



Research Article

ISSN: 3007-9055 (E)

A Critical Examination of Lucrece's Chastity: Analyzing the Interplay of Love and Moral Justification in *The Rape of Lucrece*

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Abstract

This research paper examines the complex motivations behind Lucrece's tragic decision to commit suicide in Shakespeare's *The Rape of Lucrece*, following her violation by Tarquin. Lucrece, a character defined by her beauty and chastity, confronts the devastating loss of her chastity after the assault, leading her to perceive suicide as the only means to reclaim her honor by destroying her beauty. The paper explores the intricate interplay between love, guilt, and identity in Lucrece's experience. Love is portrayed as a multifaceted emotion, where some perceive it as their entire existence, while others see it merely as a facet of life or a precursor to sexual desire. Additionally, love can evoke strong emotional attachments, complicating the concept of agency in Lucrece's tragic circumstances. This study argues that Lucrece's actions stem not only from her emotional turmoil but also from societal expectations regarding female honor. Ultimately, it seeks to uncover the nuances behind her decision, questioning whether her guilt and desire for honor led her to invite Tarquin's advances subconsciously, thereby examining the extremities of her commitment to preserving her chastity and the implications of her suicide within the broader context of gender and honor.

Keywords

Chastity, love, morality, gender, psychological turmoil

1. Introduction

The Rape of Lucrece is a famous narrative poem of William Shakespeare where we come to be familiar to Lucrece, the central attraction of the poem. The main focus of the character is her tendency to keep her unharmed chastity. Unfortunately, her glowing chastity has been shattered by a sexual attack from Tarquin. The terms which have acted as a

sole to commit this crime by Tarquin is the wonderful describing attitude of Collatine, husband of Lucrece, the beautiful young wife. Collatine described his wife's beauty in such a way that it aroused the passion in Tarquin. Next morning, Tarquin UNUT leaves for Collatine where the unsuspected Lucrece welcomes him as the General of the Roman battle field as well as her husband's friend. Tarquin

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Received: 21 May 2024; Accepted: 15 October 2024; Published: 30 October 2024



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discovers that really Lucrece was the most beautiful lady in Rome. At night he failed in the fierce fighting between his conscience and greed. It takes two to make a quarrel for which Lucrece cannot be out of the judgment. What was her attitude during the crucial moment, is a vital issue to discover a clarification of the Tarquin's rape? Though emotion conquers reason, emotion is to be considered in some situations. Before committing the crime, Tarquin feared the dreadful consequences as a military man. He was also burning with the overwhelming desire. In between the two vital factors, what should be done by him- is a matter to be judged. Anyway, in this study we shall judge the inner factors responsible for the incident. Specially, the psychological factors related to love will be base of our judgement. To ensure success in this endeavor, I have selected various documentary books that provide significant commentaries and interpretations. Additionally, I have chosen books with insightful analyses, along with magazines, newspapers, and other publications as supporting resources.

2. Methods

This research paper employs a critical analysis approach to investigate the complex motivations behind Lucrece's tragic decision to commit suicide in Shakespeare's *The Rape of Lucrece*. Through close reading, the study explores the intricate interplay between love, guilt, and identity in Lucrece's experience, examining love's multifaceted nature as both a vital aspect of existence and a precursor to sexual desire. It also analyzes societal expectations surrounding female honor and their influence on her decision. To deepen the understanding of Lucrece's motivations, the research draws on various scholarly interpretations, incorporating perspectives from literary critics, historians, and philosophers to provide a comprehensive context of the historical and cultural milieu in which the poem was composed. By investigating the interplay of love, guilt, and societal pressures, this study aims to uncover

the nuances behind Lucrece's tragic choice and question whether her pursuit of honor ultimately led to her demise.

3. Result and Discussion

Shakespeare's philosophy on love is multilayered and dimensional. There are many opinions regarding love. Some say that beauty is the source of love. Some say that sexual appetite is the main focus of love. Again, there are another group to support that there is no relation of love with sex. Some are in favor of this opinion that love leads a person to the spiritual journey. Yet again, another group think that love is a natural phenomenon between man and woman. In love, a man has less influence than woman. Whatever may be, Shakespeare love has a particular place to be denoted. But in all directions, this treatment goes to a moral and constructive view. Coleridge comments on Shakespeare's issue on love: Through his all plays Shakespeare looks at love, conceiving it with moral grandeur and philosophic penetration" (Rall 130). But Dr. Johnson diminished the importance of love in Shakespeare: "Love is only one of the passions and influences little the sum of life ; it, therefore, does not predominate in Shakespeare who caught his ideas from the living word Professor Herford showed that normal love never falls: "Nor is much tragedy to be found in normal love and so Shakespeare uses this kind of delusion which perplexes and rends apart...Always the tragic quality springs from the wonderful presentment of the love which is wrecked Ó (Rall 57). Shakespeare has commented on love more than any other aspects of human life. According to Shakespeare, love is an abstract attraction between man and woman which is irresistible signifying nothing. In the character of Lucrece, what motif of love has acted – is a matter to disclosed.

Lucrece possesses the constructed Oideal chastity in *The Rape of Lucrece*. She is proud of her beauty and chastity. But unfortunately, she has lost

her chastity by the sudden rape by Tarquin. So, she decides to destroy her another possession- her beauty by committing suicide. From the poem we learn:

But she hath lost a dearer thing than life,
And he hath won what he would lose again.
This forced league doth force a further strife,
This momentary joy breathes months of pain;
This hot desire converts to cold disdain.
Pure chastity is rifled in the store,
And lust, the thief, far poorer than before (II. 687-694).

On one hand, Lucrece is depicted as having lost something far greater than her life—her honor. This loss foreshadows her impending suicide, as her pure chastity has been violently taken from her. On the other hand, Tarquin has gained something fleeting, a “momentary joy,” which will soon result in “months of pain.” In violating both his own and her honor, he ultimately becomes “far poorer than before.” Lucrece is left to “bear the load of lust he left behind” (1. 734), while Tarquin carries “the burden of a guilty mind” (1. 735). It is evident that Lucrece’s chastity has been replaced by his lust, and Tarquin is fully aware of his actions and their consequences, leaving the scene “like a thievish dog creep sadly thence” (1. 736). One can argue that her chastity and virtue were integral to her entire existence; with these taken from her, she sees no reason to continue living. She draws a comparison to a merciless mother who, “having two sweet babies, when death takes one / Will slay the other and be nurse to none” (II. 1161-1162). In Lucrece’s case, her “two sweet babies” are her beauty and her virtue. After the rape destroys her virtue, her sorrow drives her to kill the other—her beauty, symbolized by her physical body. Her face becomes a battleground where beauty and chastity are in conflict. Her beauty causes her face to “blush,” a symbol of redness, while her virtue dyes the blushes “with silver white.” Tarquin acts as a tyrannical figure, seizing Lucrece’s chastity. Plato provides insight into the nature of a tyrant, exploring the soul of such a figure. He reveals that a tyrant’s desires in waking life are

akin to those of an ordinary person in a dreamlike state (245). Plato notes in *The Republic*, “perfectly describes the evolution of a tyrannical Man as:

And when the other desires-filled with incense, myrrh, wreaths, wine, and the other pleasures found in their company-buzz around the drone, nurturing it and making it grow as large as possible, they plant the sting of *nurun* UTLU longing in it. Then this leader of the soul adopts madness as its bodyguard and becomes frenzied. If it finds any beliefs or desires in the man that are thought to be good or that still have some shame, it destroys them and throws them out, until it’s purged him of moderation and filled him with imported madness (243).

The drone referred to in this passage is erotic love, though perhaps erotic lust would be a more fitting label. The soul of the tyrant clearly lacks harmony. Instead, lust and desire rule over reason and moderation. The tyrant’s longings so overwhelm him that they “make him drunk, filled with erotic desire, and mad” (243). To achieve his desire, the tyrant will steal it “by deceitful means” or failing that “seize it by force” (244). Finally, the tyrant abandons any inclination to do good. Because the tyrant exists solely to benefit himself in ways that likely seem penurious to those he subjugates, he is likely to be hated, and it is for this reason that Plato suggests he needs a large and “loyal bodyguard” (238). After all, it is possible for the tyrant to feel repentant or to feel that he should not perform sinful actions. However, he himself is tyrannized by a madness that does not allow him to act upon these thoughts. In Shakespeare’s *The Rape in of Lucrece* we see Tarquin is motivated and controlled by his own lust. Tarquin adheres to Aristotle’s notion that the tyrant seeks to benefit himself (325) and we see Plato’s notion that the tyrant is tyrannized by his own desire (243). We can further see why Shakespeare considers Tarquin’s desire as being “false”. Rene Girard argues that Tarquin “never laid eyes on his future victim” (25). This does seem to be true when we consider the following lines: Now thinks he that her husband’s shallow tongue, The niggard prodigal that

praised her so, in that high task hath done her beauty wrong ... (78-80). These lines suggest that Lucrece has made a first impression on Tarquin. As Plato suggests, Tarquin is a tyrannical figure because he is “lust-breathed” (“Lucrece” II.3), but is Tarquin himself tyrannized by his passions”? A. D. Cousins suggests that such is the case, writing that “Tarquin’s soliloquy in his chamber dramatizes the compelling force of his desire in conflict with the constraining powers of his fears” (II. 47). As McGrail points out, “there is a difference between a tyrant and a character susceptible of tyrannic passions that he or she sustains momentarily”. Tarquin finds himself in the unique position of adhering neither to full-blown tyranny nor tyrannical passions; that is, Tarquin is less guilty of tyranny because he was only momentarily susceptible to his passions. In effect, “the difference between hero and villain is undermined” (23). Finally, Tarquin is a lesser tyrant, especially when compared to Satan: it is one thing to engage in sin but quite another to have introduced it to the world (George 79). Further, as Aristotle suggests, Satan is solely interested in benefiting himself. He wishes to “out of good still ... means of evil” (Book I, II. I 05). Similarly, Tarquin, in attempting to satisfy his tyrannical passions by raping Lucrece, achieves something else entirely; “whereas such acts were generally expected to lead to the production of an heir, Tarquin’s rape leads to the birth of a new political system” (Hadfield 118). Lucrece’s chastity extends beyond her faithfulness to her husband; it encompasses her entire character. She is portrayed as having an innocent nature, so pure that she suspects no evil in the world. This is highlighted when Tarquin approaches her bed, “But she, sound sleeping, fearing no such thing, / Lies at the mercy of his mortal sting” (II. 363-364). Her chastity even influences her surroundings, as her final attempt to dissuade Tarquin centers on the belief that virtue reigns supreme. However, the issue lies in Lucrece’s inherent belief that she cannot be violated. According to Quay, this suggests that Lucrece is not raped because she is simply a woman, but because she is constructed as a woman who can be

raped. Tarquin’s desire is based on a false perception, as it is only his distorted idea of Lucrece that fuels his intent to violate her (1995: 4).

As the poem develops its symbols of chastity, they paradoxically seem to fuel Tarquin’s desire, as the language “invites sexual violence” (1995: 6). After the rape, the previous arguments disappear, with Tarquin now fully aware of his guilt. Quay further asserts that Lucrece becomes a symbol for chastity in the first part of the poem, as “chasteness extends the traditional definition of being faithful in marriage” (Quay 5). Following the rape, Lucrece’s purity and innocence are so strong that Tarquin’s deceit appears “unthinkable” to her. The violation thrusts her into unfamiliar and incomprehensible territory (Quay 8).

Interestingly, Lucrece partially adopts the male-centric notion that her body and chastity were treasures that Tarquin sought to possess. However, she limits this view, applying the “treasure discourse” only to her chastity and not to her entire being (Gillen 10). Ultimately, Lucrece feels so deeply betrayed by Tarquin that she identifies with the Trojans, symbolized by a painting in her home. Belsey notes, “we may without anxiety perceive a parallel with her own struggle in Troy’s, and a resemblance to her tears in the sad eyes of the Trojans also waiting to die” (Belsey 185).

So finally, it can be said that her chastity is beyond her mere faithfulness in her marriage. Her character and behavior are so pure and innocent that she does not suspect any evil in her structured and organized world. Lever comments, “The profound sense of cosmic dualism in the rape of Lucrece is both in continuity with the male-female antinomy as a paradigm in Venus and Adonis, as well as complementary to the earlier definition of the archetypes. Ó (Lever 92). D. C Allen says, “Tarquin in the poem takes on the aggressive sensuality as well as the destructive force of the Boar. Innocence

and experience, therefore, cannot be identified with male-female polarity, as it very well identifies female and male in that order. What Lucrece is defending is no mere immature purity of Adonais but a mature, wifely devotion to her fleshly honor Ó (Allen 95). Allen also says that in the character of Lucrece there is an allegorical significance –Troy identification (Allen 95). Actually, Shakespeare wants to point out that Lucrece is the symbol of destruction. C. G. Jung comments: “When Lucrece realizes her violation as so did my Troy fall, it was left to her to leave the ravished city, the sensual flesh, for higher honor. Women’s identity spans, the continuum of flesh-spirit, sense-soul, desecration-sanctity, violation inviolate purity, corruption-redemption, death-regeneration-as it is fundamentally what carries forward metamorphosis, gives birth. The archetypes of the Anima or the great mother are fundamentally symbol of transformation, passage, rebirthÓ (Jung 133). Saint Augustine argues that if chastity is Òa quality of the mind, it is not lost when the body is violated and for him this means that if Lucrece is innocent, then her suicide is wrong (Augustine 27). F.T. Prince puts the case that Òshe is forced to express herself in a way which dissipates the real pathos of her situation”; “her sufferings become sensational and not tragicÓ (Prince XXXvi). In the words of Colin Burrow, ÒTarquin’s soul is presented as a female ruler of a town under siege, whose defilement is described in terms which could be used of Lucrece. This establishes a shocking affinity between the supposed victor and his victim (Burrow 283). The image of “her hand in my handÓ is an example of Òweaving. Ó (Puttenham 285). It is Òas though Tarquin is surreptitiously imagining her to be responding to the potential eroticism of the moment when they clasp hands.” (Burrow 258). It is his memory of this moment of erotic contact with the body of Lucrece herself. Dubrow reaches a similar conclusion about this moment in the poem. Tarquin finds Lucrece’s fears sexually attractiveÓ (Dubrow 124). Coppelia Kahn thinks that the struggle between Tarquin and Lucrece registers “his subjectivity rather than her own.” She writes-

“Shakespeare, I believe, tries to fashion Lucrece as a subject not totally tuned to the key of Roman chastity and patriarchal marriage and to locate a position within which he works are bounded by an ideology of gender in which women speak with the voices of men (Kahn 29). John Roe comments that she is a Òtragic figureÓ. Because she thoroughly assimilates a patriarchal ideology founded on a notion of female chastity and honor that requires her death (Roe 33). Her sense of chastity is not simply a matter of sexual purity but of integrity—and not only the integrity of love and honor but also of body and soul.

So, from the above study, it is proved that Lucrece is neither absolutely a guilty nor a purer lady. She has been raped- is true as it is also true that she helped in the rape directly or indirectly. In both cases, love acted as a catalyst to perform that fatal action. Love has a positive motion in all the great and virtuous achievement. Similarly, it has a tremendous and devastating power to demolish great genius and their glories.

5. Conclusions

In *The Rape of Lucrece*, Shakespeare presents a profound exploration of the complexities of love, chastity, and psychological turmoil. Lucrece is neither depicted as entirely guilty nor completely innocent; instead, her character embodies a nuanced blend of victimhood and agency, reflective of Shakespeare’s multilayered depiction of human nature. Tarquin’s act of rape is driven by a tyrannical lust, not merely a physical attraction but a deep-rooted psychological impulse, as suggested by philosophical perspectives from Plato and Aristotle. The poem delves into how love, in both its pure and corrupted forms, acts as a catalyst for human actions, both noble and destructive. Lucrece’s chastity and virtue are central to her identity, and the violation of these aspects leads to her tragic suicide. Her chastity, which extends beyond mere faithfulness in marriage, is shown to be a deeper construct of her

morality and purity, and its destruction is, in her eyes, an irreparable loss. Tarquin, driven by his distorted understanding of love and desire, sees Lucrece not as an individual but as an object of conquest, blinded by lust and moral weakness. His momentary satisfaction results in a long-lasting torment for both characters, symbolizing the destructive power of unbridled desire. Ultimately, the poem illustrates the dual nature of love as both a positive and destructive force. While love can elevate and inspire great achievements, as in many of Shakespeare's works, it also harbors the capacity to devastate lives, as seen in Tarquin's violation of Lucrece. In this case, love, twisted by lust and power, leads to tragedy. Thus, Shakespeare uses the story of Lucrece to demonstrate how love can shape and destroy both individuals and societies, reflecting on the fragile balance between desire and morality.

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