

PAINFUL PARADOXES: UNRESOLVED CULTURAL TENSIONS AND THE
RESPONSE TO HUMAN SUFFERING IN *THE RAPE OF LUCRETIA*

By

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Approved by:

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Abstract:

Myths are cultural repositories that reveal a society's most intimate values, as well as its flaws. The rape of Lucretia is the myth of the founding of the Roman Republic, which is inspired by the rape of the Roman wife Lucretia by the Etruscan Prince Sextus Tarquinius, and her subsequent suicide. This myth has been revisited and reinterpreted many times since its creation, partly because it continues to present a paradox that defies interpretation: "If [Lucretia] is adulterous, why praise her? If chaste, why slay her?" (St. Augustine 29). The various reinterpretations of the myth made changes, whether subtle or dramatic, that sought to translate the story, rendering it understandable to a Christian audience. Each reinterpretation of the myth has also tried to either reconcile or emphasize this paradox, reflecting both the author's interpretation and the contemporaneous cultural values, but most importantly hinting at the problematic response to personal suffering by individuals and societies.

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The most recent dramatic rendition of the myth is the opera *The Rape of Lucretia*, the second from renowned composer Benjamin Britten and his first collaboration with poet Ronald Duncan. It was composed in 1946, adapted from the 1931 play *Le Viol de Lucrece* by André Obey (Seymour 75-76). The opera was a commercial and popular failure, largely due to this unsuccessful attempt to reconcile the myth's central tensions. The libretto of the opera is nevertheless a fascinating reinterpretation of the myth for the modern era for the ways in which, perhaps unintentionally, it not only exposes the myth's contradictions but enhances them, laying bare the complexities of the myth and causing the audience to examine how the myth's tensions are still operating in our own culture.

In order to better understand Duncan and Britten's interpretation of the myth, it is important to first turn to the original source of the myth found in Livy's *Early History of Rome*. The myth begins with a contest of chastity. The sons of the King of Rome including Sextus

Tarquinius are drinking together with other Roman soldiers. The men all praise the virtues of their wives and decide to pay a visit to each of them. Their objective is to determine whose wife is the most virtuous and chaste of all, based upon her actions while her husband is away. The wives of the Princes of Rome are all found preparing for a feast and orgy, but Lucretia, wife of Tarquinius Collatinus, is at home working diligently at her spinning. At once, "Sextus Tarquinius is seized by the desire to violate Lucretia's chastity, seduced by both her beauty and by her exemplary virtue" (Livy 1.5758). Here, a woman's virtue is defined as her enclosure with the home, or the Roman *domus*, the realm of the private: "Lucretia sets the parameters for female republican *virtù*: an ideal republican woman is sequestered in the *domus*, renounces the entertaining company of others and is fulfilled by household work" (Matthes 34-5). A Roman woman's fulfillment should be constrained with the boundaries of the private, and should never infringe upon the public realm of spectacle and entertainment, which are dangerous precisely because they transgress the boundaries of the home.

Days later, Sextus Tarquinius returns to Collatinus' house and is greeted with hospitality by Lucretia. When everyone is asleep he sneaks into her bedroom and at knifepoint declares his love for her, "begging and threatening her alternately," but Lucretia will not forsake her virtue even in the face of death. Finally, Sextus Tarquinius says that he will kill Lucretia and place her next to the body of a naked servant, so that everyone will think she has died in the act of adultery. With her chaste reputation thus threatened, Lucretia submits to the violation. She then sends for her husband and father to come with a "good friend, because a very terrible thing had happened." Lucretia's father Spurius Lucretius arrives with Publius Valerius, and Collatinus her husband with Lucius Junius Brutus (1.5758).

Lucretia explains what has happened, and makes them promise to punish Sextus Tarquinius. The men attempt to console her, “saying that it was the soul that did wrong, and not the body, and because she had no bad intention, she did no wrong” (1.5758). Lucretia knows that she has not consented. The use of force makes Tarquinius’ actions unconscionable, and reassures Lucretia’s innocence. But despite the innocence of her mind and will, Lucretia knows that her body has been violated and that this violation cannot be cured without the letting of blood. Furthermore, Lucretia says that although she has absolved herself of blame, “I will not free myself from punishment. No woman shall use Lucretia as her example in dishonor” (1.5758). Lucretia then stabs herself with a knife she had hidden under her robe, and dies. Brutus leaves Collatinus and Lucretius to mourn, but takes the knife from Lucretia’s wound and declares,

By this blood which was so pure before the crime of the prince, I swear before you, O gods, to chase the King Lucius Tarquinius Superbus, with his criminal wife and all their offspring, by fire, iron, and all the methods I have at my disposal, and never to tolerate Kings in Rome evermore, whether of that family or any other. (Livy 1.5758)

Lucretia’s suicide is anomalous, but at the same time essential to the function of the story. The paternal line as well as her body has been corrupted, making it possible that she will bring more tyrants into the world. Her death also demonstrates “the failure of masculinity, specifically of her male kin to protect her. She reveals their failure to be men” (Matthes 31). Her rape and suicide reveal the failure of their masculine *virtù*, and in revenging her death and establishing a republic, the men regain their *virtù* and simultaneously reassert their control over the female, successfully reestablishing the boundary between the realms of public *forum* and the private *domus* and placing the masculine and feminine, respectively, in these realms.

Before these two realms can be reestablished, Lucretia’s body must transgress them one more time. Her body, the symbol of both masculine tyranny and the failure of *virtù*, is

transported to the forum by Brutus. Lucretia is lost and her body is now a symbol and a spectacle, the perfect synthesis of the two most compelling arguments for the overthrowing of the dictatorship: tyranny and *virtù*. Using her body as a platform for his campaign, “Brutus urges the populace to help him make good on his word [to revenge Lucretia]. After liberating Rome from tyranny, Brutus founds the institutions of the Roman Republic and is hailed as a hero” (Jed 10).

The rape of Lucretia is essentially a myth of reinterpretation; Lucretia intends her suicide to eliminate the possibility that she will be viewed as unchaste, but instead her suicide leaves her body vulnerable to immediate symbolic reinterpretation by Brutus. Brutus’ recasting of Lucretia’s rape and subsequent suicide is successful in the most part because of Lucretia’s identity: she is the perfect “victim” who exemplifies all the most valued attributes of the Roman wife. She is chaste, faithful, hard-working and hospitable, all of the qualities that comprise a woman’s virtue. The Roman obsession with chastity is what leads to the soldiers’ contest, and it is Lucretia’s ability to so perfectly assume her role that gives Sextus Tarquinius the desire to rape her. He wants more than anything to destroy the perfect chastity of this woman, to violate the one woman who is inviolable, thereby enacting a rape of the Roman cultural values which have created her.

This paradoxical response to beauty and virtue by Sextus Tarquinius is another of the myth’s most important paradoxes. It is important to note that Sextus Tarquinius is not a Roman, but an Etruscan. He is both the Prince of Rome and a cultural outsider. The paradox of his desire to destroy beauty reflects his own paradoxical standing as the foreign Prince who is at once a part of and alienated from Roman society. The rape may represent both a fascination and a repulsion of the culture of the Roman people. The motivations for the rape, besides his lust, lie in

his simultaneous desire to be a part of the culture and retain his identity as an Etruscan. If Lucretia's beauty and virtue make her the symbol of Roman virtue, then the rape is an act which reaffirms the importance and laudability of these traits, even as it destroys them.

When Lucretia kills herself, her father and husband involve themselves immediately in the act of mourning her tragic rape and death. Brutus removes himself from the atmosphere of familial grief but takes with him the knife – the object with which Lucretia has expressed her most ardent desire to reclaim her reputation and prevent the misinterpretation of the rape as an excuse for future women to be unchaste. The physical seizure of the knife is the moment that Brutus metaphorically seizes Lucretia's message; it is the tangible symbol of Lucretia's intangible final message: that although her body has been violated, her mind remains chaste. Brutus seizes this symbol and removes it from Lucretia's body, the site of her family's private mourning, and moves its symbolism both physically and symbolically into the public realm with his declaration within the *forum*, the seat of public life.

Brutus then begins the construction of a triplicate symbol by adding to his argument Lucretia's body and blood. He swears upon Lucretia's blood, which has been poisoned by the rape, to complete his cause at all costs and by all means. The impurity of Lucretia's blood as professed by Brutus echoes the separation of body and human will expressed in the arguments of Lucretius and Collatinus. Lucretia is innocent because only her body has been violated; her mind and will remain untainted. But in the opinion of both Brutus and Lucretia, the only means to remove the impurity is to let the blood which has been poisoned. Lucretia wills her own death, violating her flesh with the knife and thereby removing the impurity from her body and freeing her soul.

Brutus next seizes the body of Lucretia itself as his final symbol. He transports her body to the forum, completing the transformation of Lucretia's message from the place of private mourning to public outrage. The knife stood for the crime, the blood for the poisonous violation of the rape, and the body for the tyranny of the monarchy and the failure of the Roman men to protect Lucretia. These three symbols become the foundation for Brutus' fight against the monarchy, and with them he is able to inspire the indignation of the people and triumph over King Lucius Tarquinius Superbus. Eventually, both he and Publius Valerius become the consuls of Rome, and at the base of their successful political careers is the bloody body of Lucretia, her identity replaced by the identity of the faceless virtuous woman, her message buried under the rubble of the fallen monarchy.

To understand why Brutus is able to fully supplant his interpretation of Lucretia's rape with his own, one must first examine what the rape meant to each of them. For Lucretia, her rape was an intensely personal tragedy. Lucretia clearly values her own chastity highly before the rape takes place. She seeks to live according to the Roman values of chastity and female virtue, and has thus far in her life been successful in this attempt. Enter Sextus Tarquinius, who takes advantage of these very rules by exploiting her obligation as hostess to enter her home and violate her, using her own desire to remain chaste in reputation as a weapon against her. It is not fear for her life that causes her to relent to his desire, but fear of the ruin of her reputation. Her reputation is more important than her life – the representation of chastity more important than its practice. Sextus Tarquinius uses Lucretia's virtue against her, and in order to regain control over her reputation and end her shame Lucretia decides to kill herself.

Sextus Tarquinius' rape was not only a physical violation, but a rape of Lucretia's values. Her suicide is a reclaiming of her lost power, a final declaration of her former chastity, and also

the moment of her greatest strength. By killing herself she decides how her body will be read, a power which would not customarily exist for her as a woman. She has no control over how her actions will be interpreted, and her voice does not have the power to declare her innocence.

Lucretia understands that in ancient Rome, women are most important as symbols, and therefore she is most powerful when reduced to a representation. Her body and her blood have the power to express her innocence in a way that her words cannot: “while for a man, his words have effect, for a woman, only her body does” (Matthes 30).

Brutus is an outsider, so his understanding of Lucretia’s rape is informed not by personal but by public tragedy. Brutus considers the victim and her attacker as representatives of larger themes. Lucretia is not simply Lucretia, she is Lucretia, the virtuous wife of Collatinus. Her attacker is not Sextus Tarquinius, he is Sextus Tarquinius, prince of Rome, son of King Lucius Tarquinius Superbus. The tragedy is not a personal one, it is a symbolic one. Lucretia’s story is important because of the roles of the victim and the rapist. There would have been no public outcry if Sextus Tarquinius had not been a prince, or if his victim had not been the virtuous wife of an important official. The rape as seen by Brutus is one more example of the monarchy’s tyranny which seizes upon the rights of the people. His reinterpretation prevails: his story replaces Lucretia’s and causes her rape and death to be forever symbolic of the founding of the Roman Republic.

The rape of Lucretia is a well-known story and presents no surprises to the reader familiar with the story’s narrative that connects Lucretia’s rape to the founding of the Roman Republic. And yet, this story does not present a logical sequence of events by any means; “there is no law that says the legend of the rape of Lucretia must begin with a chastity contest or end with Rome’s liberation from tyranny” (Jed 9). What connects these incidents is the

reinterpretation of the myth within the myth itself. Lucretia kills herself to prevent others from misinterpreting her rape, but her death is immediately reinterpreted by Brutus and used as an excuse to overthrow the Roman kingdom. But beyond this, many texts have interpreted and reinterpreted this myth, reusing it to further one cause or another, and this tradition of reinterpretation continues with Duncan and Britten's contemporary reading of the myth:

By including ourselves at the end of the narrative, we can assume responsibility for the continued reproduction of the rape of Lucretia. From the perspective of the legend's transmission, we can begin to see this rape not as an inevitable prologue to Rome's liberation but as a historical figuration, formed and reformed to serve various interests and needs in different historical moments (Jed 6-7).

Besides the issues of interpretation, the rape of Lucretia has been so often reinterpreted because it contains a fundamental contradiction. This contradiction would manifest itself more clearly as the myth was seized by Christianity, and the pagan Lucretia became a symbol of chastity to be emulated by Christians: "Lucretia was a virtuous heathen whose example might be remembered and emulated by Christians. The early Church could draw its inspiration for martyrdom from the ancient world in this way without any very obvious sense of strain" (Donaldson 26). Thus, Lucretia is mentioned as an admirable woman by both St. Jerome and Tertullian (25).

As mentioned, St. Augustine was the first to confront the dilemma of Lucretia's suicide in *The City of God*, as he contemplated why she should be praised if she is an adulteress, and why, if she is innocent, should she have killed herself? (Augustine 29). Augustine views Lucretia's suicide as an unnecessary act of self-murder. Like Collatinus and Lucretius, he does not see the necessity for suicide when only Lucretia's body has been violated, against her will. She has not committed adultery, although for Romans rape and adultery were "not significantly differentiated" (Donaldson 30). Her suicide is therefore not heroic, but rather a selfish act of murder that endangers her immortal soul (31).

Augustine's struggle to reinterpret the myth of Lucretia to make sense within a Christian context is further complicated by the shift in values "from a shame culture to a guilt culture" (33). In Livy's myth, Lucretia does not kill herself because she feels guilty for her participation in the rape. She knows that she did not consent and is therefore without blame; her suicide is instead a response to the shame at having been so polluted by the rape and at the thought of the loss of her reputation. Given the transition from the Roman culture of shame to the Christian culture which emphasized guilt, the myth of Lucretia presented a problem: "for Christians much occupied with the notion of guilt, this kind of death was puzzling and distasteful" (34). Subsequent Christian scholars such as Tyndall departed even further than St. Augustine in their commentaries on the myth, and responded by condemning Lucretia for her "selfish" obsession with her reputation and with outward displays of chastity rather than being content to know her own innocence even if it was not known or believed in by others (34). Later versions of the myth often struggled with the same problem of reconciling the myth with a Christian culture; each interpretation had to make a decision for or against Lucretia's innocence.

Britten and Duncan's 1946 reinterpretation of the myth sheds an interesting perspective on the myth's Christianization and St. Augustine's dilemma. Their libretto was much-criticized for the use of an "anachronistic, and morally inappropriate, Christian frame" which was Britten's attempt to reconcile the myth's problems to a Christian culture (Seymour 77). The problematic imposition of a male Chorus and a female Chorus who impose a Christian frame to the pagan narrative is the most important device in shedding light on how Duncan and Britten's libretto, in seeking to reconcile the myth, actually renders it irreconcilable. Indeed, the libretto nowhere else seeks to reconcile these tensions but rather relies on a multitude of irreconcilable oppositions as the source for the opera's drama: "at the heart of *The Rape of Lucretia* is a complex dialectic

between a series of opposites: violator/violated, beauty/virtue, ignorance/complicity, and guilt/innocence” and to which may be added a host of others; among the most important are male/female, personal/political, and Christianity/paganism (Seymour 85).

Duncan’s libretto opens with a political contextualization of the play by the Male Chorus, describing the tyrannical rule of the Etruscan King Tarquinius Superbus and his wife, who “now rule Rome by force and govern by sheer terror,” and their son Tarquinius Sextus who “treats the proud city as if it were his whore,” foreshadowing the Prince’s lust and subsequent rape of Lucretia (Britten and Duncan 117). The Choruses also alert the audience to their main function, which is to interpret the drama through a Christian lens: “While we two as observers stand between / This present audience and that scene; / We’ll view these human passions and these years / Through eyes which have once wept with Christ’s own tears” (117). In the original production of the opera, the Choruses were seated in thrones downstage, as described by the original opera’s designer John Piper: “...it was decided that there should be a permanent fore-stage, with the two Commentators (the Male and Female Chorus) occupying thrones there...it formed a permanent, timeless structure which, like the Commentators themselves as they had been conceived by composer and librettist, could act as an interpretative medium between action and audience” (Britten et. al 70). The two Choruses therefore separate the audience from the dramatic action physically and also serve as an interpretative filter, which is supposed to decode the pagan drama for the Christian audience.

The setting of the first scene is that of the military camp where Tarquinius Sextus, Collatinus, and Junius (the Brutus figure, here called by his first name) are carousing. Immediately, the play begins to construct its dialectic oppositions as the inebriated men begin to sing:

This conflict between nationalities is the source of the political tension that pervades the original myth and here serves a catalyst for a physical altercation between the two men, which is broken up by Collatinus. Subsequently, the audience is exposed to the depths of Junius' jealousy which finds an object in Lucretia's chastity, which has made him twice the cuckold by its contrast with his own wife's infidelity. As the Male Chorus relates, a wife's chastity is as much a political act as a personal one: "Collatinus is politically astute to choose a virtuous wife. / Collatinus shines brighter from Lucretia's fame" (119). Lucretia's personal dedication to chastity has a vital political impact on her husband's career. The ambitious Junius sheds light on this contradiction and on the Roman obsession with chastity, attributing it to their own wantonness:

JUNIUS: Collatinus will gain my fame with the Roman mob,
Not because of battle he has won,
- but because Lucretia's chaste
- and the Romans being wanton worship chastity. (119)

The idea that the Roman culture's obsession with chastity stems from its own lustful extravagance echoes the central motivations of the rapist Tarquinius Sextus in both Livy's rendition and in Duncan's (as will be seen). In both cases the rape is motivated as much by Lucretia's chastity as by her beauty, which only renders her chastity more admirable and increases the desire of the rapist to violate her, thereby transgressing the most sacred societal values and enacting a rape of the Roman culture itself.

Shortly after, in an aside, Junius questions whether Lucretia is truly virtuous, or if it is just "good luck" and that she has not yet been tempted to betray her virtue. Junius expands on this idea in a private conversation with Tarquinius Sextus, in which he states that "Virtue in women is a lack of opportunity" and further:

JUNIUS: Women are chaste when they are not tempted.
Lucretia's beautiful but she's not chaste.
Women are all whores by nature. (120)

Junius' argument supposes that beauty and chastity are mutually exclusive, and that chastity does not exist as it is contrary to the nature of women. Throughout the discussion, Junius plays upon Tarquinius' veneration for Lucretia to motivate him to commit the rape. Tarquinius begins the conversation in a posture of submission to Lucretia, declaring, "I am subject to Lucretia." Junius' arguments undermine Lucretia's chastity causing Tarquinius to declare at the conversation's end, "I'll prove Lucretia chaste," a blatant irony given that the only means to prove her chastity is by the attempted seduction and rape. As the scene ends, Tarquinius calls for his horse and begins his journey to the home of Lucretia and Collatinus.

The second scene begins in stark contrast to the masculine atmosphere of the military encampment, with the female-dominated scene of the *domus* in which Lucretia and her maids Lucia and Bianca are spinning, an act which recreates the effect of the male-dominated Roman society on the lives of women:

FEMALE CHORUS: Their little wheel revolves,
Time spins a fragile thread;
Turning and turning,
They spin and then they are spun,
Endless, so endless. (121)

The words "fragile" and "little" are aptly used to describe the life and dreams of the women which are lost over time as they age, "Seeking the threads of their dreams / Finding and losing." The song of the women and of the Female Chorus paint a picture of the Roman woman who, contained within the *domus*, spins her life and her beauty away, and is left with only one lover who is faithful to her, hinting at the double-standard of male and female values: "Death is woman's final lover / In whose arms we lie forever / With our hearts all broken" (121). This

scene of supposed domestic tranquility is already disturbed by the underlying current of the restrictive male influence.

As the women continue their spinning, Lucretia believes she hears a knock at the door, foreshadowing the eventual knock of Tarquinius. We learn that Lucretia's chastity is motivated not only from desire to be virtuous but because of her deep love and sexual longing for the absent Collatinus:

LUCRETIA: How cruel men are
To teach us love!
They wake us from
The sleep of youth
Into the dream of passion
Then ride away
While we still yearn. (122)

Lucretia's speech further illustrates the inclusion of the female within the *domus*, a theme which is even further developed by the Female Chorus and is contrasted to the world of men: "Their frail fingers are love's strong vehicle, and in their routine is a home designed. Home is what man leaves to seek. What is home but women? Time carries men, but time treads upon the tired feet of women" (122). Women are inextricable from the home. They are the essence of the *domus*. Men, in contrast, are capable of ranging freely from *domus* to the *forum*.

The ability of men to transgress the borders of the *domus* is demonstrated with the entry of Tarquinius Sextus into the home of Lucretia. The reception of the Prince is narrated by the two Choruses, and unlike in Livy's myth there is an immediate sense of danger felt by Lucretia and her maids. The sense of apprehension that Lucretia feels is of course justified. Tarquinius' first act of greeting already foreshadows his desire: "His unruly eyes run to her breast, / And there with more thirst than manners rest." Here Tarquinius engages in a visual act of possession which foreshadows his physical possession during the rape. Nevertheless, Lucretia and her maids

cannot deny Tarquinius' entry, not so much because this violates the rules of hospitality as in the original myth, but because "he is Prince of Rome" (122). His societal standing is emphasized rather than the importance of hospitality to the Roman culture, which is referred to simply as "etiquette." This change in emphasis could be another attempt to contemporize the myth and render it clear to the audience that according to the conventions of the myth Lucretia does not have the ability to refuse Tarquinius' request to stay the night, although it goes against "discretion" (123). The first Act ends as Lucretia shows Tarquinius to a room and she and the servants bid him good night.

It is difficult to understand the transformation of Tarquinius from the champion of Lucretia's virtue to her rapist. This contradictory behavior is perhaps indicative of Tarquinius' own naiveté, which prevents him from understanding Junius' manipulation or the way in which the rape of Lucretia will lead to his own destruction as much as hers. He is only aware of his own sexual desire, but does not understand the paradox of this desire which is motivated, as we learn in the previous scene, by his respect for Lucretia's chastity. In giving into his desire, he also destroys the thing he finds most beautiful, thereby nullifying his own desire. This difficult paradox, also present in Livy's version, is explained in part by Duncan's understanding of Etruscan culture:

Incidentally, the legend of Lucretia has much in common with Etruscan mythology, the essential element of which is not fertility as an isolated conception, but considered in relation to death. I came to this conclusion on glancing through a book of reproductions of Etruscan sculpture, in which I noticed that fertility symbols, such as the ewe, suckled the death symbol, the serpent – or were carved with a lion or a wolf at their throat... One might conjecture whether the Etruscans turned a tragedy into a legend or, what is more probable, whether they, suffering from the insistence of a legend, were ultimately compelled to enact it. (Britten et. al. 62)

This interpretation of Etruscan mythology is found in a speech by the Female Chorus in the beginning of the second act:

FEMALE CHORUS: . . . Through all their [Etruscan] art there runs this paradox:
Passion for creation and lust to kill.
Behind the swan's neck they'd paint a fox,
And on their tombs a wooden phallus stood. (Britten and Duncan 123)

Duncan's explanation for Tarquinius' motivation stems from the influence of his Etruscan heritage on his identity, assuming that the myth has some degree of historical validity. This interpretation is interesting in that it serves as a palimpsest: the myth of Lucretia, which is a Roman founding myth, is also an Etruscan myth, in which an Etruscan man enacts an Etruscan myth through the rape of a Roman woman. The Etruscan and Roman cultures thereby become two layers of the same myth. This interpretation helps to explain in part the paradox in which Tarquinius, the representation of death and fate, desires to violate Lucretia, the representation of fertility and life, and also emphasizes the way in which the rape is an act of self-destruction for Tarquinius.

The Choruses and several characters including Collatinus and Junius (all offstage) continue to expand on the contrast between the Romans and Etruscans as they explain the political unrest in Rome and the anger of the Roman people toward the Etruscan monarch. Collatinus remarks, "Now Roman masters become Etruscan servants / And all our city's a bazaar to them" (123). With the scene thus contextualized, the Male Chorus begins to narrate Tarquinius' entry into Lucretia's room, after which Tarquinius begins a monologue describing Lucretia's beauty and his desire, and, echoing Junius' earlier sentiment, concludes that it is squandered if he cannot enjoy it: "Loveliness like this is never chaste; / If not enjoyed, it is just waste!" (124). Once again, chastity and beauty are deemed to be mutually exclusive.

Tarquinius kisses the sleeping Lucretia, who is said to be “dreaming of Collatinus. / And so desiring him draws down Tarquinius / And wakes to kiss again...” (124). Lucretia awakes and she and Tarquinius begin a long dialogue which precedes the rape:

LUCRETIA: What do you want?
TARQUINIUS: You!
LUCRETIA: What do you want from me?
TARQUINIUS: Me! What do you fear?
LUCRETIA: You!
In the forest of my dreams
You have always been the Tiger. (124)

This line announces a new dialectic between Lucretia’s desire and her will, which would remain chaste. Her declaration that Tarquinius has “always been the Tiger” in her dreams is an overt suggestion that Lucretia is also attracted to Tarquinius and that he has been an impediment to the chastity of her mind, in particular within her “dreams.” The use of “dreams” here recalls the songs of the maids and Lucretia, who spoke of the unravelling of their dreams along with their lives as they sit spinning. The fact that Lucretia has dreamt of Tarquinius before complicates the rape and heightens the conflict between Lucretia’s will and her desire which are at odds.

The rest of the scene further complicates the relationship between Lucretia and Tarquinius and reaffirms the mind/body dialectic. Tarquinius seeks Lucretia’s consent as he asks her to give him her lips again and thereby consent to the rape. Lucretia refuses:

TARQUINIUS: Give me!
LUCRETIA: No! What you have taken
Never can you be given! (125)

After these first refusals, Tarquinius begins to play upon Lucretia’s apparent desire:

TARQUINIUS: Yet the linnet in your eyes
Lifts with desire,
And the cherries of your lips
Are wet with wanting,
Can you deny your blood’s dumb pleading?
LUCRETIA: Yes, I deny. (125)

And later:

TARQUINUS: Can you refuse your blood's desiring?

LUCRETIA: Yes, I refuse!

TARQUINIUS: Lucretia!

LUCRETIA: I refuse!

TARQUINIUS: Can you deny?

LUCRETIA: I deny!

TARQUINIUS: Your blood denies!

LUCRETIA: You lie, you lie! (125)

Lucretia's non-consent is more than a refusal, it is also a denial of her desire, according to Tarquinius. Although Lucretia claims that this is a lie, her previous claim about Tarquinius as the tiger in her dreams undermines this and seems to support the fact she does indeed desire Tarquinius. Nevertheless, she refuses, which is perhaps even stronger evidence of her chastity since it pits her will and her love for Collatinus against the desires of her physical body, dividing her against herself. The choice to create an attraction between Lucretia and Tarquinius would seem to make her less innocent and could thus reconcile her suicide according to St. Augustine's dilemma, but it is contradictory to the rest of the play which declares Lucretia's innocence and chastity, with the Choruses even comparing her to Christ. No one within the play besides Junius and Tarquinius impute any unchaste desire to Lucretia. Her consent is never contested except in this scene.

Lucretia's love for Collatinus is reaffirmed in the next passage: "Oh my beloved Collatinus....You have tuned my body / To the chaste note of a silver lute" (125). Here, the relationship of Lucretia and her husband, which is defined by purity and chastity, is contrasted to that of Lucretia and Tarquinius, which is defined by lust and passion, at least on the part of Tarquinius. But Lucretia's pleas have no effect. Once more, Tarquinius reasserts his newfound view of beauty: "Loveliness like this / Cannot be chaste / Unless all men are blind!" (125). Now,

beauty and chastity are mutually exclusive not because beautiful women cannot be chaste, but because of the effect that their beauty has on the men around them. Tarquinius uses Lucretia's beauty as an excuse to justify the rape. Continuing in this vein, he later declares:

TARQUINIUS: Beauty is all
In life!
It has the peace
Of death.
LUCRETIA: If beauty leads to this,
Beauty is sin. (126)

Even Tarquinius' description of beauty is contradictory, indicating that it is essential to life but also has the peace of death; Lucretia's beauty has the power to give peace to Tarquinius, but it also gives rise to great passion. Furthermore, in acting on his desire, Lucretia's beauty leads Tarquinius to his own death and hers. Lucretia's responds that beauty is sin if it leads "to this" and the ambiguity of the word "this" asserts that beauty is sinful for leading both to desire and to death.

The destructive consequences of the rape for Tarquinius continue to be emphasized. The Chorus urges Tarquinius to leave, as always, narrating the events of the rape and interpreting their significance. Even on stage in the moment of the rape, the actions of Lucretia and Tarquinius are being instantly reinterpreted by the Chorus, causing the story to become a means of glorifying Christianity. Here, they predict the effects of the rape on Tarquinius' future:

MALE AND FEMALE CHORUS: Go! Tarquinius!
Whilst passion is still proud
And before your lust is spent
Humbled with heavy shame.
If you do not repent
Time itself cannot
Erase this moment from your name (126).

The omniscient Choruses hint at the creation of the myth which will cause Tarquinius to be forever remembered as Lucretia's rapist. Tarquinius himself also seems to be aware of his own destruction:

TARQUINIUS: I hold the knife
But bleed.
Thought I have won
I'm lost....
LUCRETIA: No!
TARQUINIUS: Give me my birth
Again
Out of your loins
Of pain! (126)

Here the moral dilemma of Tarquinius is explored. He knows that the rape will be the source of his own destruction, but still continues to pursue the rape. Next, Tarquinius describes the rape as a rebirth, conflating Lucretia with his mother and indicating the re-naming and change of identity that will take place after the rape. This imagery also echoes the Etruscan pairing of death and fertility. Once again, Tarquinius does not desist. He "pulls the coverlet from the bed and threatens her with his sword," intending to gain her consent by force:

TARQUINIUS: Poised like a dart.
LUCRETIA: At the heart of woman
MALE CHORUS: Man climbs towards his God,
FEMALE CHORUS: Then falls to his lonely hell.
[He mounts the bed]
OMNES: See how the rampant centaur mounts the sky
And serves the sun with all its seed of stars.

Now the great river underneath the ground
Flows through Lucretia and Tarquinius is drowned
[Tarquinius beats out the candle with his sword. The front cloth falls quickly].
(126)

The description of man climbing "towards his God" suggests that Tarquinius has made Lucretia his god, and therefore causes his own damnation. However, this description and the one that

follows of “the rampant centaur” seem to be once again paradoxical. The centaur ascending to the stars could be none other than Chiron, but the description of him as “rampant” and spreading his seed among the stars is contrary to the portrayal of Chiron in myth: “unlike other Centaurs, who were violent and savage, he was famous for his wisdom and knowledge of medicine” (*Encyclopedia Britannica*). The following reference to “the great river underneath the ground” is most likely a reference to the river Styx in Hades, which once again brings to bear the paradox of life and death – Lucretia is capable of giving both death and life to Tarquinius, giving birth to him and also drowning him.

After this series of paradoxes, the rape occurs and the Choruses begin their Interlude which once again explains the scene in a Christian context. Their summary cannot be described as anything but an oversimplification. After the complex struggle between Lucretia and Tarquinius, the Choruses arrive at the following:

FEMALE AND MALE CHORUS: Here in this scene you see
Virtue assailed by sin
With strength triumphing
All this is endless
Sorrow and pain for Him. (126)

This interpretation is trite compared to the intensity of the previous scene. It would be comforting to think that this is an instance of irony, but this is not the case; Britten devised the Chorus as a framing device intended to simplify and reconcile the play’s contradictions. Nowhere is its failure clearer than in this passage. It is true that the triumph of Tarquinius is one of strength. The plot to kill Lucretia and impugn her honor by placing her body next to a naked servant is not mentioned, and Lucretia therefore consents solely to save her own life, not her reputation as in Livy’s myth.

Bianca continues her attempts to shield Lucretia from Collatinus, lying to him and saying that Lucretia is still asleep and refusing to answer him when he asks if Tarquinius has been there, as she presages the events that are about to take place (133). When Lucretia reenters, and she and Collatinus discourse on their love, with the implication that it was inevitable that some tragedy would befall them, again reaffirming Lucretia's chaste love and loyalty to Collatinus: "To love as we loved / Was to live, on the edge of tragedy" (133). Lucretia then explains the tragedy that has befallen them:

LUCRETIA: ...Last night Tarquinius ravished me
And tore
The fabric of our love.
What we had woven
Tarquinius has broken.
What I have spoken
Never can be forgotten (133).

Her explanation continues the metaphor of weaving introduced with the women spinning in Act I. Collatinus consoles Lucretia, using the same argument as Livy's, that the will sins and not the body:

COLLATINUS: If spirit's not given, there is no need of shame.
Lust is all taking – in that there's shame.
What Tarquinius has taken
 Can be forgotten;
What Lucretia as given
 Can be forgiven. (133)

But of course these pleas and his love for her are not enough to cleanse Lucretia. She is convinced that only death can render her pure once more:

LUCRETIA: Even love's too frail
To bear the weight of shadows.
Now I'll be forever chaste,
[She stabs herself]
With only death to ravish me.
See how my wanton blood
 Washes my shame away!

[*She dies*] (133).

As in Livy's version, the spilling of her tainted blood releases Lucretia from her shame and allows her to regain her purity in death. Her death is the only means to redemption, which is still as paradoxical as in the original myth, given that Collatinus is willing to forgive her and that she herself did not consent to the rape, even if her statement to Tarquinius (In the forest of my dreams / You have always been the Tiger) suggests that she was attracted to him.

As Collatinus grieves over Lucretia, Junius begins his speech to the Romans, calling upon them to avenge Lucretia's death by overthrowing the Etruscans. He concludes (in what must be an aside, although it is not indicated in the stage directions) that he will now become the ruler of Rome: "*Destroyed by beauty / Their throne will fall. I will rule*" (133). Interestingly, there is no mention specifically of the Roman Republic, and to an audience unfamiliar with the history of the myth and the founding of the Roman Republic, Junius' speech could just as easily signal a new monarchy under his reign. The libretto seems to be less concerned with the political effect of the myth than the personal one, which is a huge departure from Livy's version, in which the significance of Lucretia's death is derived primarily from its political consequences.

Bianca and Lucia are next to mourn Lucretia, placing upon her the wreath that she had made in the prior scene and mourning for her lost beauty: "*So brief is beauty. / Why was it begun? It is done*" (134). The Female Chorus echoes their sentiment, comparing beauty to "the hoof of an unbroken filly / Which thundering up to the hazel hedge / Leaps into the sun" and repeating the declaration of Bianca and Lucia (134). The grief over Lucretia's lost beauty, which caused her own destruction, is continued as all the players sing, summarizing the essential dilemma of the play:

OMNES: How is it possible that she
Being so pure should die!

How is it possible that we
Grieving for her should live?
So brief is beauty.
Is this it all? It is all! It is all!
[*Collatinus, Junius, Bianca and Lucia kneel round Lucretia's body. They stay like this until the end of the opera*]. (134)

This passage contemplates the nature of suffering, especially the suffering of those who are innocent like Lucretia, and renders the myth timeless and powerful. If these were the last words of the play, perhaps the libretto would have been better received. But instead of allowing the audience to leave contemplating the question, “*Is this it all?*” for themselves, the Epilogue performed by the Choruses answers it for them, again forcing Christian morality onto the play.

The Epilogue begins with the same question, “Is it all?” asked by the Female Chorus and subsequently, “...Is all this suffering and pain, / Is this in vain?... / Can we attain / nothing / But wider oceans of our tears?” concluding that if this is indeed all, then there is no reason to keep on living (134). The Male Chorus answers:

It is not all. Though our nature's still as frail
And we still fall...
For us did He
 live with such humility;
For us did He
 die that we might live, and He forgive

Wounds that we make
 and scars that we are.
 In His Passion
Is our hope
 Jesus Christ, Saviour. He is all! He is all! (134)

Once again, the audience is provided with the “moral of the story” and it is one that does not do the story justice. All of the complex paradoxes and contradictions are cast aside in favor of a simplified, Christianized interpretation which seems almost bewildering and is certainly nothing less than arbitrary and heavy-handed. What Brutus of the original myth did to Lucretia, seizing

her message and claiming it as his own, the Choruses have now replicated by seizing the entire myth and twisting it to meet a Christian interpretation, echoing the early attempts of Christians before St. Augustine who attempted to do the same.

An audience, especially one unfamiliar with the original myth of the rape of Lucretia, might understandably be put off by Britten and Duncan's interpretation, with its confusing and inappropriate Chorus and unsatisfying conclusion. However, a closer analysis reveals that the libretto's many unresolved dialectics were present in Livy's myth, and are thus an important part of the myth, such as the oppositions of male and female, the *domus* and the *forum*, guilt and innocence. These tensions, however inconvenient, are central to the myth itself; it is hard to imagine a rendition of the myth that would successfully resolve them without also robbing the myth of its power as a cultural signifier. The contradictions of the myth expose the paradoxes with the Roman culture, which undermined Roman culture even in its most precious founding myth. The fact that these contradictions continue to be irreconcilable means that our own culture has not yet found a solution to the dilemma – we are not yet confident of proclaiming Lucretia innocent or guilty. And perhaps it is not necessary to pronounce judgment on Lucretia, as long as we are able to judge the culture which produced her story.

The closing words of the libretto help to redeem the opera, if only a little:

MALE AND FEMALE CHORUS: Since Time commenced or Life began
Great Love has been defiled by Fate or Man.
Now with worn words and these brief notes we try
To harness song to human tragedy. (134)

These words of the Chorus at the very least acknowledge that what they have done is only an attempt at understanding something much greater than themselves: the universal problem of how to respond to human suffering. Still, even these closing words do not take into account the complexity of the libretto as a whole, which (whether intentionally or not) is remarkable in its

development of its many binaries and paradoxical relationships. These paradoxes reveal, as Livy's myth does, some of the deepest problems of human nature: the desire to destroy what we find beautiful, and the human impulse to transform individual pain into a collective experience which is representative of the culture's values. The latter problem illustrates how private suffering is paradoxical when transformed by the culture into a public symbol. This cultural appropriation has the potential to transfigure the individual's grief, and fail to appreciate the intensely private and more genuine experience of pain. Despite cultural implications, suffering is an individual experience which is then repressed rather than resolved through the imposition of cultural meaning.

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