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”What he did note but strongly he desir’d?”: Reading Shakespeare’s *The Rape of Lucrece* as a Pornographic Possession

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“What did he note but strongly he desir’d?”: Reading Shakespeare’s *The Rape of Lucrece* as a Pornographic Possession.

Victoria Burns

In 1594 William Shakespeare’s second narrative poem, an interpretation of the Lucretia myth titled *The Rape of Lucrece*, was published. In the story, a Roman man— “Sextus Tarquinius,” or “Tarquin” in Shakespeare’s text—rapes the eponymous protagonist, who consequently commits suicide. Her suicide incites Rome’s political revolution via an overthrow of the Tarquin family monarchy, a consequence that some scholars have interpreted as evidence of Lucrece’s agency. Shakespeare’s version is one of many, as poets and playwrights alike have reimagined Lucrece’s tale.

Despite its popularity in the early 17th century,¹ *The Rape of Lucrece* is not widely read today, especially when compared to Shakespeare’s plays, such as “Romeo & Juliet” and “Hamlet,” and his sonnets. In recent years, however, critical scholars have situated Shakespeare’s poem in feminist, political, and book studies frameworks. Consequently, some feminist scholars² have endeavored to interpret this poem as a text of female empowerment, gesturing to the political revolution triggered by Lucrece’s suicide. This essay will argue the opposite, expanding upon existing scholarship to evaluate what happens when we identify the pornographic features in Shakespeare’s poem. In line with scholars who claim the poem exhibits problematic features,³ I intend to address why Shakespeare’s presentation of Lucrece is troubling, especially considering the poem as a printed, commoditized object.

To begin, a few key points: First, the poem’s action is shared indirectly through Tarquin’s point of view, thus shaping the narration in the poem’s first half. As a result, the pre-rape scenes are told from the rapist’s perspective, showcasing Lucrece through a lens of objectification. Second, it matters that Shakespeare’s poem omits an account of the violent sex act itself, instead situating action in a before-and-after structure marked only by a shift from

Tarquin to Lucrece's point of view. Finally, as a printed text, *The Rape of Lucrece* is an object that readers could purchase and privately consume at their leisure. They could repeatedly return to Shakespeare's characterization of Lucrece's body as seen via Tarquin by possessing and reading the text bearing her name.

Due to the complex arguments regarding the term, it is worthwhile to explain what I mean when I say "pornography." What interests me most is how the narration style objectifies the female character, and I will turn to Martha Nussbaum's notions of objectification momentarily to clarify this point. Furthermore, the overlap between the narrator and Tarquin's point of view situates readers in a troublingly voyeuristic space. Some scholars, including Ian Moulton, claim that categorizing texts as "pornographic," in a modern sense, is unproductive and disregards individual readers' subjective interpretations. As Moulton phrases it, "[m]aterial seen as scandalously titillating in one cultural context often seems innocuous in another," and a singular text deemed "pornographic" can produce a variety of reader responses, "from powerful sexual arousal to bemused curiosity to indifference to disgust" (4, 9). Although this complexity might be true, I believe there is value in approaching this poem from a contemporary context, not so much fixating on the applicability of the term "pornography" but rather considering features of pornographic texts that we see exhibited here and what that might mean for how we respond to the text. I believe that ignoring this poem's problematic qualities would mean overlooking how Shakespeare's retelling of the myth subjects Lucrece to further victimization as an object of lust rather than a subject of resistance or authorship, permitting her body to be consumed repeatedly by Tarquin and readers alike. Sarah Toulalan notes that "[t]he peculiar and distinctive quality of pornography as a type of representation is that it is not only a 'thing': it is also thought to *do* something," to produce sexual desires and, as she phrases it, "incite action" (3, 5). Although Moulton makes a good point that that readers have individual responses to the texts they read, Peter Smith notes that Shakespeare's decision to tell the pre-rape scenes from Tarquin's point of view situates the reader as "less eyewitness than participant" (414).

Because the narrative distance is removed, readers adopt a voyeuristic role by witnessing Tarquin's desire and violent pursuit, and Toulalan identifies such voyeurism as "*the* defining characteristic of pornography" (161).⁴ Though Shakespeare's story lacks a voyeuristic spectator embedded in the poem itself, the narration style shares Tarquin's inner thoughts during his confrontation with Lucrece, inviting the reader to witness his rationalization for the assault. In seeing Lucrece's body through Tarquin's eyes and associating her features with desire, readers actively follow Tarquin's movements, an even more troubling notion once Tarquin finally assaults Lucrece. Because the narrator fails to recount the act itself, merely sharing the (however slightly) less horrific interactions leading up to it, readers are never forced to process its violent reality. Without the guilt they might feel from witnessing the explicit horrors of

Tarquin's actions, readers can engage with the content in a relatively guilt-free manner.

Furthermore, in clarifying pornographic classifications, Toulalan explains: "Intimately bound up with the desire for sexual contact with another body is the desire to look upon the body in order to desire it" (172). In Shakespeare's poem, the narrator overtly connects Tarquin's observation of Lucrece's body with his desire, implying that in viewing her body, he inevitably objectifies her, ultimately leading to the rape act:

What could he see but mightily he noted? /
 What did he note but strongly he desired? /
 What he beheld, on that he firmly doted, /
 and in his will his wilful eye he tired." (414-7)

Tarquin sees Lucrece and is powerless to resist his desire. According to these lines, Tarquin's objectifying eyes "note" what he sees and overcome his common sense. Shakespeare even echoes this connection between Lucrece's uncovered body and Tarquin's lust when Tarquin rejects her rhetoric-heavy pleas, saying: "The fault is thine, / for those thine eyes betray thee unto mine" (482-3). Her beauty stirs Tarquin's appetite, and he dismisses responsibility and his own agency, adopting a passive tone to explain his justification for the rape act to come.

Were the narrator to explicitly condemn Tarquin's actions, we could possibly read this poem as less problematic, but the overlap between the narrator and Tarquin's perspectives makes that all but impossible. Though Lynn Enterline distinguishes the characters and the narrator's 'voice', I find it relatively easy to trace how Shakespeare's representation blurs identity between narrator and rapist (155, 381). Returning to these lines, "What could he see but mightily he noted? / What did he note but strongly he desired?" even if we read the narrator and Tarquin as separate entities, the narrator's phrasing reflects a sympathetic tone, as if Tarquin will inevitably commit the rape after seeing Lucrece.⁵ Jonathan Hart describes this positioning as a tactic to "narrativize this brutal action and to displace the responsibility and guilt for it" (61). When the narrator proclaims "But Will is deaf, and hears no heedful friends; / only he hath an eye to gaze on Beauty, / and dotes on what he looks, 'gainst law or duty," he reiterates this justification that Tarquin is not fully culpable, that somehow Lucrece's features entice him against his own will, (495-7). This is further emphasized by the terminology here—"doting"—a term that might conjure loving tones, but at Shakespeare's time was also used to describe a person "silly, deranged, or out of one's wits" (OED 1). With this approach, Shakespeare guides readers to see Lucrece as somehow culpable, or at the very least, Tarquin as not entirely responsible for his actions. By engaging sympathy toward Tarquin and suggesting he can't help himself while recounting the story through his point of view, the text invites readers to participate in Lucrece's objectification with the excuse that they, similarly, can't help themselves. By

connecting the reader with Tarquin's mindset, muddying distinctions between narrator, rapist, and reader in a story *about* rape, Shakespeare increases the likelihood of a dangerous "misreading" or improper repurposing of the text for the reader's private pleasure. To further develop this point, I find Martha Nussbaum useful.

In "Objectification," a feminist theory text that maps objectification in a literary context, Nussbaum argues that we must distinguish between a character's objectification of another character and the text's treatment of the objectified character (255). I contend that for this poem, the hazy narrative voice makes the objectifying party unclear, which can have troubling consequences. To better understand this, I find two of Nussbaum's definitions particularly useful: *Instrumentality* and *Denial of Subjectivity*. Much as Shakespeare employs Lucrece as an instrument to garner fame in authorship, *Instrumentality* is a fitting term to describe Lucrece's existence within the poem's first half, as a tool through which Tarquin can quench his lust. No longer a person, she is a receptacle, a target for his sexual longing. Nussbaum also defines *Denial of Subjectivity* as when "the objectifier treats the object as something whose experience and feelings (if any) need not be taken into account," which Tarquin undoubtedly does by raping Lucrece despite her protests (257).



Fig. 1: Lucretia. Lucas Cranach the Elder, Lucas Cranach the Younger, 1537.
Web. 6 Dec. 2017.

Perhaps part of the issue is that, as Katherine Duncan-Jones asserts, Lucrece appears "more as a consciousness than a body" in Shakespeare's poem (97). In the first half of the poem, Lucrece is reduced to her physical form, but it rings

true for the second portion, and readers look upon her body without witnessing her consciousness. However, this could ring true in the poem's second half, when the narrative shifts to Lucrece's perspective and her identity is supposedly "reclaimed" according to some scholars. After the shift, we do not read additional descriptions of her body, so we only truly contextualize Lucrece's physicality via Tarquin. In Michael Hall's words, "the denial of any Lucrece except the eroticized body discourages readers from seeing her as a person with whom they could sympathize" and, I would add, never corrects the rapist's presentation of her body as a sum of lust-worthy parts (66). Even if Lucrece does achieve some degree of imagined agency in her suicide, we never see how she sees herself. In fact, in Lucrece's final few moments, she condemns Tarquin for robbing her of her features, proclaiming "O, from thy cheeks my image thou has torn, / and shivered all the beauty of my glass, / that I no more can see what I once was" (1761-3). Men mediate her body's presentation, whether through Tarquin's stares or in the poem's final scenes, when her male family members fight over her corpse before Brutus repurposes it for public display, in an effort to incite revolution. In Shakespeare's retelling of the Lucretia myth, the protagonist's body is never her own but reduced to a tool for men's objectives, political or pornographic. It is Lucrece's body, not her full self, which moves men to literally change history.

In defending the poem, Nancy Vickers celebrates how it produces an "artfully constructed sign of [Shakespeare's] identity" and "proof of [his own] excellence," claiming that its rhetoric demonstrates "the prowess of the poet" (108). Thus, Vickers joins feminist scholars of recent decades who attempt to salvage the poem by turning attention to its value in Shakespeare's career or the writer's choice to give "voice" to Lucrece. I, however, believe that the objectification we see here outweighs the poem's value as one of Shakespeare's well-crafted works.⁶

It is not as though Shakespeare is alone in writing about Lucretia's story, either. Ovid and Livy have also famously reimagined the myth, and as Michael Hall notes, Livy briefly describes Tarquin groping Lucrece's breast but almost immediately directs attention to rhetoric and politics (63). In comparison, Ovid's *The Fasti* represents Lucrece as an object by featuring commentary about her body. However, Ovid tells the story via a distant narrator, who records what happened as a series of events. It does not include Tarquin's lengthy rhetoric, which Hall claims would have "extended the tension just before the rape and would also have undercut the brutishness of the actual assault" (64). Shakespeare distinguishes himself from Ovid—who, for any objectifying language, does not shy away from publishing the ugly rape act for what it is—by delivering a seemingly ceaseless stream of Tarquin's vacillating inner thoughts and his torment over the act itself, which a reader could even interpret as Tarquin's victimization by his own lust. Even Shakespeare's contemporary, Thomas Middleton, published *The Ghost of Lucrece* in 1600. It centers upon Lucrece's ghost, which, as Celia Daileader says, calls out after death "from metaphysical limbo and then summons her rapist to follow her to Hell" (68).

Unlike Shakespeare's poem, which lingers on Tarquin's mindset as he debates whether to, and eventually chooses to, overpower and assault Lucrece, Middleton's poem reflects a "relative lack of interest in the violence itself as opposed to its consequences," circumventing the rape scene and instead presenting Lucrece's continued vengeance in the afterlife (84). Because of this, Middleton sidesteps issues of recounting rape from the perpetrator's point of view, and even more the risk of recounting an act of sexual violence for the reader's pleasure.

Despite Shakespeare's troubling presentation of both rapist and victim, Amy Greenstadt claims that the Lucrece narrative retellings can allow for the protagonist to reclaim identity and subjectivity, assuming the author can successfully "orchestrate the silences into an intentionally controlled and therefore persuasively powerful discourse" (25). Lynn Enterline echoes this, arguing that because the poem's second half shifts to Lucrece's perspective, it restores the personhood that Ovid's version silences. Perhaps it is true that Shakespeare works to offset Lucrece's objectification earlier in the poem by imagining her mindset after the act. However, we should not accept that this shift in narration, nor her self-written publication in her suicide, outweighs what Hall terms a "chase scene" between Tarquin's arrival in Lucrece's home and the point at which we can infer he violently assaults her between the stanzas (67). Regardless of what Shakespeare contributes rhetorically through his retelling, his description of the pre-rape drama, as Hall phrases it, "legitimize[s] and incite[s] a thrill-of-the-chase response" when told through Tarquin's point of view (68). Vickers and others who imply that this particular writing style is necessary to demonstrate Shakespeare's mastery need only turn to Livy and Ovid for counterexamples.

At this point, I have endeavored to demonstrate the poem's troubling content. I want to end by considering its form. I am obviously not suggesting that the narrative poem's form produces pornographic content. However, if we can identify the text's pornographic features, as I have attempted to do, we can also see how its printed nature can distinctively encourage active participation to further its purpose, as the reader consumes it for pleasure. The reader purchases and possesses the poem, at which point he actively reads and processes each individual sentence. Unlike a performance, where the action can unfold in front of an audience, a reader willfully engages with the material in the reading act, in this case consuming Lucrece's suffering as he reads. Additionally, even prior to the purchase, publishers at Shakespeare's time performed this same active objectification to attract potential buyers.

Katherine Duncan-Jones notes that publishers often displayed "visual images of Lucrece killing herself" in shop signs, paintings, seal-rings, and more. These creative renderings typically displayed, as Duncan-Jones puts it, "a disheveled and bare-breasted woman whom less serious-minded young men might view as a pin-up" (95) (See Fig. 1). *Lucretia*, a painting crafted by Lucas Cranach the Elder, is one such example. It was produced almost 60 years prior to the text's publishing, but it displays comparable features to what buyers

would have seen: Lucretia (Lucrece) preparing to stab herself, her gaze directed at the painting's audience, her breasts exposed. A celebration of Lucrece reclaiming her power and identity in her final moments? Perhaps. But to a certain audience, it could just as easily be repurposed as a pornographic image, particularly if observed while recalling Tarquin's commentary—"Her breasts, like ivory globes circled with blue, / A pair of maiden worlds unconquered" (407-408). Lucrece's exposed chest in these marketing materials once again encourages potential buyers to view her as a collection of desirable parts, enticing them to purchase the poem to read more. Regardless of the myth's popularity, these images reduce the victim to a spectacle and invite potential readers to consume her features at their leisure.

Duncan-Jones further claims that the lack of early copies suggests that people read the poem so frequently that they damaged their copies (91). In text form, Lucrece becomes, as Wendy Wall phrases it, "subject to both the rapist's and our own readerly gaze," repeatedly exposed for the sake of Shakespeare's storytelling (Wall 271). This interaction between poet and participant, rapist and reader, becomes even more problematic when we recall exactly who tells the story of Lucrece's suffering and from what perspective.

When considering the poem as material object, we also cannot overlook the title. Originally sold as *Lucrece* and later as *The Rape of Lucrece*, the title suggests that the printed poem contains the essence of Lucrece herself. Though this naming structure was common with Renaissance texts, Wendy Wall argues that it equated the text with the woman described within:

"the text became synonymous with the female body, which was now multiply reproduced and displayed for a larger reading audience. By mass-producing portable and compact textual women for the male gaze, printing offered its readers the thrill of acquiring, owning, and viewing the erotics of love coded as a woman." (203)

When readers purchased the poem, they purchased Lucrece, "a book that is personified as a raped maiden" (Wall 218). Though Wall argues that the poem's conclusion offers some relief when Lucrece "re-publishes" her body to communicate her will, I find that the ending does not sufficiently offset the objectification we witness in earlier moments because after Lucrece dies, her body is once again repurposed to serve men's goals. Coupled with salacious advertisements, the poem becomes less an exploration of morality, female agency, or political resistance and more an invitation for readers to derive pleasure from a woman who has been victimized first historically and later in writers' quests for fame and readers' pursuits of pleasure.

What do we gain from returning to Shakespeare's version of Lucrece's tale? Is it about reinterpreting her story to transform her from victim to political agent? Celia Daileader says that the Lucretia myth "reifies women's rapable status" by telling and retelling her story, inviting readers to consume her, to pick her apart, to render individual judgment (86). Once we acknowledge how this

poem can function as pornography, we see how it invites readers to repeatedly violate her. We can't change the myth's history. Lucretia is raped, and she kills herself. But we can choose whether we perpetuate women's status as rapable objects through the eyes of the rapists themselves. Shakespeare's poem, however much it may demonstrate his rhetorical excellence, exploits a victim of rape. If we choose to preserve Lucretia as a raped figure in fiction, we must celebrate texts that employ fiction's flexibility to truly imbue her tale with agency, rather than encouraging readers' objectification for the writer's personal gain.

Notes

¹ Katherine Duncan-Jones has established its popularity at Shakespeare's time by examining citations, reprinting frequency, and remaining copies from the earliest printings (9).

² See, among others, Coppélia Kahn, Amy Greenstadt, and Christy Desmet.

³ Celia Daileader, Nancy Vickers, Michael Hall, and Lynn Enterline all raise concerns about how this poem (and by extension, its author) frames its protagonist, and I will be drawing upon, and at times challenging, their scholarship.

⁴ In *The Imprint of Gender*, Wendy Wall claims that this voyeuristic approach was a common tactic to sell Petrarchan sonnet sequences (203). While this may be true, we must distinguish between imaginary and unnamed recipients of poets' desire in these sonnets and a victim of rape whose story is retold for an audience's pleasure and whose likeness is artistically rendered (typically bare-breasted) to garner fame for artists.

⁵ Celia Daileader also helpfully directs our attention to how Lucrece is unwilling to blame Tarquin, noting that "she must be *taught* to curse her assailant: she cannot do it herself" (75). Even if we aimed to interpret the poem's second portion as countering the problematic opening half, the fact that the protagonist will not even assign blame to her rapist further encourages the reader's sympathy toward Tarquin, whose perspective guides so much of the action.

⁶ Though I am using Martha Nussbaum's "Objectification" to demonstrate how *Tarquin* and readers victimize Lucrece in their looking, one of objectification's subtypes is "*Instrumentality*: The objectifier treats the object as a tool of his or her purposes" (257). If we apply this definition, we can see Shakespeare himself in the role of objectifier, describing Lucrece's suffering and exposing her body textually for his own profit.

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