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Towards a Critical Reevaluation of *The Rape of Lucrece*

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The Rape of Lucrece is currently not amongst Shakespeare's most popular works.¹ It can be argued that 1855 lines of iambic pentameter, distributed among 265 septets of steady "rhyme royal" (*ababbcc*), is not the most fashionable format in the Netflix-obsessed late-modern cultural climate of 2019. But this wasn't always the case. Together with numerous editions and praising references by fellow poets, in 1598 Gabriel Harvey annotated in the margin of his copy of Chaucer that "[t]he younger sort take much delight in Shakespeare's *Venus and Adonis*, but his *Lucrece* and his tragedy of *Hamlet Prince of Denmarke*, have it in them to please the wiser sort" (*apud* Hehmeyer, 2013: 140). This makes us think about the intellectual depth and popularity with which the poem was perceived at the time. A high regard which contrasts with the marginal position the poem holds nowadays within the Shakespeare canon. Even specifically, within the specialized circles of Shakespearean scholarship, the poem has not fared too well and, as Katharine Eisaman Maus has suggested, such limited attention can be at least partly attributed to how modern critics have "persistently object[ed] to its elaborate rhetoric" (Eisaman Maus, 1986: 66). This is, I believe, an accurate characterization of much of what has been written about the poem. A line of inquiry that is to a large extent exhausted, or at least outdated, as debates about the rhetorical quality of Shakespeare's works have become rare in a research community that now tends not to evaluate, but to historicize Shakespeare's writing.

However, there is a different approach that has kept the poem alive, and that is (what I should broadly term) feminist criticism. It is not a surprise that feminism would have something to say about a poem that re-versifies the semi-historical, semi-mythical account of the rape of Lucrece, the virtuous, chaste and beautiful wife of the nobleman Collatine, at the

hands of Tarquin, son of the last Roman king: a poem that provides an extensive and intensive representation of the psychological processes involved in a sexual assault; a poem that is concluded by Lucrece's suicide, the banishment of Tarquin and the rest of the royal family, and the establishment of the Roman republic. So taking the text's sustained attention to the motivations, processes and consequences of rape, my initial standpoint is that the poem is worth revisiting in 2019, a time in which sexual violence – from the Harvey Weinstein scandal to the Spanish “Wolfpack”/“La Manada”, just to name two high-profile cases – has taken up a specially relevant space within the preoccupations of late-modern feminism.

Why did Lucrece commit suicide?

Much of what has been written about the poem has had to do with Lucrece, her reaction to abuse and, especially, the motivations and implications of her final suicide. To frame the debate and establish what I see as the three basic strands of criticism regarding Lucrece, we have to go back in time around eleven centuries prior to the writing of the poem, for it was Saint Augustine in *The City of God*, his influential theological/philosophical/political treaty that inaugurated a moralistic evaluation of Lucrece's suicide that has influenced later critical reactions to the poem. If she was chaste, why was she killed, wonders Saint Augustine. In his view, if women keep a clean mind during the sexual aggression, even when raped, “in the witness of their own conscience, they enjoy the glory of chastity” (Augustine, [426 AD] 1871: 30). This is not the case of Lucrece for Augustine, who finds her actions incoherent and explains that in her suicide Lucrece was excessively eager for honour and covetous of glory. Shakespeare's poem reactivated the debate in 1594, and as Sasha Roberts has shown, in the 17th century Lucrece is represented through “contradictory images (...) as both a honourable icon and adulterous sinner” (Roberts, 2002: 107), the latter position being articulated through numerous

Augustinian-inspired attacks, which include one by Margaret Cavendish.

It is difficult to gauge the contemporary strength of these “Augustinian criticisms” of the poem, but Katharine Eisaman Maus’s article locates the two latest scholarly discussions in the 1960s. It is tempting to assume that in 2019 Saint Augustine’s views are anachronistic. But as hard as it is to imagine an Augustinian attack on Lucrece’s suicide within current gender debates, we shouldn’t be too quick to assume that Augustinian values are a thing of the past. Taking into account that Christian faith is cemented on the idea that “God created man in his own image” (Genesis 1:27), Christianity assumes that human life is sacred from the moment of its inception and any attempt of any kind to end it is unjustifiable. Christian beliefs on the preservation of life go beyond suicide and are intimately linked to current debates on issues such as euthanasia and pregnancy termination. What we could call “pro-Life ideology” rests on perspectives on human life that we could call Augustinian. In other words, as much as feminism will quickly oppose this view, it is not difficult to accept that Christian-inflected reactions that deem Lucrece’s suicide as morally reprehensible may be still available now.

The antagonism between pro-life movements and feminism has been constant since the passing of abortion laws in most Western countries in the late 1960s and 70s (UK: 1967/US: 1973). But, paradoxically, Lucrece’s suicide makes her an uncomfortable heroine for feminism too. Renowned Shakespeareans, such as Nancy Vickers (1985) and Coppelia Kahn (1997: 27-45) among others, have expressed their reservations towards Lucrece, because of the poem’s “belittling image of [Lucrece’s] feminine passivity” (Hyland, 2003: 119). To put it succinctly, this critical position interprets Lucrece not just as a victim of Tarquin’s abuse, but also as an accomplice of patriarchy in the way she fails to resist male domination. After the Augustinian, this second perspective reads Lucrece’s suicide as an example of victimized, disempowered and inactive femininity. Within this view, it is problematic to regard Lucrece as an icon for the

kind of feminism that Vickers and Kahn seem to subscribe to. As Catherine Belsey notes, “critics influenced by feminism have predominantly seen Shakespeare’s Lucrece instead as the victim of patriarchal values, whether the passive object of a struggle between men or in her suicide complicit with masculine misogyny” (Belsey, 2001: 315).

It is in this article of 2001 that Catherine Belsey establishes a third position towards Lucrece’s suicide which is in a way closer to later feminist standpoints. According to her, Shakespeare is very clear in presenting the “appalling character” of Tarquin’s assault, which “impugns the identity of a faithful wife and eradicates the personal sovereignty of a human subject”. But instead of reading Lucrece as a victim of a “forcible bodily violation” (*idem* 329), Belsey see her as the source of action and agency, as she is responsible for Tarquin’s banishment, for the end of Roman monarchy, and for the beginning of the democratic republic:

Her final victim-ization, rendered by her own hand, is at the same time the ultimate act of self-determination; the object of violence is simultaneously the subject as agent of her own judicial execution (...) By her death Lucrece dissolves her shame, erases the threat of Collatine’s lineage, and motivates political action (...) a new political order founded not on possession but on consent (*idem* 331).

In her reading of the poem Belsey sides with more recent debates on sexual violence, in which feminism is trying to react against the victimization of rape “survivors” (not of rape “victims”). An updating of the discussion that aspires to improve the epistemology of rape by emphasizing positive models of female agency and empowerment. Lucrece does not survive, but Belsey’s reading makes her a martyr for a higher cause. Her death was worthwhile as she is solely responsible for political change, for democracy, for a more equalitarian model of Roman citizenship.

Within the three perspectives I have presented, I personally connect better with Belsey's take on the poem, but St. Augustine, Kahn and Belsey share a common problem, which is of central importance to late-feminist approaches to rape: that is, their focus on the *evaluation* of the victim's response to the assault, an assessment that is at risk of promoting the hierarchical classification of victims of sexual violence depending on their reaction to the attack. The three perspectives seem to be looking for an answer to the same question: did Lucrece react to Tarquin's assault in the right manner? When it comes to the sexual assault, the poem is very clear and neither St. Augustine, Kahn nor Belsey dispute that Lucrece's endurance is exemplary. But the three are judgmental in their approach to Lucrece's response to the assault and perhaps too comfortable in deciding whether her final suicide was the right way to handle the aggression. From a modern knowledge of post-traumatic disorders, Lucrece's suicide is hardly an enigma, and from this perspective Shakespeare can only be praised for articulating the complexities of a character in such mental distress so richly. But if we can learn anything from a late-modern understanding of sexual violence, it is that, provided that there is no consent (and not even St. Augustine takes issue with that) rape victims' thoughts and behaviour throughout the assault (whether they fought bravely or froze in terror) or how they carried themselves after the assault should take up a marginal space in the conversation, if any space at all. Thus, my point is that, although in different degrees, Augustinian and feminist readings of the poem (whether they attack or defend Lucrece) have so far provided analyses that tend to perpetuate the scrutiny of the victim. In turn, late feminism advises us not to concentrate on Lucrece, but on the perpetrator.

Why did Tarquin rape Lucrece?

In 2019 the question is not anymore "was Lucrece right in killing herself", or "is she a viable

model for feminism”. Late feminism begs us to go back to the poem and take up Lucrece’s question, when she awakes, terrified, as Tarquin has begun the assault, and wonders: “Under what colour he commits this ill” (v. 476). The question then is not “why did Lucrece commit suicide”, but “why did Tarquin rape her”. In her book of 1998, *Gender and Violence in Contemporary Theory*, Gill Allwood claims that it was around the 1980s that feminist debates about rape started to shift:

Although the emphasis was still on women as survivors of violence, the 1980s also saw a growing (if still limited) interest in men and masculinity. Feminists had begun to consider the violent man and not just the survivor. Attention was drawn to the ordinariness of rapists and men who are violent in the home, and the notion that there is something different about them was slowly being worn away (Allwood, 1998: 109).

The first sustained discussion of the issue dates to 1975, with the milestone publication of Susan Brownmiller’s *Against Our Will: Men, Women and Rape*. There she credits Austrian psychologist Wilhelm Reich as being the first to call attention to the “masculine ideology of rape”, but her book stands as the seminal feminist contribution that characterized rape not as an individual but as a systemic problem. As Alison Healicon has recently argued in *The Politics of Sexual Violence* (2016), up until the 80s and 90s, rape had historically been understood as “isolated incidents resulting from individual pathology rather than a pattern within the wider social and political context” (Healicon, 2016: 5). Since then, the literature on the topic has become growingly abundant. Allwood describes rape as an instrument of social control. Anderson and Doherty characterize rape as being socially produced and socially legitimated (2008). The list goes on to paint a picture of what feminism has come to term *rape culture*, that is, the “culture in which sexual violence is a normalized phenomenon, in which male-dominant

environments (...) encourage and sometimes depend on violence against women” (Projanski, 2001: 9), a claim that has gained especial relevance in the last couple of years with the Harvey Weinstein scandal and the resulting proliferation of incidents disclosed by the #metoo movement. Within this perspective of “rape culture”, Allwood lists the three “most commonly held beliefs” rejected by feminism: “that rape is due to men’s sudden and uncontrollable sexual urges; that rape is always committed by strangers; and that rapists are “mad” or in some way marginal to “normal” society” (Allwood, 1998: 125).

If we look at Shakespeare’s poem from a late feminist approach to rape, the result is problematic. From this perspective, the problem is not, as Kahn suggested, that Lucrece is too passive, but that Tarquin’s abuse is represented as a case of lustful insanity. As Belsey reminds us, “in accordance with a metaphoric commonplace of the period, passion enslaves the desiring Tarquin” (Belsey, 2001: 323). And the problem is not just that the rhetoric of the impassioned slave is recurrent in the poem, but that throughout the over 700 lines that Shakespeare dedicates to Tarquin and his inner process, the poem provides a picture of an out-of-line sociopath, unable to control his sexual urges: “My will is strong”, Tarquin says, “past reason’s weak removing” (v. 243). Within this perspective, the poem facilitates a psychoanalytical reading, as Belsey has remarked:

The poem’s image of Tarquin beside himself, slave to an insatiable desire beyond the reach of Law, is strangely Lacanian three hundred and fifty years *avant la lettre*. In a manner that closely resembles Jacques Lacan’s doomed, desiring subject, in command of everything but its own desire (...), the king’s son, dissatisfied with what he already possesses, wants precisely what, because it is forbidden, will destroy him and all he already has (Belsey 2001: 323).

A psychoanalytical reading of the poem, like this one, can be disappointing for

feminism because a Lacanian interpretation would attribute Tarquin's abuse to the *nature* of the human psyche and would fail to frame the poem within the bigger picture of the *culture* of rape, its ideological motivations and political ramifications. As French sociologist Welzer-Lang argues, "the fact that men choose exactly when and whom they hit demonstrates that their behaviour is both intentional and conditioned and that violence is not due to a loss of control" (*apud* Allwood, 1998 121), but Shakespeare's portrayal of Tarquin, inflamed with Lucrece's beauty, falls within the stereotype of the uncontrollably mad rapist that feminism has been resisting in the last few decades. A reading of Tarquin as prey to his untameable passion shuts down the social and institutional dimension of rape. And if we give credibility to Tarquin's explanations of his motives and passions, as Shakespeare's rhetoric promotes, we give in to the individualization of the problem, which disconnects Tarquin's violence from the larger patriarchal culture that feminism demands us to inspect. Perhaps at this point we can take on again the old attack against the poem's rhetoric. But from a feminist perspective, the complaint wouldn't be that the lines are too elaborate but that they are misdirected. To give an example, that instead of making Lucrece blame Tarquin's assault on the "Night", "Opportunity" and "Time" for almost two hundred lines, Shakespeare could have dedicated those long rhetorical passages to exploring the social mechanisms that provoked the attack and led to her suicide.

Before I close my discussion, it is important to acknowledge that, if we look past the sociopathic portrayal of Tarquin, the poem offers plenty of opportunities to comment on the larger patriarchal system that Shakespeare depicts. For example, the poem assumes the essential physical and mental weakness of women as a gender; through mercantile rhetoric and metaphors of possession Lucrece is continuously objectified and subdued to an ownership power-struggle between her father, her husband and, ultimately, her aggressor; and both Belsey and Hyland have provided convincing arguments on how at the end of the poem Brutus, who

will become a leader of the Republic, takes political advantage of Lucrece's suicide. Still, I contend that the portrayal of Tarquin is problematic in the way it erases the ideological foundations of rape. In a late feminist perspective, *The Rape of Lucrece* understands rape as an isolated, extraordinary incident, characterized by contingent and deranged passion, and not as the endemic social, political and cultural problem that the #metoo scandals are a clear example of.

I believe that many of the feminist perspectives I have presented in the discussion are to a large extent complementary and that, rather than excluding each other, together they constitute a crucial body of contributions within the critical history of the poem. But, in 2019, in the age of #metoo, late-modern feminism is especially sensitive to de-politicised understandings of rape, which are still very much in circulation. So, let me close the discussion with an anecdote, that is relevant. In the recent Spanish presidential race, a news comment by Cayetana Álvarez de Toledo, congressional candidate of the Partido Popular illustrates my point. She said:

Enough with instrumentalizing the pain of victims and women. Conjugal violence is not a political crime. There is no macho organization devoted to killing women. There is no ideology behind conjugal violence. There is no organization that says "let's kill women" (Álvarez de Toledo 2019).

[Basta ya de instrumentalizar el dolor de las víctimas y de las mujeres. La violencia de pareja no es un crimen político. No hay una organización de machos que se dedique a matar a mujeres. No hay ideología tras la violencia de pareja. No hay una organización que diga 'matemos a las mujeres'] (translation by the author).

This paper was aimed to explore how *The Rape of Lucrece* has provided problematic responses, even within feminist criticism, by evaluating and overemphasizing Lucrece's suicide. And then I meant to shift the debate towards Tarquin and alert that Shakespeare's

treatment of rape may portray a de-politicised understanding of gender violence, a perspective that would promote views like the one expressed by Cayetana Álvarez. Feminism, I am sure, will continue to shape and be shaped by Shakespeare's works and, in the case of this congresswoman, I am not too worried, because I do not think her ideology welcomes much debate, just as I do not think she reads much Shakespeare.

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