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# LUCRETIA OR LUCRECE?

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THE WOMAN IN THE MYTH AND HER IMPACT ON  
SHAKESPEARE



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## 0. Abstract

The myth in charge of issuing the story of the rape of Lucretia has played an important role in history. The fall of the ideal Roman matron has been reproduced in multiple ways from classical times onwards, including a historical account of the story by the Roman historicist Livy, a poetic version by Ovid in his *Fasti* and another by the hand of the English writer William Shakespeare. His revival of the myth, however, recreates a more modern victim as well as a focus put specifically in other aspects that the classical versions did not to a great extent take into account. I am going to concentrate on these last two versions, due to the fact that Ovid and Shakespeare's poems share certain details that make them very similar, at the same time presenting crucial differences that will be looked at in this paper. Other classical versions of this poem like Livy's will be named, but not thoroughly explained. The aim of this piece of work is to describe by means of a comparison the way in which the texts by Ovid and Shakespeare on the rape of Lucretia present significant divergence from one another and how the two main characters—Tarquin and Lucretia—are affected by it. Although the two versions portray similar atmospheres, the core intention of the narratives seems to be different or at least somewhat contrasting. I will first look at the general traits of both poems and how they interact in their similarities based on the portrayal of their main protagonists. I will continue by taking a closer look at the two main characters in both pieces and how they are described by their respective narrators. Finally, attending to the presented reasons I will take a look at how the political intentions of the poetic versions of this myth are shown, if any, depending on the era in which they were composed.

**Keywords:** The rape of Lucretia, Ovid, Shakespeare, Tarquinius, Lucretia, The rape of Lucrece.

## 1. Introduction

Honor, fate and death are the three capital pillars holding the haunting story that pushed Rome to become a republic. The classical myth narrating the morally controversial rape of Lucretia, wife to Collatinus, is one of the most revealing myths in the history of Rome; it does not fail to portray typical Roman lifestyle, numerous examples of right and wrong behavior and more importantly, traces of the history of this city. Tarquinius, son of the king of Rome, will become obsessed and fascinated with the beauty and chastity of Lucretia, an obsession that will trigger the story. The description Collatinus–Lucretia’s husband–makes of his wife while waiting for the sieged city of Ardea to declare war is only one of the many causes why the protagonist of the story will fall to disgrace. The honorable combatant but foolish Collatinus draws such an ideal picture of his chaste wife that, at the sight of her, Tarquinius will not be capable of avoiding the commencement of his carnal desires, becoming unable to control them. He will wait until the soldiers are back in camp to sneak into the chamber of pure and innocent Lucretia, and force her: “He burned, and, goaded by the pricks of an unrighteous love, he plotted violence and guile against an innocent bed.” (*Fasti*, 776)<sup>1</sup>.

Lucretia is irrevocably destroyed after Tarquin’s rape, which takes place by disgraceful means and produces a loss of honor in both characters involved. The rape causes Lucretia to waste everything she has been building throughout her life. Tarquinius’ breaking of the laws leaves her with one fatal decision to make: to live in shame or to die with honor? Her consequent decision and the bravery that her killing herself requires will make the main character one to look up to. More importantly, her honorable character is preserved after an unavoidable difficulty that ruined the most important thing to her; Tarquinius dispossessing her of her status does not stop her from acting with principle. However, another value will be added to the death of chaste and honorable Lucretia, for her blood will serve as a reason for the Roman population to condemn the monarchy of the Tarquins and begin the Roman Republic.

The main utility of this piece of literature is to exemplify the destruction of an ideal woman by a dishonorable leader. She will become a symbol for Rome itself, and how the monarchy destroyed it. The use of certain political analogies suggests that by

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<sup>1</sup> The references in this paper will be formatted according to MLA.

raping Lucretia, Tarquin violated the purity of Rome with the tyranny of his family (Donaldson, 9). Apart from that, a very specific political purpose is added to Lucretia's death itself with the use of her dead body as an excuse to commence the Roman republic (Hart, 34). Not only the suicide of the female character in the classic myth has had an impressive impact on the literature of the succeeding centuries, but also her impeccable nature has been reproduced in written as well as in plastic arts (*Sextus Tarquinius and Lucretia*) and other fields like theater (*The Rape of Lucretia*).

Livy and Ovid were the writers in charge of versioning this myth in the times of Emperor Augustus, the first accounting for a historical version of it and the second betting for a more poetical one. Notorious literary plots and motifs have been adapted by distinguished authors throughout all eras since then, William Shakespeare's among the most important ones. The poet and playwright will create his own version of the classical story and character, naming her 'Lucrece' in his poem and adapting this magnificent tale to the Elizabethan era. He, who is considered as the most influential author of the Anglo-Saxon culture<sup>2</sup> will enhance the virtues of Lucretia and the flaws of the other characters in a notably different manner than his classical antecessors. In Shakespeare's *The Rape of Lucrece*, the moral debates and internal fights of the sinner of this story, Tarquin, and his victim are paid a greater amount of attention; the poet will deeply conquer the desperation of the characters in this narrative poem.

This paper will be pointing at the main differences and similarities of both the Roman version by Ovid and the English one, by Shakespeare. Though Livy also accounted for this myth in his work *Ab Urbe Condita*, the version I have chosen for a closer look is the one by Ovid. This comparison being possible is due to the higher number of similarities with the English poet, who centers his attention specifically on the story of Lucretia (Coria, 104) and is considered to write it as a poem rather than history itself (Coria, 106). I am to describe how the focus is placed in the moral actions and consequences of Lucretia and Tarquin's decisions in these two versions of the characters, as well as to deep into what the motivations for this portrayal of the ideal woman inside the myth are.

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<sup>2</sup> Authors such as Harold Bloom will defend the impossibility of analyzing present literature overlooking Shakespeare, expressing that this poet is present in innumerable contexts and places, and that he is the creator of the modern human character. (Bloom, 3)

## 1. Lucretia and Lucrece

The two versions being juggled in this paper are separated by more than six centuries; however, the parallelism between the two of them is palpable in both the story they tell and the motifs behind the texts. Shakespeare differs in some points from Ovid as will be later explained, but mostly the English author uses characteristics of the version present in Ovid's *Fasti*, both in style and treatment of characters.

I am to bisect the mythical character of Lucretia into two different personalities, each according to one version of the story. Even if both characters are based upon the same mythical tradition, different perspectives make the characters in these poems significantly contrasting. The time the Roman piece was written in provides us with a clue of what the intentions of the poems could be. Written in 8 A.D, Ovid's poem is biased by the glorious Augustan perspective, which tried to enhance Rome in every aspect and unite its people after a turbulent time of war. For this, literature was an indispensable tool: "Augustan ideology is not so much expressed as reflected, refracted and examined in the works of Augustan writers" (Davis, 23). Ovid, however, is an exceptional case, given that he was exiled of Rome because of the poetry he composed—among other unknown reasons—and seems to challenge the Augustan order with his literature: "That he mocks the principal constituents of Augustan ideology is also evident" (119). Apparently not chasing the same political purpose, Shakespeare shares the same manner of looking at the story by focusing on and victimizing the character of Lucretia and her innovative bravery.

Firstly, the principal narrator is one of the most blatant similarities: in both Ovid and Shakespeare it is a third person perspective who carries the entire responsibility, sometimes introducing direct dialogues between the characters. The role of this external storyteller does not end with the presentation of the mere facts; this voice takes part in the moral judgment of the characters and some of their actions: "He burned, and, goaded by the pricks of an unrighteous love" (*Fasti*, 779). The main characters are sentenced from the very beginning to being interpreted according to very specific descriptions, for instance of Lucrece: "Roman dame (Shakespeare, 51)" and Tarquin: "Lust-breathèd Tarquin" (3). Ovid chooses to describe Tarquinius' actions previous to his meeting Lucretia: his decision to deceive an entire town by making them believe that he was taking their side against his father: "No sooner was he installed in power than he sent a friend to ask his father to show him the way of destroying Gabii." (*Fasti*, 707-710). The fact that Tarquinius victimized himself to fool the citizens of Gabii, who gave him refuge being

unaware of his intentions, provides the reader with a background of Tarquinius' methods.

However, the account of Tarquinius' decisions is not the only tool Ovid uses to bias the reader into a certain way of thinking, using additionally negative terms to describe him: "Tarquin, a man unjust" (687). Similarly, the character of Lucretia in Ovid is continuously portrayed by this narrator as a defenseless woman: "In a struggle a woman will always be worsted" (801). She, never having done any harm, is taken in her own home by a shrewd dishonorable man without any remorse. Ovid very concisely fixates the traits of this character by the contraposition of the two protagonists of the story. When Lucretia lets her husband's colleague inside her house and even offers him supper and beverages, is encaged inside a situation of desperation of which she is totally unaware: "All unaware she, hapless dame, prepared a meal for her own foes." (794). She is also said to be a "virtuous spouse" (790) who not only has impeccable charisma and chastity, but is also a kind woman who takes care of his husband's visitors. Tarquinius, however, is not virtuous, and takes advantage of the woman. Lucretia is likewise put in the skin of a lamb, who is hopelessly attacked by a wolf that does not use honest methods to destroy her: "But she trembled, as trembles a little lamb that, caught straying from the fold, lies low under a ravening wolf." (799-800). The remarkable part of this extract is the way in which the use of subtle adjectives drives the reader to consider Lucretia as weak and defenseless and Tarquinius as a predator waiting for his victim; innocence contrasting with lust. She is equaled to not any kind of animal, but to a defenseless lamb, laying down despairingly under not a regular wolf, but under a *ravening* one. This hopelessness of the victim is reinforced by the rhetoric question that follows in the text: "*Quid faciat?*" (801). A powerless woman under the strength of an armed man, mental virtues under the power of carnal desires, what are the possibilities?

Shakespeare shares the exact same line of thought in his poem about the situation of Lucrece, only presenting Tarquin first, making him protagonist of the sin: "The wolf hath seized his prey; the poor lamb cries," (Shakespeare, 677). The narrator is intrusive again, describing Lucrece in this version with the addition of the adjective 'poor' to the 'lamb' that she is. Contrastingly, the wolf in this version of this story is left with the benefit of the doubt, and though despicable, he is provided with second thoughts and a minimum level of humanity: "He scowls and hates himself for his offence" (738). The moral characteristics that Shakespeare decides to give Tarquin are palpable on the guilt he feels after he has committed the rape, after his rage is gone and his sexual desires are

fulfilled: “The guilty rebel for remission prays” (714). Tarquinius does not feel guilt or any other kind of humanism after he rapes the woman in the version by Ovid, disappearing immediately. In Shakespeare we observe how the narrator provides the reader with a last stanza depicting the besieger’s and Lucrece’s thoughts intertwined (736-746). However the decision of the prince is the same in both versions: to flee. No further instance of Tarquinius’ existence is given in Ovid, but he escapes during the night, acting like the authentic lawbreaker he is in Shakespeare’s version. Paying attention to this issue in the classical version, it is perceivable that the besieger does not present any human characteristics that could save him from his shame, or represent the fact that he acknowledges the wrongness of his actions.

The possibilities of Lucretia in Ovid are considerably less discussed. Lucretia does not fight as much (*Fasti*, 801-812), she assumes the fact that nothing would help her case, and thus accepts Tarquinius’ decision with a meaningful sentence: “how dear a single night did cost thy kingdom!” (812). By this line, the text makes evident one of the most important intentions of the poem, depicting the fall of Rome, implying that this action has revealed the true nature of the prince. At the same time Lucretia is swearing vendetta, since she is certain that the rape will be avenged by her death. In Shakespeare, however, she tries to address to his decency before he proceeds to his evil intentions and the debate goes on for a while (*Shakespeare*, 624-665). This could be a sign for different perceptions of the myth in the two authors, one in which we can distinguish how they described Lucretia to think in different ways. For Ovid, the final conclusion of the story seems to be only that evil has won over decency, that the carnal desire that dispossessed Tarquinius off the little morality he had made him destroy Lucretia. For Shakespeare, on the other hand, the absence of description of Tarquin’s previous actions and Lucrece’s faith in the fact that her rapist could change his mind when faced with reality seems to suggest that his view is more hopeful. Even after the sinner leaves, the weight of his actions follows him as well as Lucrece: “She bears the load of lust he left behind, /And he the burden of a guilty mind” (734-735) something not described in Ovid.

Another important divergence is the fact that Lucrece seems to be given a new dimension in Shakespeare. She is after the fleeing left alone in her room and proceeds to reflect upon the events through a monologue that embarks her into the decision she is to carry out later that night. She does not wish the day to come since it would be unbearable for her to live with this offence: “She prays she never may behold the day” (746). The



monologue enhances the sinfulness of the night, which resembles hell and serves as a “Black stage” (766) for sin to happen: “Vast sin-concealing chaos, nurse of blame,” (767). In this part of the poem is where the narrator chooses to show Lucrece with actual feelings, different from those she takes out of her purity and decency, but continuously focalized through the teller himself. This monologue, however is not found in Ovid, where her only words are of despair and cause her immediately to fall to pieces: “She was long silent, and for shame hid her face in her robe: her tears flowed like a running stream” (*Fasti*: 819-820).

According to everything mentioned above, it seems correct to conclude this section by remarking that the Ovidian version of the rape of Lucretia is a less sentimentalist story, because it takes into account little of the human condition of the characters in the story. The 16<sup>th</sup> century version, contrastingly, emphasizes this above all. Lucrece is not merely a symbol of Rome, a city that the Tarquins chose to destroy with their monarchy, but a woman with ideas to express and respect to her life and honor, as I will explain in the last section of this paper.

## **2. Lucretia: Creating a utopia**

The first instance of the versioned character of Lucretia I am going to look at in detail is the one present in the poem by Ovid so that it becomes clearer how it differs from the English version of the same character. Of course, assuming the importance of the myth in the western culture is assuming the weight of the main protagonist on it, Lucretia. In the following section I am to describe the main traits of the woman who challenged the roles imposed to her while embracing her moral integrity, which was of supreme importance to her. On the other side of the coin there is Tarquinius, who will be described to possess very specific attributes which will contribute to the moral and political side of the myth. These two characters shape to a great extent the content of the myth, alongside the duality of what is right and what is wrong in the Roman tradition. The consequences of Tarquinius’ decision to rape Lucretia will be paid by both characters, although differently, at the same time allowing Rome for a new beginning.

### *2.1. Lucretia*

The life of mythical Lucretia, a perfect matron that would worry only about the well-being of her home and husband, will culminate with a bath of blood. Honorable and

virtuous apart from beautiful and chaste, Lucretia was sentenced to death by the sin committed by a horrible man<sup>3</sup>. In this, the classical poetic version of the myth, Lucretia barely speaks—she lacks a voice— and relies on the men to make the decisions for her until she is besieged in her own bed. From this moment on she will gain enough bravery to stab herself to death and start a new Rome.

The character of Lucretia might be easily considered as the realization of an ideal woman. Lucretia is not only seen as a representation of exemplary human values in her descriptions, but also functions as a model of conduct with her honorable behavior. It is not a secret that men in antique Rome would wholeheartedly prefer a woman whose mind does not go further than the needed, who lets men be in control and is objectified: “[...] a woman is regarded as a subordinate and property of her husband” (Donaldson, 11).

Lucretia’s words, voice and fairness captivate Tarquinius in Ovid’s *Fasti*; also being irresistible the mere fact of her being a woman who cannot be corrupted: “[...]and virtue incorruptible” (*Fasti*, 765). Unbreakable charisma and infinite loyalty, then, together with outstanding beauty combine perfectly for a model woman in the Roman tradition. She is faithful to her husband, submissive and capable, traits that turn her, as mentioned above, into an uncontrollably desirable woman. This perfection created for her is precisely what makes her vulnerable, becoming her lack of flaws what will indeed make her honor stained and forever cursed. After Tarquinius decides to make use of his power and strength to violate Lucretia’s privacy and will with evil decisions, Lucretia will become the eternal victim. Ironically, she will be the main sufferer of the consequences that the rape will entail, once taken her destiny from her own hands. Her chastity, pureness and exemplary character will spontaneously and irrevocably become stained and socially compromised, with a choice left only at the hands of the sufferer. Lucretia, however, was harmed not for the decision she made, but for the conjoint circumstances that lead to her bed being invaded.

Though controversial in later times, when the Christian morality invaded the minds of society, Lucretia’s decision to stab herself to death after the violation of her privacy and freedom seemed to be the most profitable decision. For Roman matrons, safeguarding their honor was extremely important, necessary for the conservation of the family and their social respect: “[...] Lucretia also prevents moral pollution passing along

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<sup>3</sup> The situation women were in, partly illustrates why the suicide of this character becomes necessary. They are subordinated to their husbands and fathers, who held the power over their lives and deaths. (Donaldson, 11; Pomeroy, 152)

a family line” (Donaldson, 12). The protagonist of this myth was worshipped for her impeccable character and manners, up to the point in which it is more important than her own life. We can see this in the fact that after the loss of her honor, she paradoxically needs to end her life to continue on being virtuous: “Her death is indeed the ultimate sign of her innocence, her crowning act of virtue” (Donaldson, 22). Lucretia’s death is seen as a heroic act, assuring her position in a place of honor. Not only that, but this will make sure that other actual adulteress women are penalized with the capital punishment (22).

Lucretia, even if impeccable in making individual decisions, is intrinsically linked to the authority of her husband and other masculine figures. When faced with this extreme situation, she immediately recurs to the men in her life, which is not what anybody would expect. Maus (69) depicts it:

Far from being the culturally acceptable thing to do in a patriarchal society, Lucrece's suicide shocks the Roman men; its supererogatory character is precisely what makes it seem both heroic and troubling [...]

So, given the inadequacy of a woman deciding for herself to end a life that did not belong to her—even if it was her own—it was her almost masculine honorability that allowed her blood to serve as a symbol for the upcoming revolution: “For Ovid, Lucretia is *animi matron virilis*, a matron of manly courage” (Donaldson, 10). Women in antique Greek and Roman civilizations were passive and completely subjugated to the will of their husbands and fathers, their owners and in charge of acting: “Revenge, retaliation, hitting the enemy—all these are tasks for men, not for the injured woman; [...]” (11). The main character’s decision in this story, however, possesses a level of individuality, since her decision to end her life was not affected by the respected pardon of her father and Collatinus. Married women were of little importance outside marriage, lacking any kind of independence. Taking this into account, Lucretia serves as an exception because she was a metaphor for the city of Rome, an active figure defending her lineage with her suicide (118).

Lucretia’s reputation, was entailed by Tarquinius as well as the destruction of her prospects for a respectable future, which could never be recovered with simple words of absolution: “Overcome by fear of infamy, the dame gave away” (810):

[El adulterio] lo consideraban una acción propia de seres débiles sujetos al dominio de sus pasiones, si bien los segundos no sólo lo considerarán como un

delito que atenta contra el orden social y las reglas básicas del pudor, sino como un grave pecado que ofende a la divinidad (Arrocha, 129).

Taking into account this consideration of adultery, it seems logical that Tarquinius funded his threats on setting an adultery scenery with one of Lucretia's slaves: "I, the adulterer, will bear false witness to thine adultery" (*Fasti*, 808-809). Aware of the fact that he is holding in his hand is nothing less than Lucretia's life itself, he decides to act anyway, conscious that it will be destroyed: Consenting to the rape would destroy Lucretia's honor and privacy, whilst the adultery scenery proposed would only make the mentioned disgrace public. After the rape, Lucretia's possibilities fade, leaving her with only one final choice to make: she needs to kill herself. Consequently, Tarquinius' actions ironically catapult Lucretia's capacity of decision, making stronger one of her most characteristic features, her determination. Tarquinius is, thus, the one in charge of driving Lucretia's destiny: his desires inevitably place the main character in the position to decide that her best option is to stab herself and finish with everything she is or ever was.

The protagonist of the story rejoices in her own purity and chastity, qualities that equal honor from her point of view. When this righteousness is corrupt, the entire existence of Lucretia totters and is no longer valid for her to continue living. Adjusting to the Roman thinking, it is perfectly understandable that women were only able to grow on their purity and marriage, since their education stopped when the time came to be instructed on marital issues (Escalpés, 121). This inability to act and think with independence will slightly change in the English version, as I will point out in later sections of this paper.

## 2.2. *Tarquinius*

Sextus Tarquinius is described a wolf who has come into Lucretia's chamber with a weapon on his belt and has submitted her will to his desires. Yet, her response is always honorable and correct, making even more evident the lack of morality of the actions of her invader; already knowing that that night will be of a high cost for his reputation: "He was welcomed kindly, for he came of kindred blood. How was her heart deceived!" (*Fasti*, 787-790)

Placing the focus on Tarquinius in Ovid's version of the poem, it is much easier to understand the different situation men and women were in. Men's position of power diminished the consequences of adultery to zero, and thus allowed them to have sexual

intercourse outside their marriages. However, and in spite of the advantages men could have had over women, Tarquinius is from the very beginning depicted as disgraceful and shameful, one that would destroy the purity of this honorable woman, far from being this an act exempt of guilt: “true scion of his proud sire” (*Fasti*, 692).

The core of Tarquinius’ blame, then, lies on the mere fact that he became obsessed over an honorable woman, wife to a friend of his, and could not control his desires and thus forced her to become adulterous. Tarquinius is to blame, to a great extent because his actions were subjected to his inability to apply reason and control upon his own physical desires. He destroyed not only his own reign and personality, but Lucretia’s, who is to blame for nothing but her beauty. She will be conscious of the moral consequences that the prince’s selfish actions will endure, and so will she tell her besieger. The narrator of the story chooses to make the prince immediately dispossessed of his senses after contemplating the beauty of Lucretia: “her figure pleased him [...]/and the less hope he had, the hotter his desire” (763-766). Behind this reasoning, especially in the mind of the classic roman citizen, we find the *unacceptable* mistake Tarquinius makes of succumbing to his desires instead of attending to his own sensibility, being again susceptible to judgment: “[...] the attackers are his own passions [...] and Tarquin faces the consequences” (Hynes, 452). He will no longer care about the implications of the decision he has made, and will even consider his actions as those typical of ‘audacious’ men.

These dishonorable actions catapult Lucretia’s freedom of decision and she will no longer be determined by the actions of others. The change in perspective of the principal character can be seen in the lack of obedience to her father and husband’s forgiveness, which she does not accept, being too late for her stain to be polished: “She said: “The pardon that you give, I do refuse myself”” (*Fasti*, 830). Her freedom of choice is now an important treasure to protect, since she can no longer rejoice in her purity, which has been besieged and destroyed, as will be pointed in later sections.

Conclusively, Lucretia is not a regular character inside a myth. This personality was thoroughly conceived and purposely stained in order for her to make the fatal decision that will propel a revolution in Rome. Her independence, character and choices will be taken as an example, as well as her honorable and at the same time tragic death as an excuse for the good of society.

### 3. Lucrece: the romanticized Lucretia

William Shakespeare adapted this story to his own perspective on a poem entitled *The Rape of Lucrece*. This version, composed of 1885 lines, exposes a much more elaborated mind of the different characters. Lucretia, as will be pointed below, becomes a more independent being, in the sense that she is able to think for herself to a much greater extent than she was portrayed to be in the version by Ovid.

The character's views and perspectives of things are almost completely shown through the words of the poet, who enhances every little detail and adds perspective to the classical story, leaving behind part of the political implications of it (Newman, 304)<sup>4</sup>.” Shakespeare, as well as Ovid, enriches the human side of the characters, especially that of the woman of the story, becoming a morally involved narrator who judges the actions from a non impartial perspective.

#### 3.1. Lucrece

Shakespeare's does not fail to portray a woman whose aspirations go beyond the physical sphere. In this poem, in which the poet above all prioritizes the internal moral fights of the characters and diminishes the importance of the underlying political dimension of the myth, Lucrece's personality is enhanced. This new feature, thus, merges Livy and Ovid's intentions: the first's political inclinations and the second's exploitation of the personal integrity: Ovid and Livy's purposes are put together in this work by the English dramatist (Hart, 29)

Shakespeare unfolds another dimension of the same character presented in the classical Roman tradition. In it, Lucrece will have an Anglo-Saxon version of her name, which will also give her a level of independence she lacked before, since in this case, she will have something to say. Lucrece is described as a battlefield for a war between beauty and virtue, both of which she had: “This heraldry in Lucrece's face was seen, /Argued by Beauty's red and Virtue's white” (Shakespeare, 64). Lucrece's beauty is nothing ordinary, it shows the ‘heraldry’ of nobility and family. As explained by the narrator, Lucrece possessed, as well as Lucretia—the character in the classical versions— so much virtue and beauty that both characteristics fight for the preeminence on the face of this

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<sup>4</sup> “[...] the progress of the narrative is frequently interrupted by interior monologues and rhetorical set pieces that dilate Livy's and Ovid's essentially political story of Lucrece's rape [...]” (Newman, 304)

female hero. These two qualities are shown through a personification in these lines, something that only adds up to her laudable character, as if Beauty and Virtue had chosen *her* over all women.

However, Lucrece is naïve and trusting, little of the world she knows and having never left her home and closest circle, she is unable to distinguish the evil intentions of her strange visitor: “But she that never coped with stranger eyes/ Could pick no meaning from their parling looks” (99). The woman is a complement to her husband, awaits for him to come safe home from the battlefield while entertaining herself with simple chores; the main character, same as in the Roman tradition, lives for her virtue and craves the arrival of her man. Shakespeare acknowledges this with the attention Tarquin gains from the woman when he is praising her husband’s bravery: “He stories to her ears her husband’s fame, / [...] And decks with praises Collatine’s high name,” (106).

The idea of Lucrece being again an exemplary woman is also presented throughout the lines and stanzas, turning the rape into the worst fatality Lucrece could have ever faced. Although the anti-hero is conscious of what evil he is bringing to the life of innocent Lucrece, a temple into which Tarquin enters and decides to destroy with little remorse, he does not reconsider his decision: “I see what crosses my attempt will bring;/ I know what thorns the growing rose defends; [...] But will is deaf, and hears no heedful friends” (491-495). The woman begs for Tarquin to change his mind, addressing first to his decency “Reward not hospitality/ With such black payment as thou hast pretended;” (576), then to his loyalty to another man and friend (Collatine): “My husband is thy friend; for his sake spare me.” (582); then for his own sake and honor: “Thyself art mighty; for thine own sake leave me” (583); and lastly for the sake of having mercy for a woman, whose opinions do not usually count for a man’s decision making: “If ever a man were moved with a woman’s moans, / Be moved with my tears, my sighs, my groans” (587-588). All of these efforts, unluckily, exert no influence on Tarquin’s mind, inasmuch as he was driven by lust and out of all of his senses.

Lucrece, however, is not the main theme of this poem, although the description of her virtues and exemplarity are an important segment. The really fundamental point in this story is not merely the fact that she is pure and chaste, but the fact that her faultless spirit found a way to continue unaltered while faced with adversity. As a consequence of the rape, Lucrece was dispossessed of her qualities and virtues, things that could never again be recovered: “The scar that will despite of cure remain” (732) “She bears the load of lust he left behind” (734). Tarquin, driven by irrationality and at the same time acting

from selfishness, turned Lucrece's treasures into irretrievable pieces, leaving her no other choice but to commit suicide to preserve and avenge her honor. Her life was no longer valuable to her, at least not without her virtues, because: "[...] she hath lost a dearer thing than life" (687). Her honor and qualities of which society was proud, were lost.

The manner in which the English author chooses to describe the crashing of the innocence and purity of Lucrece is not to be overlooked. The choice of words pushes the text to be understood from a certain point of view that is not a product of fortuity: "Shakespeare's principal narrator wastes no time interpreting each character", "He [the principal narrator] properly chides Collatine because his boast about Lucrece had tempted Tarquin", "The narrator represents Tarquin as being as restless as thieves, cares and troubled minds" (Hart, 36). Truly, he does not waste any time at the moment of judging the characters' actions, not leaving space for any other interpretation. Similarly, the narrative voice speaks about the actions of the antagonist of the story, which is partiality observed in Shakespeare but can also be seen in the version by Ovid, which is positioned on one specific side: "[...] Tarquin, a man unjust" (*Fasti*, 688). The reasoning behind this contrast of polarities and sides might be the broader political intentions the classical poem by Ovid bears, which turns Lucretia into a mere symbol for the city. While in the Roman version these are clear taking into account the socio-political situation of Rome, it is not so crystal in the 16<sup>th</sup> century version as I will point in later sections.

In conclusion, Shakespeare's version of the myth provides classical Lucretia with a deeper soul and conscience, even if she is still intrinsically linked to the decisions the men in her life take in most of the cases. She is in this poem also capable of acknowledging her responsibility after the rape, exemplified by a long monologue.

### 3.2 *Tarquin*

Same as Lucrece, Tarquin is a considerably more communicative character in this version; Shakespeare is capable of describing some mental processes and internal dialogues that provide a broader perspective of the antagonist. Newly to the classical myth, the narrator introduces instances of moral doubts which force the besieger to stop and think about his actions, physicalized by objects detaining him: "The doors, the wind, the glove that did delay him" (325). The narration exemplifies the moral fight by showing a dramatic tension between the antagonist's sensibility and his overwhelming carnal desires (Hart, 37). This other side of the story, that of Tarquin –Ovid's Tarquinius– is seen then from a deeper point of view: "I have debated, even in my soul, / What wrong, what



shame, what sorrow shall I breed, but nothing can affection's course control" (Shakespeare, 498-500).

Shakespeare's interpretation of the son of the king of Rome is not significantly differing from that in the original version. The thoughts of the Roman prince are looked at through a glass of judgment placed by the author with remarkable in-text suggestions that also mirror his internal debates. With regard to his description, he is said to be the contrary to the perfection of Lucrece: "This earthly saint, adored by this devil," (Shakespeare, 85). For instance, the moment in which he acknowledges the incorrectness of his thoughts and realizes that prayers to the gods won't help him in his doings: "The powers to whom I pray abhor this fact. / How can they then assist me in the act? (350-351). However, nothing succeeds to dissuade Tarquin from his horrible intentions, not even the tireless begging of Lucrece, which far from discouraging him, convince him further: "[...] 'My uncontrollèd tide/ Turns not, but swells the higher by this let'" (645-646). The intruder enhances himself by the use of a metaphor that equals him to a great sea: "The pretty streams, that pay a daily debt/To their salt sovereign, with their fresh fall's haste/Add to his flow, but alter not his taste" (649-651); Tarquin is comparing himself to the sea ('salt sovereign') putting Lucrece in the position of a *pretty* stream that cannot compare herself with his greatness.<sup>5</sup>

Nothing that she says or desires will be of importance when facing the sinful wishes of a king. This modern version, nonetheless, gives Tarquin a sense of morality thanks to the sentimentality Shakespeare confers to it. Tarquin is overruled by evil and cannot make his rationality win over his carnal desires, despite being in the end conquered by the guilt created because of his loss of sense: "He scowls and hates himself for his offense" (738). Tarquin's decision, which is contrary to his morality, will doom him: "He chooses wrongly, against his own moral sense, and it is this free choice which damns him," (Hynes, 453).

Regardless of the blood that runs in Tarquin's hands, the narrator of the poem places a big amount of guilt in Lucrece's husband from the very beginning. The first

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<sup>5</sup> According to Burrow (2002), it was a commonality in the late 16<sup>th</sup> century to compare kings to a sea, to which each stream pays tribute, fact that would imply Tarquin making use of his royal condition to subjugate everyone to his desires.

verses of the poem make clear that it was Collatine's irresponsibility that provoked Tarquin's actions; the blame is to be put on the innocent husband apart from the rapist:

*Haply that name of 'chaste' unhap'ly set  
This bateless edge on his keen appetite,  
When Collatine unwisely did not let  
To praise the clear unmatched red and white,  
Which triumphed in that sky of his delight,  
Where mortal stars as bright as heaven's beauties  
with pure aspects did him peculiar duties. (8-14)*

Through the way in which the narrator portrays Collatine in this second stanza of the poem, we know about his *recklessness* at the time of speaking about his wife in such a way. It is suggested that it was Collatine's speech that triggered the entire rape and the rapist's irrevocable desires. This stanza also makes patent these two characters—Lucrece and Collatinus—, even if Lucrece has not yet been introduced and has only been named once. When paying careful attention to the instances of the characters in this significant extract, Lucrece is evident in at least two occasions. The first one says as follows: “that name of ‘chaste’” (8); the chastity of Lucrece is one of her most evident characteristics and is existent, as shown, from the very beginning of the poem. Another reference to Lucrece is patent in the words “the clear unmatched red and white” (11) which refer to the later mentioning of the fight that Beauty and Virtue have within the face of the woman. Negative terms are continuously used in the extract as in an attempt for the reader to foresee the fatal outcome of the story: “unhap'ly set” (8) or “unmatched” (11).

To conclude this section, it is important to recapitulate that the thoughts and internal debates derived from feelings of grief and doubt are given a big amount of importance in this poem, fact that takes significance off the political dimension of the myth. Shakespeare provides the characters in the story with a greater depth, including moral fights for every decision that they make. Tarquin, the antagonist, is looked at from a broader perspective which, as I have shown, places him in a particular position to be judged for his thoughts and actions. Shakespeare chooses to tell the story from an emotional point of view, in which the human flaws and intrinsic philosophical issues to the themes dealt with in the myth are told through the exploitation of emotion.

#### 4. The Political Side of the Myth

As pointed out above, Shakespeare enhanced the emotions inside the characters. This feature, not so noticeable in Ovid; made the moral fights taking place in the minds of the two main protagonists gain a significantly important role. The further development of the characters may discard to some extent the relevance of the metaphoric political dimension in the poem by Shakespeare, while being one of the most significant purposes of the classical version. Ethics and passion fight to become the main moral discussion in the story but, what part does the history of Rome take?

First of all, both versions end with the consequences Lucretia's death entails: a new Rome, these consequences are not related to Collatine or Lucretia's father, but the eradication of the Tarquins from the throne. Furthermore, in Ovid the story begins with politics too, by the description of Tarquinius' disloyal military tactics. It is important to make evident the military metaphor found in the story to this regard: Tarquinius is first described as the disrespectful besieger of the city of Ardea: "Tarquin, a man unjust" (*Fasti*, 688). The traits by which Tarquinius is described also entail assumptions of how the Roman tradition becomes an important part of the characters' personalities. Tarquinius is in this story nothing but the living proof that the monarchy of his family, leading Rome, was not right for the city. For Roman noblemen inside this tradition, a leader should never show weakness or lack of virtue, even if some of these characteristics were necessary for leading: "Siempre debe simular ser virtuoso." (Cardona, 121)

Secondly, and attending to the reasons presented below, it can be easily concluded that Lucretia was written to become a metaphor for the city of Rome. Taking into consideration the time when Ovid accounted for this myth, is logical that Augustan unifying ideology would have made an impact on this poem: Lucretia being corrupted by a dishonorable Tarquinius. Shakespeare diverges from both, but integrates the central political preoccupations of the classical era as well as the mentioned ethical struggle. The rape is corresponded with the political side of it by a series of "formal analogies", also talking about the "the rape of a country as well as of the rape of a woman" (Donaldson, 9-10) which does not seem like a mere coincidence. Shakespeare's poem describes the rape in violent and military terms, referencing in some cases to "deadly enemies" (Shakespeare, 674) and "huge fires" (647) when describing the moment of the rape itself.

These implications do not seem to have been taken out of nothing. In this case, the English poet might be using the revival of this classical myth to reflect the political situation he was living (Hart, 30). Being Shakespeare one of the defendants of an “Elisabethan Republicanism” (30) a question rises about how tensions could have become clear in the poet’s era with Brutus’ speech about the ending of the monarchy.

The political analysis of Lucretia can be tackled from this perspective attending to different reasons. Lucretia’s descriptions are a sign of her perfection in manners and character: “her words and voice and virtue incorruptible” (*Fasti*, 765), even her ornaments are chaste “Thou seest, our mistress’ ornaments are chaste” (322). She is innocent, pure and, even if she has done no wrong, she is attacked when most vulnerable: in the darkness of the night and in her bedroom. Innocent Lucretia’s righteousness drove her towards her worst moment, the final day of her life. She was attacked and mistreated in her own home, by an uncontrollable armed man with power and strength. The similarities between the woman and the city subjected to the tyranny of a powerful man can be drawn from this comparison, also taking into account how the son of the king besieged Ardea from the inside. Tarquinius does not pay attention to the common good, but to his personal desires and cravings. Lucretia’s doom, Tarquin, is very clearly depicted as a shameless besieger, a disrespectful warrior who would use any means to conquer his own desires. He enters the innocence of Lucretia and *corrupts* it with his immorality and uncontrolled cravings, destroying the honor of the woman and overlooking the consequences of his actions. There is an irony accompanying this crime that is linked to the perspective with which Tarquin looks at it: Tarquin conceives the rape as a methodic act, almost like a battle (Maus, 68), while at the same time rejecting Lucrece’s attempts to allude to his decency: “Black lust, dishonour, shame, misgoverning, /Who seek to stain the ocean of thy blood” (Shakespeare, 654-655). Paradoxically, this ‘battle’ will be his last.

Shakespeare shares with Ovid the historical trait of Lucrece being compared to Helen of Troy and makes it visible in the poem. The presence of an explicit image of Troy in Lucrece’s room is a palpable reference to the metaphor of the rape as a battle (1366-1456). The picture, present in the painting the woman intensely describes, helps visualize the importance Tarquin’s military decisions have. There is a large description of it full of sorrow and misery: “For Helen's rape the city to destroy,” (Shakespeare, 1369). The

language is constantly pointing towards disaster; towards the fall of Helen, and the fall of Lucrece as costly as the fall of Troy. Such extensive metaphor and description is not appreciated in the poem by Ovid, who does not spend as many lines portraying the fall of Lucretia as Shakespeare does. However, as previously stated, the importance given to this in the classical version is not to be overlooked. The use of this historical figure does not seem like a simple coincidence. The kidnapping of Helen triggered the most famous war of antiquity, one that would bring heroes and new beginnings, while the rape of Lucrece, with the woman as an excuse and symbol for a new revolution, will equally entail a fresh start for the stained Rome with the ending of its unfair monarchy. Ironically, or maybe not so unintentionally, Tarquin's crime enhances this woman's character, turning her into a symbol. Ovid's *Fasti* is characteristically emphatic in his portrayal of the growth of Rome from its modest origins to the peak of its success: "One of the recurrent themes in *Fasti* is the spectacular growth of Rome from a humble village to the capital of the world" (Luck, 116). Lucretia's death becomes the peak moment of her life, moment that turns her into something bigger than herself. This decision enhances the history of Rome; which will be, from that moment on, free of Tarquin's tyranny.

To conclude with this historical and political section of the myth, it is important to recapitulate how the contrast between the two versions is presented in the text. As mentioned, both Shakespeare and Ovid use numerous references to the metaphorical layer of Tarquinius, Tarquin, Lucretia and Lucrece by a series of analogies in their character and behavior. Nonetheless, while Shakespeare drives it to a second plane to a great extent, focusing more vastly in the moral side of the story, it is one of the most important layers in Ovid's version.

## **5. Conclusions**

The mythical story of the rape of Lucretia is one that has survived through the moral debates of many unrepeatable authors. It has shaped innumerable works of art that will prevail throughout time and continue to inspire generations. However, the manner in which the decisions made by the characters in the story are looked at changes with each pair of eyes, enriching the perspective.

As I have been pointing out, these specific poetic versions share some similarities but hold many differences as well. Diverging narrative styles of the authors and the time span separating both pieces cause the story to be perceived differently. When separating them for their differences it is relevant to remark that the main goal of the two poems differs. Ovid's version was influenced by the period in which it was composed, something more similar to Livy's poem: the empire of Augustus focused on modifying the image of power that the continued situation of war in the previous years had established and for that, he spread "a complex of ideas designed to effect just this transformation of perception" (Davis, 23)

The lack of political purposes in the Englishman's writing—though some socio-political critique might be implicit—provides the characters with a newly found freedom to be more human. Shakespeare furnished the characters with feelings and with deeper personalities, guilt for Tarquin and words of wisdom for Lucrece. The individuality conferred to Lucrece, however, does not turn her into an independent being. Lucretia and her both depend on the power of the men to bring her justice, unlike the other main character, Tarquinius, who is dispossessed of his honor in both versions but struggles to let his desires win over his sensibility in the English poem.

Moving away the perspective to the overall objective of the poem, the political intentions are present in both versions analyzed. Though it seems true that Shakespeare managed to somehow diminish it in favor of moral issues, both authors acknowledge the metaphor that Lucrece is: Rome. The city has been besieged and corrupted by the sins of the monarchy, and with the blood of the chaste woman it needs to be avenged. This metaphor is most clearly presented through military language for descriptions and comparisons of Lucrece with Helen of Troy.

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