desire is still a latent interest, but it grows, and by the time Tarquin has made a return visit to the house of Collatine, his desire has grown stronger.

Guilt. Guilt is the condition in which Tarquin is able to recognize the potential evil in the desire and then lust he feels for Lucrece, who has gradually become a fixed pole in his mind. Guilt is part of the definition of Tarquin; he lives in it.

Lust. Lust is the outcome of desire, in Tarquin's mind. We must suppose that he has been reflecting, for some time, on the described virtue and beauty of Lucrece. (We have no reason to think Tarquin has met the lady prior to the fatal night of the rape.) Lust is harder to silence than desire.

History. In the end the house of the Tarquins falls, broken by shame, defeated not by vast military undertakings, but by the brutal lust of a prominent representative of the family. There is an historical fall out, to the rape the poem concerns, but at the same time there is a weary affirmation of the universally evil in human nature, 'man's first disobedience and fall,' as the poet John Milton put it.

Tarquin

character Is Tarquin a particularly evil man or is he just an ordinary guy? Let's put the question to Shakespeare. Tarquin is not skilled at nipping temptation in the bud, though he seems to know what temptation is, as we all do. In the case of the present play, Tarquin's ears were the problem. He listened too closely to what Collatine was telling him—which was already, in the telling, weighted toward a dangerous mixture of boasting and inviting. It may have been chance that brought Tarquin back to Collatine's house, in the absence of the master, but it was, Shakespeare hints, probably a mixture of chance with a sort of plan. Tarquin is the kind of guy who steps into a 'sort of plan,' and then finds himself trapped. From the get to, in Collatine's house, Tarquin and the master's wife will have been having an agreeable conversation. They get along. Then the evening party breaks up and everybody goes to his room. Everything is alright, but everything is not alright. Tarquin has been fantasizing for a long time. Please remember he is not a bad bad guy, just ordinary, but as he twists and turns he starts to imagine Madame, the perfection Collatine has described, lying adorably in her bed. He can't resist getting up. If you asked him, at this point, where he is going, he will probably say 'to the bathroom.' He will not be fully honest, to himself or to us, about his destination; and certainly will not be honest about his intentions. Even when he has begun his long and fretful journey, to Madame's room, he will be conscious, not of his goal, but of all the door and key like obstacles that lie along his way. I won't say more, about a judicial verdict on this man; sure he's bad. But for a human verdict, in all its complexity, one couldn't ask for a more observant judge than Shakespeare.

Parallels. King Candaules, in Herodotus' *History*, praises the beauty and chastity of his wife, to his trusted friend and leading courtier. The courtier accepts Candaules' offer, to hide in the Queen's bedroom, at the time when she disrobes for the night, and to verify the King's opinion. No less a longing led Tarquin. And like Tarquin, the King's courtier was to find that giving in to this degree of prurience was already to enter the labyrinth of history. He was forced to pay heavily for the indiscretion he exercised at the queen's expense. Moral: never listen too closely when your friend praises his wife or husband to you. Warning: the birth of desire is the birth of death.

Illustrative moments

'By our ears our hearts oft tainted be...'

Tarquin eventually perceives the deceptive power of speech, especially persuasive speech.

'...inward ill no outward harm expressed...'

In Tarquin, as he sat conversing with Lucrece, all seemed fine and dandy

*'in venturing all we leave to be
the things we are for that which we expect...'*

it is always a mistake, Tarquin finds, to live in dreams of what the other is.

*'So from himself impurity hath wrought
that for his prey to pray he doth begin...'*

Tarquin finds himself harboring benign as well as baleful feelings toward Lucrece.

'Thoughts are but dreams, til their effects be tried...'

It occurs to Tarquin that his desired goal may not be exactly what he imagines.

Discussion questions

Venus and Adonis, and *The Rape of Lucrece*, were composed early in Shakespeare's work life, probably before the age of thirty. At the same time he was writing his earliest plays—*Love's Labours Lost* or the first plays of the *Henriad*. Do you see the same creative genius at work in both of these kinds of works?

Is Shakespeare a moralist in his early poems and plays? Or rather more a psychologist? Pascal, a few decades later than early Shakespeare, wrote that 'the heart has reasons, that reason cannot understand.' What would Shakespeare have said to this *bon mot*?

What role does the narrator play in the early work of Shakespeare? Is his voice as playwright different from his voice as Poet? Can you see Shakespeare having taken the path of poetry inside of drama, or do the two registers of his voice harmonize perfectly?