

Marital Affection and the Medieval Lucretia

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NEAR THE END OF Chaucer's *Book of the Duchess*, when the Black Knight describes the beauty and virtue of his beloved White, he compares her to Penelope and Lucretia. The use of such classical women as touchstones of female virtue is typical, if not clichéd; yet embedded in the Black Knight's conventional rhetoric is an odd qualification. He comments:

She [White] was as good, so have I reste,
As ever was Penelopee of Grece,
Or as the noble wif Lucrece,
That was the beste—he telleth thus,
That Romayn, Tytus Lyvyus—
She was as good, and nothyng lyk
(Thogh hir stories by autentyk),
Algate she was as trewe as she. (lines 1080-87, my emphasis¹)

Literally, the italicized line states that White was as good as Lucretia, but White was nothing like Lucretia. The perfect balance of this contradiction, appearing on either side of the caesura of line 1085, renders it all the more stark. Despite, or rather because of, its paradoxical nature, this line accurately sums up the status of the Lucretia legend in late medieval literary traditions. For medieval authors, Lucretia was simultaneously an exemplar of wifely chastity to which medieval women should aspire and a pagan whose actions and values ill fit a Christian era.

This essay considers the complications involved when medieval authors employed Lucretia as a model for Christian women. Specifically, I am interested in how a woman whose story culminates in suicide, an action deemed both sinful and despicable throughout the Middle Ages, could be recuperated as a viable model of Christian wifely behavior.² While there is no definitive answer to this question, a particularly

interesting set of answers can be gleaned from the appearance of the Lucretia legend as an exemplum of married chastity in *Le Ménagier de Paris* (*The Goodman of Paris*), a late medieval French conduct book purportedly written by a husband for his young wife. A concern that doggedly occupies the *Le Ménagier* narrator is how marital affection, and specifically the affection that his wife owes him, can be translated into action and thus made manifest to both himself and others. Herein, I contend, resides the attraction of the Lucretia legend, for, from the point of view of the *Le Ménagier* narrator, an act as extreme and irreversible as suicide incontrovertibly establishes Lucretia's internal, wifely devotion. Despite the *Le Ménagier* narrator's praise of Lucretia, his depiction of her extreme spousal devotion fits uneasily, and, in fact, contradictorily, in his larger consideration of chastity, as the narrator conveniently overlooks the stark discrepancies between his exempla. In order to consider how a medieval audience might register these discrepancies, I turn to Christine de Pizan's *Livre de la Cité des Dames*, in which we find a more acute consideration of how the Lucretia exemplum might be translated into ethical action.

The depictions of Lucretia in *Le Ménagier de Paris* and Christine's *Cité des Dames* point to developments in late medieval formulations of marriage, particularly as those developments involve increased emphasis on the connection between a wife's virtuous actions and her inner emotion. Paradoxically, a pagan matron like Lucretia can stand as a model for medieval Christian wives partially because of the ways in which marriage developed as a Christian institution after the sacramentalization of marriage in the twelfth century. The more Christian the institution of marriage became, the more the emotional bond between husband and wife was valued, and the better classical pagan women could exemplify ideal wifeness, since pagan women were not constrained by religion to split their love between an earthly and heavenly bridegroom or to forego suicide, a frequent sign of the pagan matron's devotion to her husband.³ Furthermore, the narrative elements of the Lucretia story, particularly her use of suicide to affirm her internal will, complement a widespread late medieval interest in the connection between a wife's internal, emotional attitude toward her husband and the external, ethical actions thought best to exemplify virtuous wifeness. Medieval discussions of

a wife's virtue and actions suggest that a woman's virtuous behavior stemmed from and established her emotional attachment to her husband. However, such discussions also suggest that a wife's inner emotional state could be counterfeited or misrepresented so that it fails to match up with her actions. Because the correspondence between a wife's actions and emotions involved interpretation and speculation on the part of others, late medieval wifely virtue became a complex affair that went well beyond the rote performance of duties. The appearance of Lucretia as an exemplary model for women in *Le Ménagier de Paris* is valuable because it makes these developments in wifely virtue readily apparent. Indeed the example of Lucretia suggests that only the performance of taboo actions (suicide) can incontrovertibly establish a wife's internal fidelity. Consequently *Le Ménagier de Paris* is, in its treatment of Lucretia, less an actual manual of conduct than a fantasy of a non-existent wife.

Part of the reason why medieval authors could depict Lucretia in multiple, at times contradictory ways is because they had a rich legacy of interpretations of Lucretia from which to draw. Like many classical personages, the medieval Lucretia is a palimpsest figure on whom classical, patristic, and medieval interpretive traditions all left their mark. Therefore, before turning to *Le Ménagier de Paris* and the *Cité des Dames*, it will be useful to review some of the major classical and patristic renditions of the Lucretia legend. Examining these versions of the legend reveals the degree to which the nature of wifely virtue and the manner in which physical actions reflect or fail to reflect a woman's internal will were major concerns of authors of the Lucretia legend from classical antiquity onward.

The two classical versions of the Lucretia legend that circulated most widely in the Middle Ages are found in Livy's *Ab Urbe Condita* and Ovid's *Fasti*. In both versions, Lucretia lives during the last days of the Roman monarchy; she is raped by Sextus Tarquinius, the son of Tarquinius Superbus, the seventh and final king of Rome. Lucretia's rape and subsequent suicide precipitate the exile of Tarquinius Superbus and the foundation of the Roman Republic. As related by Livy, the legend contains three major narrative events: the virtue contest, the rape of Lucretia, and Lucretia's suicide. The virtue contest begins not in Rome but at the siege of the city of Ardea, where a group of Roman

noblemen, including Lucretia's husband Tarquinius Collatinus and the king's son Sextus Tarquinius, entertain themselves one evening by debating who has the most virtuous wife. Unable to settle the debate, the men secretly return to Rome to spy on their wives. They find all of their wives feasting and enjoying themselves, except for Lucretia, who sits among her women weaving wool. Consequently "[t]he prize of this contest in womanly virtues fell to Lucretia" (*Muliebris certaminis laus penes Lucretiam fuit*).⁴ However, the virtue contest has an unforeseen outcome: "Sextus Tarquinius was seized with a wicked desire to debauch Lucretia by force; not only her beauty, but her proved chastity as well, provoked him" (201) (*Sex. Tarquinius mala libido Lucretiae per vim stuprandae capit [1.57.10]*).

The second event, the rape of Lucretia, takes place when Sextus Tarquinius secretly returns to Lucretia's home, where she treats him as an honored guest and gives him lodging. During the night he sneaks into Lucretia's room and attempts to seduce her. The virtuous Lucretia initially refuses, but eventually yields when Sextus threatens to kill her, kill a slave, and position the two as if he had caught them in the act of adultery. The third event, the suicide, occurs after Lucretia summons her husband and kinsmen and reveals what Sextus has done. Lucretia states: "my body only has been violated; my heart is guiltless" (203) (*corpus est tantum violatum, animus insons [1.58.7]*). Yet despite her claim, and despite her husband's and others' similar insistence that her virtuous intentions can be separated from the rape suffered by her physical body, Lucretia states "though I acquit myself of the sin, I do not absolve myself from punishment; not in time to come shall ever unchaste woman live through the example of Lucretia" (1.203) (*ego me etsi peccato absolvo, supplicio non libero; nec ulla dinde inpudica Lucretiae exemplo vivet [1.58.10-11]*). She then commits suicide. Afterwards, Brutus, one of the men who have witnessed Lucretia's suicide, successfully leads a revolt against the Tarquins. This revolt results in the foundation of the Roman Republic.

Particularly notable in Livy's account of Lucretia is the dynamic relationship between action and intention. Initially, Lucretia's superior virtue is established by her action, as she virtuously spins wool. Yet, as Lucretia realizes, actions gain meaning through interpretation, and

they are therefore subject to misinterpretation. It is for this reason that she surrenders to Sextus, for she realizes that even if she dies an unsullied woman, her purity would be meaningless if Sextus framed her for adultery with a slave and she lost her reputation. Even though she lives to tell her story and clear her name, she fears that her actions still might be misinterpreted; specifically, Lucretia fears that other women might justify unchaste activity by claiming her as a precedent. Therefore, despite Lucretia's and her kinsmen's claim that her heart is pure, Lucretia feels the need to realign her external actions with her internal will. This realignment occurs with her suicide, which removes any possible interpretation that she might have willingly participated in adultery with Sextus.

Ovid's version of the Lucretia legend differs from Livy's in that, as Corinne Saunders notes, "Livy focuses on the political and public impact of the rape of Lucretia, in the context of the larger history of Rome, while Ovid emphasizes the sentimental, private tragedy of Lucretia, and presents her as the innocent victim of savage desire."⁵ Ovid shows a heightened concern for what constitutes female virtue and the relationship between a person's physical actions and interior will. Regarding the virtue contest, while Livy's Roman husbands focus only on the actions of their wives, whether they are feasting or spinning, Ovid focuses on what these actions represent. In his version of the story, the Roman husbands' debate over wifely virtue is sparked by their question, ". . . are we as dear to our wives as they to us?" (*ecquid / coniugibus nostris mutua cura sumus?*).⁶ Unable to resolve their debate through verbal argument, Collatinus proclaims: "No need of words! Trust deeds!" (111) (*non opus est verbis, credite rebus!* [11. 734]). By implication, it appears that a woman's emotional attitude toward her husband can only be established by her actions. This implication is borne out by the narrative; when the men return to Rome to spy on their wives, the description provided of Lucretia is many times longer than Livy's simple reference to her spinning. Ovid's Lucretia spins with her ladies, but she also speaks, expressing her great concern for her husband's wellbeing and becoming so emotional that she swoons. When the spying men reveal themselves to her and she sees Collatinus, "She revived and on her spouse's neck she hung, a burden sweet" (113) (*illa revixit / deque viri collo dulce pependit onus*

[II. 759-60]). Ovid's Lucretia is virtuous not just because of her virtuous actions but because those actions reflect her deep love for her husband. Interestingly, while Ovid's rendering of the virtue contest heightens the story's focus on the correspondence between a woman's outward action and inner emotion as compared to Livy's version, Ovid's depiction of the suicide seems to downplay these issues since it lacks the extensive consideration of the states of the physical body and inner will that we find in *Ab Urbe Condita*. There is, in fact, very little direct discourse on the part of either Lucretia or her kinsmen. However, this lack of words seems to follow from the imperative of the virtue contest: "No need of words! Trust deeds!" Given this standard, Lucretia realizes that the only way to establish her innocent intentions is through suicide.

Augustine provides a new interpretation of Lucretia's rape and suicide in his *De Civitate Dei*, where he famously condemns Lucretia's actions on the grounds that purity is not a state of the body but a state of the soul. What society thinks of a rape victim is irrelevant; only a woman's standing before God matters: "Within themselves [rape victims], indeed, by the testimony of their own conscience, they have the glory of chastity. Moreover, they have it in the sight of God, and they require nothing more" (Habent quippe intus gloriam castitatis, testimonium conscientiae; habent autem coram oculis Dei sui nec requirunt amplius).⁷ According to Augustine, Lucretia's suicide indicates that she is guilty of some sin, for, if Lucretia was forced against her will to have sex with Sextus, then, in committing suicide, she killed an innocent victim. Conversely, if Lucretia felt some pleasure in her encounter with Sextus, then she is guilty of adultery.⁸ Interestingly, despite Augustine's attempt to disregard a woman's physical body and focus instead on her internal will, his arguments are not so different from Livy's. Both authors interpret Lucretia's suicide as a reflection of her inner state. The difference is that while Livy employs this correspondence to establish Lucretia's virtue, Augustine interprets it as a sign of vice. Although it is impossible for Augustine or anyone else to determine the nature of the correspondence between Lucretia's action and intention, the correspondence itself is still there.

Although Augustine is frequently cited by medieval authors as an authority on the Lucretia legend, it is worth noting that his condemnation

of her suicide is not shared by all church fathers. Jerome provides a different interpretation of Lucretia in his *Adversus Jovinianum*, which circulated widely throughout the Middle Ages. While Augustine sees Lucretia as adhering to a spurious and superseded set of pagan values that emphasize public honor more than a person's internal standing before God, Jerome views female purity as a construct continuous across the pagan and Christian eras and praises Lucretia as a virtuous model for Christian women. These starkly contradictory interpretations of Lucretia in influential theological texts contributed to the multivalence of medieval versions of the legend.⁹

Based on Livy's, Ovid's, Augustine's and Jerome's depictions and interpretations of Lucretia, it is clear that this legend inspired complex meditations on female virtue, particularly regarding a woman's interior state, which could be conceived in terms of honor (Livy), emotions (Ovid), spiritual standing (Augustine), or purity (Jerome) and the manifestation of that state in action. Late medieval authors also took interest in Lucretia for these reasons, although their treatment of her responded to particular developments in the concepts of love, marriage, and wifely duty. I will briefly consider these developments before turning to the late medieval Lucretia legends themselves.

The extensive examination and reformulation of marriage that took place in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, which included the development of marriage as a Christian sacrament, contributed to the belief that marriage was not simply a licit outlet for sexual urges or a means to the end of procreation but rather an institution through which participants could attain spiritual merit.¹⁰ With the sacramentalization of marriage also came greater emphasis on the importance of affection between husband and wife. As Emma Lipton points out, "the mutual love between the two members of the couple . . . was [viewed as] both the sign and substance of God's grace."¹¹ Yet, when canon lawyers, or parsons preaching to lay people, or lay people themselves referred to the "mutual love" of marriage, what did they mean? This question is a complicated one, and leads to the term *affectio* and its many meanings. The term *maritalis affectio* was inherited from ancient Roman law, although, as John T. Noonan has pointed out, its meaning altered over time.¹² According to Noonan, "*maritalis affectio* is a term first used in

classical Roman law to mean ‘intent to marry’” (481), and the concept was used legally to distinguish marriage from concubinage and to designate legitimate children as heirs (485). However, in the Justinian Code (529 CE), *affectio* “has an emotional tone; it means liking, inclination, fondness for” (487-88). The ambiguity of the term continued into the Middle Ages. For Gratian, *affectio* was a necessary element of marriage and appears to refer to a willingness to be married and a state of mind in marriage that differs from desiring one’s spouse sexually or wishing to procreate. After Gratian, various Popes expounded further on *affectio* in their decretals; Pope Alexander III (1159-81) “separated [*affectio*] from consent to marry and assigned [it] a new postnuptial function. . . . What in Justinian and Gratian had determined the existence of a marriage was now made the measure of its continuing quality” (500). Furthermore, “affection was now treated as an active disposition which the spouses had a duty to cultivate” (501). As a result, *affectio* took on a “dynamic aspect” that involved both an interior, emotional state and outward acts that express that state (502). For example, in a decretal enjoining that the husbands and wives of lepers continue to care for their diseased spouses, Pope Alexander III references *affectio* in such a way that leads Noonan to conclude that “[w]hat was being recommended was a tender loving attitude which would result in the care appropriate to one spouse being tendered by the other spouse” (503).

It appears that in the high to later Middle Ages marital affection comprised both the loving emotional attitude that spouses shared for each other and the activities that spouses performed, including a husband’s providing food, clothing, and shelter for his wife or a person caring for an ill spouse, that both stemmed from and reflected this attitude. Rüdiger Schnell demonstrates how this dynamic is reflected in high to late medieval marriage sermons; for example, in the influential collection of sermons of Peregrinus, a Dominican friar of the late thirteenth century, one finds the following instruction to husbands regarding wives: “You must love her in such a way that everything is as good for her as it is for you, in clothing, food, drink, and comforts.”¹³ Yet the vagueness of marital affection persisted; Michael M. Sheehan notes that Pope Innocent III (1199-1216), like his predecessors, made “no attempt . . . to define [affection’s] essential qualities or to establish criteria that would

make it possible for a court to decide whether marital affection existed or not.”¹⁴ Furthermore, even as a husband’s or wife’s outward actions were supposed to attest to an inner love for the spouse, there is at least some evidence suggesting a concern that actions and inner states might not match up. In an examination of legal disputes involving marriage in late medieval York, Frederik Pedersen recounts a case in which a witness asserts that marital affection indeed existed between a married couple, “so far as this witness could make out.”¹⁵ Pedersen notes that the witness’s testimony “makes it clear that she was aware that she could not be sure that the external signs of affection actually covered the inner reality of the emotion.”¹⁶

Le Ménagier de Paris also features ambiguities created by the two-part concept of marital affection. Long before the *Le Ménagier* narrator employs Lucretia as an exemplum, his book’s preoccupation with marital affection, and specifically with the dynamic interrelation between a woman’s emotions and actions, leads to considerations of wifely virtue that resemble those found in the Lucretia legends. The book itself is allegedly the product of marital affection. In the work’s Prologue, the narrator claims that his new, young wife requested instruction from him on how to fulfill her spousal duties, and his “piteuse et charitable compassion” (tender compassion) for her motivates him to concede.¹⁷ Furthermore, he tells her:

. . . se vostre affection y est telle comme vous m’avez monstré le semblant par voz bonnes paroles, il se peut acomplir en ceste maniere: c’estassavoir que une lecçon generale vous sera par moy escripte et a vous baillee (Prologue, 80-84).

[. . . if your affection is really as you have shown to me in such well-intentioned words, the lessons can be accomplished in the following manner: I will write and give you general instructions (50)]

The if-clause of this statement perhaps belies an anxiety that the young wife’s words do not accurately reflect her affection. In writing his treatise, the narrator provides instruction on the actions that will better indicate her inner, loving state than words alone.

In the treatise itself the narrator insistently correlates a wife's actions and her interior affection for her husband by repeatedly referencing love as a motive for her virtuous behavior. Sometimes such references are brief; at other times they are extensive, as when he states:

Par Dieu, je croy, quant deux bonnes preudegens sont mariez, toutes autres amours sont reculees, anichilees et oublyees fors d'eulx deux: et me semble que quant ilz sont presens et l'un devant l'autre ilz s'entregardent plus que autres, ilz s'entrepinsent, ilz s'entrehurtent et ne font signe ne ne parlent volentiers fors l'un a l'autre. Et quant ilz s'entreloignent si pensent ilz l'un a l'autre, et dient en leur cuer: "Quant je le verray je lui feray ainsi, je lui diray ainsi, je le prieray de tel chose." Et tous leurs plaisirs especiaux, leurs principaulx desirs et leurs parfaictes joyes, c'est de faire les plaisirs et obeissances l'un de l'autre. Et s'ilz ne s'entraiment il ne leur chault de obeissance ne de reverence fors le commun, qui est trop petits entre pluseurs (I.6.1181-94)

[In God's name, I believe that when two good, virtuous people are married, all other loves outside of each other are remote, destroyed, and forgotten. It seems to me that when they are in each other's presence, they look at each other more than the others, playfully tweak one another, press close, and do not willingly recognize or speak to anyone besides each other. And when they are separated, they think of each other, saying in their hearts, "When I see him, I will do this for him, say this to him, ask him about this." All their private pleasures, their dearest desires and their perfect joys are satisfied in pleasing and obeying the other. But if they don't love each other, then they don't value obedience and reverence more than does the average couple, which is, in most cases, not much (124).]

This passage begins by suggesting that internally, each spouse is only occupied with the other, "toutes autres amours" (all other loves) being "reculees, anichilees et oublyees" (remote, destroyed, and forgotten). This internal affection then manifests itself in actions such as tweaking and pressing, and, from there, inner affection appears externally in the form of mutual obedience, that is, performing any action which might

please the other. This depiction of marriage based on mutual affection might seem refreshing given the pervasive depictions throughout the Middle Ages of women as subservient to men. Yet it is important to note how easily this discourse of mutuality slips into hierarchy; the primary emphasis here, as the use of the masculine pronoun “le” as the object of “verray” and “prieray” indicates, is on the obedience that a wife owes her husband. While the wife and husband are both required to show affection, that affection manifests itself in different ways: for the wife, through obedience, for the husband, through guiding and instructing his wife, perhaps through books like *Le Ménagier de Paris*. Furthermore, given the fact that marriage was a sacrament and that the love between husband and wife was the “sign and substance of God’s grace,” the failure of a wife to demonstrate her affection through acts of obedience could be interpreted as a spiritual shortcoming. The *Le Ménagier* narrator repeatedly references this conflation of spousal and spiritual devotion, sometimes quite bluntly, as when, upon concluding the story of Griselda, he states that the point of the story is

pour monstrier que puis que ainsi est que Dieu, l’Eglise et raison veullent qu’elles [wives] soient obeissans et que leurs mariz veullent qu’elles aient tant a souffrir, et que pour pis eschever il leur est necessité de eulx soubzmettre du tout a la voullenté de leurs mariz et endurer paciemment ce que leurs mariz veullent . . . (1.6.844-49).

[to show that since God, the Church, and reason require that they (wives) be obedient, and since their husbands will that they have so much to suffer, to avoid worse they must submit themselves in all things to the will of their husband and endure patiently all that their husbands require (118).]

Indeed, the narrator goes so far as to suggest that a good wife will obey her husband even if he orders her to commit a sin:

Encores se mal vient par vostre courage, si dit l’en d’une femme mariee: “Elle fist bien, puis que son mary lui commanda; car en ce faisant elle fist son devoir (1.6.1133-37).

[Even if a wrong comes from your constancy to your husband's commands, it is said of a married woman, "She acted well, since her husband directed her; in so doing she performed her duty" (123).]

Despite the tight rein that the narrator recommends a husband keep on his wife, *Le Ménagier* repeatedly attests to the difficulty of doing so. In the book husbands constantly test their wives, and, despite exceptions like Griselda, the women frequently fail these tests. Indeed, the work is filled with negative exempla of unruly women who resist their husbands' control and of women whose outer actions do not conform to their inner will. In short, the *Le Ménagier* narrator is deeply anxious about women's motives, particularly about women's fidelity to their husbands, and it is for this reason that Lucretia is an attractive model of femininity.

The *Le Ménagier* narrator relates the story of Lucretia in a section of the book devoted to chastity, a term used here to denote marital fidelity. The narrator uses multiple sources for his Lucretia story, his most direct source being *Le Jeu des Eschaz Moralisé*, a mid-fourteenth century French translation of Jacobus de Cessolis's *Solacium ludi scacchorum*, in which Lucretia also appears as a model of feminine chastity.¹⁸ The *Le Ménagier* narrator also claims to have seen Livy's Lucretia legend, and, whether he actually used the Latin version or not, it is clear that the author drew from sources other than *Le Jeu*, since *Le Jeu* does not include the virtue contest as part of its Lucretia story, while *Le Ménagier* does. The *Le Ménagier* narrator's reliance on multiple sources is at times awkward; for example, Sextus Tarquinius falls in love with Lucretia twice, first, following *Le Jeu*, when he meets her at a dinner at Collatinus's home and later, following the tradition of Livy, during the virtue contest. Still, the manner in which the author combines versions of the Lucretia story reveals something about his interests. Given the work's preoccupation with female virtue, and particularly with testing such virtue, the inclusion of the virtue contest makes sense. According to the narrator, Lucretia wins this contest when the men find her enclosed in her home praying over a book of hours—a fairly typical medieval Christianizing of classical myth. Yet it is not just her isolation and Christian devotion that render her virtuous. The narrator relates:

et fut trouvé que lors ne autres foiz, toutes foiz que son mary
Colatin estoit hors, et en quelque compaignie ou feste qu'elle fust,
il n'estoit nul ne nulle qui la veist dancier ne chanter, se ce n'estoit
seulement le jour qu'elle avoit letters de lui ou qu'il retournast la
veoir; . . . (1.4.256-61).

[and it was found that neither then nor any time when her husband
Collatinus was away, in whatever company or celebration she
was, had man or woman seen her dance or sing, except on the day
when she received letters from him or when he returned to see
her (90-91).]

This detail does not appear in *Le Jeu*. By connecting Lucretia's pleasure to her husband, the narrative takes on an emotional tinge reminiscent of Ovid's Lucretia legend and, in so doing, suggests that at the core of Lucretia's virtuous actions is marital affection. Similarly, when Lucretia tells her husband that Sextus has raped her, she prioritizes his honor over hers, telling him first that Sextus "a ton lit deshonnoré" (1.4.298) (has dishonored your bed [91]) before referencing her dishonored body. This detail follows *Le Jeu* and departs from Livy, in which Lucretia first references her honor before referring to her husband's defiled bed. Thus the narrator appears to follow and depart from sources in a fashion that emphasizes Lucretia's inner affection for her husband. Likewise, Collatinus's love for Lucretia is emphasized; it is he alone, and not her other kinsmen, who seeks to comfort her upon learning of the rape. Here we see the mutuality of the affectionate bond that, in the later Middle Ages, was supposed to typify the relationship between husband and wife.

Despite the narrator's updating of the classical Lucretia legend with a book of hours and an affectionate marriage, the story inevitably ends with Lucretia's pagan suicide. Upon concluding the story, the narrator merely instructs the wife that this is an example to follow for "garder son mariaige ou chasteté" (1.4.344) (protecting marriage or chastity [92]). This instruction seems glib. If necessary, is a wife supposed to commit suicide, an act greatly condemned in medieval Christian culture? Yet, while virtuous suicide is a concept belonging to the values of pagan Rome, not medieval Christendom, the attraction of suicide in

the context of this conduct book can be attributed to medieval developments in marriage. If marital affection was supposed to consist of corresponding internal emotions and external actions, then questions could emerge regarding this correspondence. What if a wife performed virtuous behavior by rote, without possessing the appropriate inner emotions? What actions were so extreme that they could unequivocally testify to the woman's inner state? In classical versions of the Lucretia legend, the irrevocability of suicide operates as a means for Lucretia to insure that her encounter with Sextus would be interpreted as rape rather than adultery. Similarly, for the *Le Ménagier* narrator, Lucretia's suicide guarantees that her devotion to her husband is genuine.

The use of Lucretia as an example of marital chastity is complicated by the narrator's other major example of chastity, Susanna, who better exemplifies an Augustinian notion of chastity than the version of chastity exemplified by Lucretia. The Susanna story is set in Old Testament Israel, where Susanna is a Hebrew matron. Two judges attempt to seduce her, but she refuses them. Angered, the judges threaten to accuse Susanna of adultery if she does not give in to their desires. Susanna still refuses on the grounds that adultery is a sin, and her standing before God is more important than her worldly reputation. The judges make their accusation and condemn Susanna to death. However, the boy-prophet Daniel intervenes. Through his divinely inspired cleverness, the truth comes out, Susanna's life is saved, and her reputation redeemed.

The Lucretia and Susanna stories are notably similar in plot but different in ethical action. Both Lucretia and Susanna are given the same rather bleak set of options. Each woman can either preserve her physical chastity, in which case she will lose her honorable reputation and her life, or she can submit to being raped and live with her worldly reputation intact. Yet, faced with the same options, the two women make different decisions. Lucretia gives up her physical chastity so as not to lose her honor; the text reads: "Et celle qui doubta plus la honte du monde que la mort, si se consenti" (1.4.288-89) (So she, who feared more to be shamed before the world than to die, consented to lie with Sextus [91]). As mentioned above, the text also links Lucretia's decision to her marital affection. Susanna makes the opposite decision, choosing to maintain her physical chastity. In her deliberations, she never

mentions her husband; instead, she turns to God:

Dieux, dit elle, angoisses sont a moy de toutes pars; car se je fais ceste chose, morte suis comme a Dieu, et se je ne le fay, je ne pourray eschapper de leurs mains que ne soie tormentee et lapide. Mais mieulx me vault sans mesfaire cheoir en leur dangier que faire pechié devant Dieu (1.4.94-99).

[“God,” she said, “miseries surround me, because if I do this, I will be dead to God, and if I don’t do it, I won’t be able to escape from their hands without being tortured and stoned. But better that I fall into their trap, without committing a wrong, than to sin before God” (87).]

These discrepancies between Susanna’s and Lucretia’s actions raise several questions. Is chastity a physical state of sexual monogamy, or does it entail a concern for one’s reputation and husband that cannot always preclude extramarital sex? Does one maintain chastity out of devotion to one’s God or one’s husband? Based on the fact that both Susanna and Lucretia can operate as exempla of chastity, it would appear that, at least in the context of this late medieval conduct book, such either/or questions are impossible to answer. Lucretia’s chastity better conforms to the model of sacramental marriage in which marital affection and devotion to one’s husband are emphasized, while Susanna’s chastity is presented as a religious mandate from God. That these two models conflict points to the multiple, at times competing notions of marital chastity in circulation at this time. It is of course much easier and more ideologically expedient to assume that a wife’s devotion to her husband and God would converge rather than conflict, and this is an assumption that the *Le Ménagier* narrator makes throughout his book.

The impossibility of a single woman emulating the actions of both Susanna and Lucretia should her chastity be threatened also opens up questions about how much, or how little, even a text like *Le Ménagier*, which is seemingly devoted to thinking about female action, can really consider how women act and the consequences those actions have. In other words, because the *Le Ménagier* narrator cannot acknowledge the conflicts within the concept of chastity and the exempla that illustrate

it, he also cannot meaningfully consider how a woman might translate feminine chastity into ethical action. This accounts for the glib conclusion to the Lucretia legend mentioned above. As for the Susanna legend, the narrator concludes not by considering how a medieval woman should act in Susanna's situation, but rather by showering Susanna with copious praise and then considering the Old Testament law condemning adulterous women to death by stoning, a practice which the narrator claims continues in his own day. The narrator is quite an admirer of this punishment, and he urges contemporary Christians to continue the practice: "Mesmes les mauvaiz [the Jews] tiennent ceste loy, et nous devons bien tenir, car c'est bonne loy" (1.4.165-67) (Since even the wicked [the Jews] keep this law, we must keep it also, for it is a good law [88]). The narrator's shift from considering Susanna as an example for married women to considering this Jewish punishment as an example for Christians perhaps registers a difficulty with how precisely he might use Susanna as a model for married women, given his interests in spousal devotion and Susanna's lack of concern for her husband.

The *Le Ménagier* narrator is certainly neither the first nor only Christian author to gloss over the practical implications of his exempla, and, with a story like Lucretia's, which ends in suicide, perhaps the only way to employ her as an exemplum of female virtue is to avoid considering how her actions might be translated into a Christian worldview. An author who attempts to make such considerations is Christine de Pizan, who retells the Lucretia legend in her *Livre de la Cité des Dames*. Christine's interest in how models of femininity in literary texts affect the lives of actual women is evident throughout her career; obvious examples of this interest include her participation in the *Querelle de la Rose* and her framing of the *Cité des Dames* as a reconsideration of misogynistic literary depictions of women.¹⁹ The *Cité des Dames* famously opens with the narrator Christine reading a misogynistic book with surprise and confusion as she is unable to reconcile this book's and other similar ones' depictions of women's mores as "enclins et plains de tous les vices" (inclined to and full of every vice) with her own experience as a woman and her interactions with actual women, both of which countered the book's characterizations of femininity.²⁰ Christine presents the *Cité des Dames* as her attempt to rewrite the stories of exemplary women so that

they better conform to her own comprehension of female experience.

One of these stories is the Lucretia legend. Although Christine cannot alter the unpleasant narrative elements of this story, she frames and rearranges them in a way that demonstrates her interest in the applicability of literary texts to everyday lives. Christine relates the story of Lucretia in Part Two of the *Cité des Dames*, but she does so in two different sections, and in so doing, she divides the legend's three main narrative elements, the virtue contest, the rape, and Lucretia's suicide. At Lucretia's first appearance in the *Cité des Dames*, her rape and suicide are narrated, but not the virtue contest. The heading preceding the Lucretia legend indicates that the purpose of the legend is to refute the belief that women enjoy being raped. Whether women experienced pleasure during rape was a concern in the Middle Ages, and, given Augustine's influential commentary on the Lucretia legend, Lucretia could be used to affirm that such pleasure was indeed possible. Saunders points out that "Christine's choice to tell the story of Lucrece here [under the above-mentioned heading] suggests her awareness that the history of Lucrece engages more directly with the issue of pleasure in rape than any other legend."²¹ Consequently Christine frames the legend in a way that counters readings of Lucretia that could be used to condemn women for experiencing carnal pleasure during rape. Christine concludes this first narration of the Lucretia legend with Lucretia's suicide, the expulsion of the Tarquins, and then this seemingly original addition to the story:

Et a cause de cel oultraige fait a Lucesce, comme dient aucuns,
vint la loy que homme mourroit pour prendre femme a force;
laquelle loy est couvenable, juste et sainte (887).

[And because of this outrage perpetrated on Lucretia, so some claim, a law was enacted whereby a man would be executed for raping a woman, a law which is fitting, just, and holy (162).]

Karen Casebier notes that, "by inventing a fictional law that makes rape a capital crime, Christine removes a fatal precedent by which women should judge their own responses to rape. In doing so, she not only erases the severe measure allowed for victims of male violence, she also places the moral responsibility for sexual aggression on the males who

instigate rape . . .”²² In other words, the ethical action that Christine endorses is not that raped women should commit suicide but rather that men should not commit acts of sexual violence in the first place.

Christine also distances Lucretia’s exemplary virtue from her suicide in her second telling of the legend later in Part Two of the *Cité des Dames*, which focuses on the virtue contest, Rectitude, the allegorical narrator of Part Two, introduces the Lucretia legend with the point that men love women more for their virtue than their beauty. She illustrates this point with the story of how Tarquin the Proud (Christine’s name for Sextus Tarquinius) comes to desire Lucretia. The virtue contest is then narrated: the Roman men spy on their wives to prove whose is the most virtuous; Lucretia wins the contest, and Tarquin falls in love with her specifically on account of her virtue. Lucretia’s rape is alluded to, but not narrated, and no mention is made of her eventual suicide. While Lucretia exemplifies chastity, this chastity no longer requires the extreme act of suicide in order to be established. Christine translates the Lucretia legend into practical action, and she distances the legend from exemplifying acts that are both undesirable and morally impossible for a Christian woman.

Clearly, Christine’s interpretation of the Lucretia legend could not be more different from the *Le Ménagier* narrator’s, even though they both recount the same basic narrative. Christine’s recuperation of the legend is only possible through her radical reframing of it, as she literally pulls the legend apart. What is most striking about Christine’s Lucretia legend is not the actions of Lucretia herself but rather the interpretative decisions of Christine the author. Because Christine’s interpretation of Lucretia takes precedence over Lucretia’s actions, the acts of reading and interpreting are themselves highlighted as ethical actions. Consequently Christine’s formal treatment of Lucretia upholds a major theme of the *Cité des Dames* as a whole, that moral exempla must be read not as conveyors of universal values but as products of the interests of particular authors, and that therefore authors have an ethical responsibility for how they convey classical legends to their audiences.

In conclusion, the Lucretia legend is an important site for both disseminating and countering predominant late medieval ideologies of wifely chastity in *Le Ménagier de Paris* and the *Cité des Dames*. The

complex portrait of marriage that informs and emerges from medieval Lucretia legends is significant in that it helps scholars to re-historicize marriage, an endeavor of increasing significance as histories of marriage are brought to bear on present-day debates about the institution. A belief that permeates popular culture is that marriage in the Middle Ages was essentially loveless, and a number of popular histories of marriage trace a narrative of progress from a time when love was irrelevant to marriage (i.e., the Middle Ages) to more recent times, when love is touted as the defining characteristic of marriage.²² The particular ways in which medieval authors, including the author of *Le Ménagier de Paris*, frame and adapt the Lucretia legend demonstrate the degree to which an emotional attachment which we might term “love” played an important part in late medieval formulations of marriage. However, formulations of marital love in the Middle Ages differ significantly from such versions of love today, and to make recourse to a transhistorical notion of love would be to repeat an offense to which James Schultz and Karma Lochrie have notably drawn attention, that medieval gender studies remains overly indebted to modern formulations of gender and sexuality.²³ Consequently consideration of medieval Lucretia legends requires a delicate balancing act between conceiving of the medieval past exclusively in terms of either sameness or difference. As such, medieval Lucretia legends might help us not only to excavate concepts of marriage from the medieval past, but also to consider new historicist methodologies for making that past relevant to the present.

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END NOTES

1. *The Riverside Chaucer*, ed. Larry D. Benson, 3rd ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1987).

2. On condemnations of suicide in the Middle Ages, see Alexander Murray, *Suicide in the Middle Ages*, vol. 2, *The Curse on Self-Murder* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

3. While late medieval authors cite some Old Testament examples of virtuous wives and also employ the Virgin Mary as a model of wifely humility, they tend not to feature Christian women as ideal wives. Rather, virtuous Christian women most often appear as saints in hagiography. The majority of female saint legends feature virgins, and, even though there was an increase in the number of married female saint legends in the later Middle Ages, these married saints tend not to prioritize their husbands. Often enough husbands are obstacles to the saint's devotion. For example, in Chaucer's *Second Nun's Tale*, Saint Cecilia threatens her husband that if he attempts to consummate their marriage and thus mar her holy virginity, an angel will kill him. In a somewhat different vein, when Margery Kempe, a would-be saint, fiercely negotiates for sexual autonomy, her husband John can only comment: "Ye arn no good wyfe." (*Book of Margery Kempe*, ed. Barry Windeatt [Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2004], 86). A Christian woman who does serve as an example of virtuous wifedom in the later middle ages is Griselda. However, I have argued elsewhere that because authors of various versions of the Griselda legend, including Petrarch and Chaucer, were so accustomed to turning to classical women to think about wifely virtue, Griselda herself can be viewed as the product of classical traditions of female wifedom. See my "The Pagan Griselda," *The Chaucer Review* 44, no. 1 (2009): 61-83.

4. The original Latin quotations and English translations of Livy's *Ab Urbe Condita* are taken from Livy in *Fourteen Volumes*, trans. B. O. Foster, Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1988), vol. 1, book 1, chap. 57, sec. 9-10 (Latin); vol. 1, p. 199 (English). All subsequent quotations from Livy are from this edition and volume and are hereafter cited parenthetically. Latin quotations are cited by book, chapter, and section numbers; English translations are cited by page number.

5. Corinne Saunders, *Rape and Ravishment in the Literature of Medieval England* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2001), 153.

6. The original Latin quotations and English translations are from Ovid, *Fasti*, trans. James George Frazer, Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1989), 111 (English) and book 2, lines 729-30 (Latin). All subsequent quotations of Ovid are from this edition and are hereafter cited parenthetically by page number for the English translations and by book and line number for the original Latin.

7. The English translation is taken from Augustine, *The City of God against the Pagans*, ed. and trans. R. W. Dyson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 31. The Latin quotation is taken from *City of*

God, ed. and trans. George E. McCracken, 7 vols., Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1957-72), vol. 1, book 1, chapter 19, page 90.

8. One reason that medieval and patristic commentators believed it possible that women feel pleasure during rape is on account of the widespread belief that women must feel pleasure during sex to conceive. Since there were cases of rape victims becoming pregnant, it was assumed that they must have felt some pleasure during their violation. On this point, see Louise Sylvester, "Reading Narratives of Rape: The Story of Lucretia in Chaucer, Gower and Christine de Pizan," *Leeds Studies in English*, n.s. 31 (2000): 133-34. Sylvester notes that this belief goes back to Aristotle's *On Generation*, in which Aristotle accounts for the pregnancy of rape victims by suggesting that humanity's "reason and . . . flesh are often at war with one another. A woman can withhold rational consent even though on the carnal level she may experience pleasure and thus emit seed." (134).

9. For the relevant passages in Jerome's *Adversus Jovinianum*, see Ralph Hanna III and Traugott Lawler, eds., *Jankyn's Book of Wikked Wyves: The Primary Texts* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 1997). While not specifically referencing the Lucretia story, Eusebius and Ambrose also appear to find the suicide of rape victims morally permissible. See Murray, *The Curse of Self-Murder*, 100 and 202.

10. Scholarly works which have been particularly useful to me in thinking about medieval marriage include the following: Glenn Burger, "Medieval Conjuality and the *Canterbury Tales*," in *Chaucer's Queer Nation* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), 37-77; Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, "Masoch/Lancelotism," in *Medieval Identity Machines* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), 78-115; Georges Duby, *Medieval Marriage: Two Models from Twelfth-Century France*, trans. Elborg Forster (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978); Dyan Elliott, *Spiritual Marriage: Sexual Abstinence in Medieval Wedlock* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993); Emma Lipton, *Affections of the Mind: The Politics of Sacramental Marriage in Late Medieval English Literature* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007); and Michael M. Sheehan, *Marriage, Family and Law in Medieval Europe: Collected Studies*, ed. James K. Farge (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1996).

11. Emma Lipton, *Affections of the Mind*, 2.

12. See John T. Noonan, "Marital Affection in the Canonists," *Studia Gratiana* 12 (1967): 479-509. This article is hereafter cited parenthetically by page number.

13. Rüdiger Schnell, "The Discourse on Marriage in the Middle Ages," *Speculum* 73, no. 3 (1998): 772-73.

14. Michael M. Sheehan, "Maritalis Affectio Revisited," in *The Olde Daunce: Love, Friendship, Sex and Marriage in the Medieval World*, ed. Robert R. Edwards and Stephen Spector (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1991), 38.

15. Frederik Pedersen, *Marriage Disputes in Medieval England* (London and Rio Grande: The Hambledon Press, 2000), 172.

16. Ibid.

17. The original Middle French quotation is taken from *Le Mesnagier de Paris*, ed. Georgina Brereton and Janet Ferrier (Paris: Livre de Poche, 1994), Prologue, lines 69-70. The English translation is taken from *The Good Wife's Guide (Le Ménagier de Paris): A Medieval Household Book*, trans. Gina L. Greco and Christine M. Rose (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2009), 50. All subsequent quotations and translations of *Le Ménagier de Paris* are taken from these editions and cited parenthetically. Original French quotations are cited either by prologue and line number or by distinction, article, and line number; English translations are cited by page number. I have occasionally made small changes to Greco and Rose's translation to render it slightly more literal.

18. For the Lucretia legend in *Le Jeu*, see Jacques de Cessoles, *Le Jeu des Eschaz Moralisé, Traduction de Jean Ferron* (Paris: Champion, 1999), 139-40.

19. On Christine's participation in the *Querelle de la Rose*, see Kevin Brownlee, "Discourses of Self: Christine de Pizan and the *Romance of the Rose*," in *Rethinking the Romance of the Rose: Text, Image, Reception*, ed. Kevin Brownlee and Sylvia Huot (Philadelphia: University of Philadelphia Press, 1992), 234-61; Marilyn Desmond, "The *Querelle de la Rose* and the Ethics of Reading," in *Christine de Pizan: A Casebook*, ed. Barbara K. Altman and Deborah L. McGrady (New York: Routledge, 2003), 167-80; and Susan Schibanoff, "Taking the Gold out of Egypt: the Act of Reading as a Woman," in *Gender and Reading: Essays on Readers, Texts, and Contexts*, ed. Elizabeth A. Flynn and Patrocínio P. Schweickart (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986), 83-106. On the many studies considering Christine's rethinking of feminine virtue in *Le Livre de la Cité des Dames*, among others see Judith Kellogg, "*Le Livre de la Cité des Dames*: Feminist Myth and Community," *Essays in Arts and Sciences* 18 (1989): 1-15; Maureen Quilligan, *The Allegory of Female Authority: Christine de Pizan's Cité des Dames* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991); Schibanoff, "Taking the Gold," and Eleni Stecopoulos and Karl Uitti, "Christine de Pizan's *Livre de*

la Cité des Dames: The Reconstruction of Myth,” in *Reinterpreting Christine de Pizan*, ed. Earl Jeffrey Richards (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 1992), 48–62.

20. The original Middle French quotation is taken from Maureen Cheney Curnow, ed., “The *Livre de la Cité des Dames* of Christine de Pizan: A Critical Edition” (PhD diss., Vanderbilt University, 1975), 618. The English translation is taken from Christine de Pizan, *The Book of the City of Ladies*, trans. Earl Jeffrey Richards (New York: Persea Books, 1998), 4. All subsequent quotations and translations of the *Cité des Dames* are taken from these editions and cited parenthetically by page number.

21. Saunders, *Rape and Ravishment*, 172–73.

22. Karen Casebig, “Re-Writing Lucretia: Christine de Pizan’s Response to Boccaccio’s ‘De Mulieribus Claris,’” *Fifteenth-Century Studies* 32 (2007): 47.

23. The notion that love in marriage is exclusively a modern concept is evident in the title of one popular cultural history of marriage, Stephanie Coontz’s *Marriage, a History: How Love Conquered Marriage* (London: Penguin Books, 2005). Coontz’s discussion of marriage in the Middle Ages is generally sophisticated and well researched, and throughout her book, Coontz argues less that love and marriage were mutually exclusive in the past than that love was not viewed as the central, defining characteristic of marriage. Still, the notion that there were pre-modern notions of marital affection that might differ from concepts of love today is not really acknowledged. Another popular history of marriage, B. J. Graff’s *What is Marriage For?: The Strange Social History of Our Most Intimate Institution* (1999; repr. Boston: Beacon Press, 2004), uses a historical narrative progressing from the disjunction of love and marriage in the past to their conjunction in the present to argue for the right of gays such as herself to marry. Some of these misconceptions regarding medieval marriage stem from trends in medievalist scholarship of the twentieth century. For example, studies of courtly love that present courtly love as being opposed to marriage may give the impression that love and marriage were always mutually exclusive. Misrepresentations of love in medieval marriage also stem, I think, from the notion that because love was not always viewed as a necessary precursor to marriage in the Middle Ages it was therefore not expected *after* marriage—a contention that is not supported by much of the scholarship cited in this article.

24. See Karma Lochrie, *Heterosyncrasies: Medieval Sexuality When Normal Wasn’t* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005) and James Schultz, *Courtly Love, the Love of Courtliness, and the History of Sexuality* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006).