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Psyche at Play in Shakespeare's *The Rape of Lucrece*

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Abstract:

The Rape of Lucrece is a Narrative poem by Shakespeare having all the features of a Drama. The story of Lucretia has a significant impact on Roman History as it was a significant reason for the establishment of Roman Republic which is why there were many attempts to depict the same. The most prominent account was done by Shakespeare in his poem where he uses his characters to build a voice, a voice in conflict by the mind, a conflict between Desire and Honour, Real and Unreal. The poem has two characters in play with the psyche, Tarquin and Lucretia. Tarquin's mind is bound with the conflict between his desire and his honour and imagining the consequences of his faulty desire he chooses his desire only. While Lucrece's narrative has the mind facing reality and convincing herself that suicide is only option left to her. This paper aims at the depiction of the psyche in a story popular in literature and art and how each detail of the conflict of Lucrece's mind in the poem can be interpreted.

Keywords: metacritical, narrative, psyche, conflictual, rape.

The Narrative of Lucrece:

The Rape of Lucrece or Lucretia had been the reason for the establishment of Roman Republic and the rebellion against the tyranny of the Tarquins. Because this incident had a

specific impact on the history of Rome, the story of Lucrece has many accounts. There were accounts of the same indicating the question of political history and Lucrece only a part of such historical account. There had been narrations which focused on Lucrece as a central subject and dealt with the question of whether Lucrece consented to the Rape. There were questions about Lucrece committing the act of suicide whether to save her honour or to kill her guilt. Various and numerous versions of the legend can be found in the history of both Literature and Art.

Talking about Literature, the first account of the rape of Lucretia was made by Livy concerning itself with the historical and political import of the incident. Ovid's account concerns itself with the historical impact too although he had been more poetic in his rendition. It was Shakespeare whose account of Lucrece minimizes the historical significance of the rape. The history can only be found in the Argument which precedes the poem and in the last few stanzas. Because of the psyches of the two main characters involved in the poem and surrounding the act of rape and suicide, Shakespeare's Rape of Lucrece offers unique narration than any other previous accounts of the same. The focus of Shakespeare in his account of the rape of Lucrece is on the before and aftermath of the sexual assault. The psyche of the rapist before the rape is in conflict with his desire for momentary pleasure and with his honour as a nobleman of Rome in which his desire wins and the forceful act is done.

The rape of Lucrece is not only about the rape of a Roman matron but also explores the physical as well as emotional trauma of the victim, the dilemma of her mind in conflict morally and her suicide followed by a public confession. The argument has a historical significance which tells us that the Tarquins are banished and a republic is established overthrowing Roman monarchy. Shakespeare did not mention any of the Tyrannical actions of the Tarquin family. He is more interested in the psyche of a rapist who had reason and honour yet follows lust, the effect of such decision on the psyche of the victim and emotional consequences for the same. Shakespeare represents the psychological state of Tarquin and Lucrece both in a very realistic way.

Ian Donaldson remarks, "No other version of the Lucretia story explores more minutely or with greater psychological insight the mental processes of the two major characters." There has been emphasis on the psychological state of both the antagonist and protagonist which justifies Lucretia's decision to commit suicide. Suicide is the ultimate consequence of the Rape

for Lucrece as she does not live to see the establishment of Monarchy or the banishment of Tarquins.

In Shakespeare's *The Rape of Lucrece* much attention is paid to moral and internal debates of Tarquin and Lucrece. The internal moral fights of the characters minimize the historical and political significance and represent the characters in reality with their own flaws through the medium of their psyche. Shakespeare is also unique in the way that he uses Lucrece instead of Lucretia, Anglo-Saxon version of her name also gave her independence to speak for herself. Shakespeare's *The Rape of Lucrece* has two major incidents, the rape in the beginning and the suicide at the end. However, these two incidents are bridged by the psyches of the two characters i.e. Tarquin and Lucrece.

Tarquin's Psyche and Internal Debate:

The first half of Shakespeare's *The Rape of Lucrece* examines the psyche of the rapist. Tarquin is presented as a person who has his reason in his thoughts and who is aware of the consequences of his actions which are driven from lust yet he ignores such reason. The inner workings of Tarquin's mind are explored which directly establishes his guilt:

“As from this cold flint I enforc'd this fire,

So Lucrece must I force to my desire” (181-182)

Tarquin submits to his desire even before reason steps in. He forces himself on Lucrece and becomes deaf to his pleas as the psyche already decided to pave way only for the desire and reason went unattended. Tarquin who is the rapist and abuser of Lucrece's physical and mental state himself engages in conflict between his desire and duty when he considers the consequences of rape for himself. His desire would risk him his martial honour, his family's name, his Roman piety and his manhood along with his friendship with Collatine. He thinks that his own descendants would curse him if he goes blindly behind his desire: “crush my bones” and “wish I their father had not been”. He also ponders upon thinking that he will gain nothing in moving ahead with such an act but might lose everything. Tarquin's psyche even agrees that he doesn't have any reason to go ahead and justify such act and even Collatine had not done

anything to him. When he finds no reason or excuse, he lets his desire win: "Why hunt then I for color or excuses?" (267)

Before going to Lucrece's chamber, Tarquin is engaged in a psychological debate of whether or not he should go ahead with such an act of rape on thinking upon its consequences. Tarquin's conscience is self centered in the way that his internal debate only involves consequences of the rape to his own status as a nobleman and not to Lucrece's state. Tarquin is divided in his internal conflict: "Tween frozen conscience and hot burning will" (246). He says: "desire my pilot is, beauty my price." (279) he declares directly the win of his desire over his reason. Tarquin's desire is portrayed through "loss of control and hot burning will". There are interpretations of a *The Rape of Lucrece* where Collatine is held responsible for the rape as he was the one who boasted about Lucrece's beauty and virtue through images of red and white. Tarquin also repeats the same while blaming Lucrece herself to be the cause of his own desire:

"The colour in thy face,

That... Makes the Lily pale,

And the red Rose blush...

...The fault is thine.

For these thine eyes betray thee unto mine".(477-483)

He is so much engraved with his lustful desire that he loses the reason completely. He asserts that Lucrece's colour and eyes betrayed her. Tarquin is also aware of the fact that even the gods would condemn his act and his spirituality also loses in front of his desire: "The powers to whom I pray abhor this fact; how can they assist me in the act". (349-50) Lucrece's pleas affect Tarquin in a manner that his desire grew more and that her protests " swells his uncontrolled tide"(645) . This overpowering of desire is not only in his psyche but his physical actions too:

"Yield to my love: if not, enforced hate

Instead of love's coy couch, shall rudely tear thee" (668-669)

During the rape, the desire overpowers Tarquin's reason so much that he threatens Lucrece to kill a servant and place him in Lucrece's bed and kill her too, the shame for which will follow her husband. Reason came to Tarquin's mind often but desire overpowered which is evident in the fact that he had to render Lucrece as silent and invisible and himself as deaf and blind. He had to stop his ears to avoid listening to Lucrece's pleadings and also avoided the very sight of her face and body. It is ironical that even before the sight of Lucrece, Tarquin was possessed with her beauty and chastity just by Collatine's description and when he was about to fulfill his desire and lust, he could not bear to see her body and face. Tarquin extinguishes the lamp in Lucrece's chamber by his foot: "for light and lust are deadly enemies". (674) He stops Lucrece's cries and her repetition of arguments which existed in his own psyche moments ago.

"Till with her own white fleece her voice controll'd

Entombs her outcry in her lips sweet fold:

For with the nighty linen she wears

He pens her piteous clamours in her head; (678-81)

His hot lust and desire is calm only by Lucrece's tears and the act of rape and not by her sight and her cries which were controlled by him:

"Cooling his hot face in the chastest tears

That ever modest eyes with sorrow shed." (682-683)

The image of Lucrece entombed in her own clothes represents the final image which concludes the poem in which her corpse is displayed on the streets of Rome for consent of people to avenge against the Tarquins. It is this lust in Tarquin which lets his desire win over reason

"While lust is in pride no exclamation

Can curb his heat or rein his rash desire." (705-06)

Animal imagery is used to describe Tarquin's psyche. He is compared to 'grim lion', 'The foul night walking cat', 'the Wolf', 'serpent' and the 'cockatrice'.

After the rape, Tarquin leaves the place and the psyche of him is depicted by the narrator.

“She bears the load of lust he left behind, and he the burden of a guilty mind.” (734-735)

Lucrece's Psyche and Internal Debate:

In the second half of the poem, the psyche of Lucrece is dealt with in which her emotional and psychological state is explored which gradually leads her to arrive at a decision to commit suicide. The story of Lucrece is about justice that is public, as banishing the Tarquins and establishing republic is not a revenge taken or justice served personally to her which is why emphasis can be found on Lucrece's own evolving ethics. Lucrece use the same arguments as that of Tarquin's to dissuade him of her husband, his family and his princely name.

“She conjurers him by high Almighty Jove,

By knighthood, gentry and sweet friend ship's oath...” (568 to 569)

She accuses him of having violated her hospitality and of being true and true to himself:

“That to his borrow'd bed he make retire,

And stoop to honour, not to foul desire”. (573 to 574)

This is Lucrece dealing with reality but after Tarquin left the scene, her psychological state appears as there is no one to blame on to or to share her sorrow and suffering which is why she relies on abstractions such as Night, Opportunity and Time to put the blame on and relies on the painting of Troy and its figures, primarily the figure of Hecuba to share her sufferings with. Lucrece gets involved in a mental process in which she explores her physical, emotional and moral condition after the foul act.

Lucrece's eyes are closed before Tarquin touches her which indicates a preconscious character. When she opens her eyes she hardly has any conscious awareness of the nature of act Tarquin intends yet she pleads with a full conscious character. After the rape, she tries to cope with the act and her pain in a subconscious manner until she decides to commit suicide; she becomes the figure of suffering. Rape is not an isolated event but her sufferings after the rape gradually leads her to the decision of suicide. She seeks recreation in her own mind and the

projects her feelings on abstractions. Her mind is not ready to directly confront her culprit that is Tarquin. She finds abstractions to lay blame onto someone. Her mind is at a stage where she knows the truth but is not able to directly confront with it and accept it.

She's alone and needs company-'any sort of company-human, animal, inanimate-is preferable to solitude.' Before the rape she pleads with rationality and later there is no rationality left. She vents her anger which she has for Tarquin towards Night. She calls Night 'the image of hell', 'a Black Stage' and 'a Ravisher'. She blames opportunity which allowed Tarquin for the act and passes verdict against this opportunity:

"Guilty thou of murder and of theft,
Guilty of forgery and subordination,
Guilty of treason, forgery and shift,
Guilty of incest, that abomination:

An accessory by thine inclination." (918- 922)

She calls time, "a Carrier of Grisly Care" and "Virtuous Snare". She lays consequence of the blame on time: "Be Guilty of my death since of my crime"(931) Lucrece calls on Philomel to share her grief: "to make thy sad grove in my dishevelled hair." Her tale of complaints signals further action of suicide and she seeks a knife to kill herself. She addresses her own hand:

" Poor hand, why quiver'st thou at this decree!

Honour thyself to rid me of this shame,

For, if I die, my honour lives in thee,

But if I live, thou liv'st in my defame."(1030-1033)

When Lucrece's maid asks her what is it that troubles her matron, she replies:

"The repetition cannot make it less;

For more it is then I can well express.

And that deep torture may be called to hell

Where more is felt than one had power to tell." (1285- 1288)

She is so terrified by the act that she is not even able to repeat it as she cannot express the torture she went through and the pain she felt. She assumes such torture to be hell. She experiences the same torture in repeating what she went through in writing a letter to her husband. After much thought she is able to write a letter and do not express herself, her grief or the act but only calls for her husband. Out of such irrational blames she realizes that all the blame which she lays on abstractions is actually in vain and Tarquin should only be blamed.

After such a rational shift of the psyche, she again moves towards the painting of Troy to have company in her sorrow. Lucrece observes the painting of Troy. She finds many figures, objects, characters through passing her eyes from the painting and encounters people dead, lamentations of wives for their husbands and tears.

"At last she calls to mind where hangs a piece

Of skilful painting, made for Priam's Troy.

... A Thousand lamentable objects there." (1373 -1375)

Lucrece looks at the painting of Troy and sees the soldiers dying in the war:

"And from the strand of Dardan where they fought,

To Simois' reedy banks the red blood ran,

Whose waves to imitate the battle sought." (1436 - 1438)

The blood of the soldiers is regarded as sacrifice and given due honour and pride in the same way she thinks her blood would prove her chastity and save her honour. Her moving eyes then stop at the figure of Hecuba who is depicted in the painting as shocked and still.

"Staring on Priam's wounds with her old eyes,

Which bleeding under Pyrrhus' proud foot lies." (1450-1451)

The figure with which Lucrece recognizes herself was of Hecuba in terms of physical, emotional and moral suffering:

“On this sad shadow, Lucrece spends her eyes,
And shapes her sorrow to the beldame’s woes ,
Who nothing wants to answer her but cries
And bitter words to ban her cruel foes.
The painter was no good to lend her those,
And therefore Lucrece swears he did her wrong,
To give her so much grief and not a tongue”.(1459-1465)

There is an exchange of grief between the two. Lucrece complain that the painter gave Hecuba so much grief but no tongue to express that grief. Lucrece searches in the painting to find equivalent suffering as her own and finds Hecuba. She makes a connection with the figures in paintings. “She lends them words, and she their looks doth borrow” (1496-1498) which can be seen as a significant exchange between the verbal and the visual.

She analyses the figure of Hecuba and relates to her fallen nobility. She lost her beauty, her blue blood turned black and she lost her own existence. She “showed life imprisoned in a body dead”. If Lucrece lives, she will also be like her imprisoned in her own body and she decides to take her life and be freed from her prison. The narrator in this ekphrasis also analyses the visual where Ajax’s eyes can be found rolling depicting his rage and rigor, Ulysses has a mild glance which signifies his self control, Achilles’ war like figure is replaced by the vision of his spear only, the eyes of the Trojans can be seen through the loopholes of towers which showed them war wearied.

Lucrece used the painting and figures of painting to deal and interpret her own situation. Then there is the figure of Sinon whose appearance look humble but is full of deceit. Lucrece could not believe that such an innocent face could bear so much evil inside the mind just as Tarquin. She compares Sinon directly with Tarquin:

“In him the painter laboured with his skill

To hide deceit and give him harmless show.” (1506-1507)

She trusts Tarquin in the same manner that Priam trusts Sinon and compares them:

“For even as subtle Sinon here is painted,

So sober sad, so weary and so mild,

As if with grief of travail he had fainted

To me came Tarquin armed to beguild

With outward honesty, but yet defiled

With inward vice: as Priam him did cherish

So did I Tarquin, so my Troy did perish.” (1541-1547)

She is aware of how her own personal action would transfer into a larger political and military order and she would play an active role in the total action of Rome. Lucrece tears the figure of Sinon on the painting with her nails assuming his deceit as that of Tarquin. Lucrece also associate herself with figures of Priam, Helen and the city of Troy which faced destruction by abduction of a woman also referring to destruction of Roman monarchy as a consequence to her rape. Lucrece identifies herself with the city and observe the painting: “for one’s offence why should so many fall, to plague a private sin in general?” (1483-1484)

She questions the fact that why is it so that for one person’s sin, it is the entire city that falls. But here, she also compares her situation where Tarquin’s sin needs to be addressed and justice should be served to her as well as Rome in the form of a movement. The painting in the end helps Lucrece to come back to her senses and accept the fact that a brutal act of rape has been done to her and now is the time to act against it.

After a long description of Troy painting she gets back to rationality and decides to let everyone know what happened to her and how her honour was ravished. She pledges not to die unless Collatine hears the cause for her death. She reminds the knights of their oath to avenge her

rape and only then she names Tarquin. Her irrational psyche led her to be rational while deciding to commit suicide and prove her innocence publicly.

When Lucrece appears in front of Collatine, she is unable to find words and her appearance speaks for her.

“Who finds his Lucrece clad in morning Black

And round about her tear disdained eye,

Blue circles stream’d like rainbows in the sky.” (1585-1587)

After the rape, her psyche relied on abstractions and the painting but after she pulled herself together, she blamed Tarquin not only for her rape but for her murder.

“He, he fair lords, ’tis he

That guides this hand to give this wound to me”.(1723-1724)

Even when Tarquin left the poem immediately after the rape, his presence can be found in Lucrece’s psyche until her final act of suicide. She decides to kill herself yet she questions the men of what is her guilt. She rationally declares that even though her mind is pure and she knows who the sinner is, there is no option left to her rather than suicide to save her honour :

“What is the quality of my offence,

Being constrained with dreadful circumstance?

May my pure mind with the foul at dispense,

My low-declined honour to advance?

May any terms of acquit me from this chance?

The poisoned fountain clears its self again;

And why not I from this compelled stain?” (1702-09)

When she finally moves out of her own trauma, she asserts her innocence and purity of her mind: "Immaculate and spotless in my mind". (1656)

Her words where she blames Tarquin finally after blaming imaginary abstractions are accompanied by her blood. She shed her blood which was polluted by Tarquin to signify her purity. Blood is closely connected with Lucrece's chastity and her existence. At the time of revealing Tarquin's name and accusing him for her murder, she is unable to speak his name and after many delays and breaths she utters his name. Lucrece's knife from her body was removed by Brutus,

"Her bubbling blood doth divide

In two slow rivers, that the crimson blood

Circles her body in on every side,

Who like a late-sac'd island vastly stood

Bare and unpeopled in this fearful flood.

Some of her blood still pure and red remain'd

And some look'd black, and that false Tarquin stain'd."(1737-1743)

The blood image is also found in the figure of Hecuba from the painting. This raises the question of existence. The character of Lucrece, her body and mind which once was pure is no longer the same. The grief of the body and mind resulted in making both Hecuba and Lucrece's blood as Black. In the beginning of the poem, Lucrece is described with red and white imagery. 'Red' symbolise her beauty and 'White' her virtue. The same imagery can also be found in the last suicide scene where 'red' for blood represents her chastity and 'white' virtue becomes black blood representing how Tarquin's act had stained her body and soul. At the time of suicide, she has a 'joyless smile' on her face, indicating satisfaction and pain together. She is satisfied with the answer of the Knights-men who were prepared to avenge her rape and the pain existed with such satisfaction.

Conclusion:

In Shakespeare's poem, Tarquin's psyche provides a broader perspective by going through mental processes and internal debates. As a Roman prince, Tarquin is looked through a glass of judgement and also those judgements are reflected in his internal debates. He rationalises and think about those judgements yet his morality cannot win over his carnal desires but after the rape, he is guilty because of his loss of sense: "He scowls and hates himself for his offence". (738)

Lucrece's psyche goes through internal debates derived from feelings of grief and doubt. Tarquin's decision of rape was preceded by his internal conflict and Lucrece's decision of suicide was preceded by her own internal conflict. Thus the two incidents which are central in the poem i.e. the rape and the suicide goes through mental processes of its characters. The incident of rape and suicide both has Lucrece's body at the centre but its before and aftermath has psyches of Tarquin and Lucrece at the centre of the poem. Tarquin's psyche goes through a conflict and desire of his body wins over his psyche. On the other hand, Lucrece's psyche also goes through a mental process but her mind wins through the medium of killing her body. Shakespeare's version of the story of Lucrece is considered to be the most psychologically complex version ever written for internal struggles in psyche of main characters. It has an interdisciplinary significance for its dual abilities of verbal and visual to evoke emotion.

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