



## Poetic Canvas and Painted Poem in “The Rape of Lucrece”

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### ABSTRACT:

The Rape of Lucretia is a fascinating episode of Roman history, which stretched outside the caveats of historical archives and became a recurring motif in philosophical writings, conduct books, poetry and art. The socio-cultural standing of this episode is undeniable and when we contrast the representation of this historical in two different art forms, one sees a fascinating amalgam of two distinct yet connected art forms poetry and painting. Through Titians’ and Shakespeare’s rendering of this episode, this paper would try to understand the structural nexus of these two art forms and how a comparative study of these two distinct interpretation reveal the workings of the mind of the artist and renders clear the socio-cultural patina of Art.

### KEYWORDS:

Shakespeare, Rape of Lucrece, visual arts, poetry, Renaissance, Titian

“ There is no one so stupid, that has not heard of her.” (Seproni)

Seprone Seproni, Renaissance humanist and scholar, wrote this in one of his dialogues, on seeing the popularity that the roman myth of The rape of Lucretia and her subsequent suicide acquired in the 16<sup>th</sup> century Europe. The myth since its first appearance in Livy’s History of Rome from its Foundations has expanded from a short episode in history to an iconic image of glorious and honourable fate of Roman mother and wife Lucrece, and since then, is cherished as a fable of treachery and honour. The representation of this myth in art, both in paint or ink, is seen as a major “episode” in the sequence of historical events that led to Roman democracy. More than the “rape”, the traumatic physical brutality on Lucrece by Tarquin , the emphasis is always given to what happened due that rape. As Seneca wrote,

“To Brutus we owe liberty, but to Lucretia we owe Brutus” (Seneca)

These lines clearly posit the significance of Lucretia fitting familial roman ethos, and a role model for all the other Roman wives and mother (this being a ready example to go in conduct books prevalent in 16<sup>th</sup> century Europe, Lorenzo Lotto’s “ A Portrait of a woman inspired by Lucretia” (1530-2) (fig. 2) is a case in point)<sup>1</sup> or to put in another manner, a mere instigator of the democracy of Rome. The masterpiece by Boticelli “The Story of Lucretia”(1504) (presents the same myth, which looks like a comic strip panel version of the tale (fig. 1). The painting is divided into three different panels, extreme left side depicts the scene of Tarquin’s entry into Lucretia’s bed chamber, and to the extreme right panel depicts the scene of Lucretia’s

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<sup>1</sup> Lorenzo lotto’s 1530-32 picture illustrates the iconic representation of Lucretia entering the Roman household, woman in the painting holds the drawing of the suicide of Lucretia and there is latin inscription on a sheet of paper, taken from Roman historian Livy’s account, “After Lucretia’s example let no violated women live.”

suicide, and her dead body held by her shocked relatives. The central scene which sequentially should follow the scene on the right, to give dominance is placed in the center instead and is covering most of the canvas, where the dead corpse of Lucretia is hailed as a flag by the standing Junius Brutus, a fellow soldier and a friend to Collatine, Lucretia's husband, (who can be seen mourning for his dead wife) to trigger courage amongst the soldiers to overthrow the Roman monarchy. This symbolic rendition of Brutus taking the oath with Lucretia's bloodstained dagger, became the main icon to be associated with the myth, which also accounts for the abundant representations of the "suicide of Lucretia" in artworks, rather than her "rape".

Two brilliant and popular artists of the time, Shakespeare and Titian, saved this myth from just being a historical account and infused it with the dramatic psychological insight to both the agent of the rape Tarquin and to the victim Lucrece. Shakespeare in his long poem "The rape of Lucrece"(1594) poetically paints the very moment of rape, rendering a personalized narrative to both Tarquin and Lucretia, which is absent in almost all the literary writings of the myth. And Titian, paints a poetic account of the very moment of rape, in his late masterpiece "Tarquin and Lucretia" (1568-71)(Fig. 3), portraying dramatic vivacity and psychological emotiveness on the faces of Tarquin and Lucretia. These two artists, very similarly rendered the physiognomy to Lucretia, projecting the brutality and consequences of the atrocity committed against her body and her person, and also made available to the perceiving eye that this Lucretia is only given space within the four-cornered canvas.

In this paper, I would be discussing the similarity in the projection of this myth by Shakespeare and Titian and Shakespeare's pertinent struggle through the poem, echoing the

treatises of the time<sup>2</sup>, to proclaim poetry over painting and finally realizing that such holistic stands cannot be taken, if one wants to achieve, what one would term a “higher essence” of art, which is showcased by both these artworks working as companion pieces.



Fig.1 The Story of Lucretia ca. 1500-1504, Sandro Botticelli

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<sup>2</sup> Sir Philip Sidney’s *An Apology for Poetry*, Sidney following the meta-tradition, of distinguishing the two arts, painting and poetry, such as Lessing’s *Laocoon* and proclaiming the superiority of one over the other.





Fig.3 "Tarquin and Lucretia" 1571 Tiziano Vecello , Titian

This action of three line sentence is brilliantly remodeled into a dramatically and psychological fraught poetic narration of 226 lines. Shakespeare's Tarquin not only goes through the consequences that his passionate pangs will result in, but also tries to find the motives that guide his lustful eyes to Lucretia's chamber. His reasoning is inconsistent, which shows his impulsive animalistic passion overpowering his reason, but he is fully aware of the import of his deed.

“That my posterity...<sup>[SEP]</sup> Shall curse my bones and hold it for no sin<sup>[SEP]</sup> To wish that I their father had not been.” (Shakespeare) [208-210]

Titian in his dramatic canvas describes this very inconsistent to and fro of passion and reason, through Tarquin’s posture in the painting, as he stands in half upright posture with full artillery and brandishing a shiny cutlass, ready to strike, while his naked knee is thrusting forward between Lucretia’s legs, (fig. 5). He leans forward with all his weight and his other foot is just touching the ground. This not only accentuates the scene’s brutality, but also adds to the drama of the scene, which is painted as a spectacle. The crumpled bed sheet and pillow adds to the chaos of the scene and through the green curtains at the back and quick brush strokes on thick coats of paint, the inner chamber setting is turned into a stage setting, where curtains are opening on to the very moment of rape, forwarding the violence onto the spectators.

Both Shakespeare and Titian convey the quality in Lucretia that has inflamed Tarquin, while at the same time condemning him for his deed. Titian’s Lucretia is drawn with emphasis of a beautiful and emphatically voluptuous naked body very similar to his painting of Venus, the goddess of love. Her nakedness is juxtaposed with the fully armed and clothed, in passionate red, Tarquin, showing her condition as a helpless animal as Shakespeare in his poem, says, “She like a wearied lamb lies panting there” [737]. Shakespeare visually brings forth the beauty of Lucretia and her emotions in a clash of colours, which are reflected on her face, Shakespeare writes,

“From Venus” doves, doth challenge that fair field. Then virtue claims from  
beauty beauty’ red” (Shakespeare 58-59)

This heraldry in Lucrece’s face was seen, <sup>[SEP]</sup> Argued by beauty’s red and virtue’s white.

(64-65) Critic Nancy Vickers, notes in her essay, "This Heraldry in Lucrece's Face", that Tarquin's speech belongs to the genre of "blazon", she defines blazon as a part of poetic tradition which describes a heraldic description of a shield and also to describe woman like an object, looking her at as an art, she sees the silent war of lillies and roses as painted and rhetorically praised by war-like imagery. (Vickers)

Titian's Lucretia is decked with only ornaments that mark her with the status of a princess and also captures her in the conventional metaphor of woman as a conquerable piece of land filled with riches, Donne's Elegy XIX To his mistress going to bed<sup>3</sup>. Shakespeare richly used this metaphor while describing Lucretia's beauty by Tarquin.

Where like a virtuous hills her head entombed is, where like a virtuous monument she lies  
(Shakespeare)(390-391)

Her breasts like ivory globes circled with blue,<sup>[11]</sup><sub>SEP</sub> A pair of maiden worlds unconquered,  
(Shakespeare)(407-408)

Thy never-conquered fort. The fault is thine, (Shakespeare) (483)

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<sup>3</sup> "My mine of precious stones, my empery, How blessed I am in discovering thee!" (30-31)





Fig.5 Detail of Titian's Painting

Catherine R. Simpson in her book, *Where the meanings are: Feminism and Cultural Spaces*, writes, "In Shakespeare only well-born women are raped, their violation becomes one of property, status, symbolic worth as well. The greater those values, the greater the sense of power their conquest confers upon the rapist. Because men rape what other men possess." (Simpson)

Shakespeare gives a brilliant example of Ekphratic representation in the poem, where after the rape the distraught Lucrece describes a wall painting of the Fall of Troy as a, <sup>[[SEP]]</sup>of skillful painting, made for Priam's Troy"(1368) "well-painted piece"(1443) He deftly begins with a remark on the painting as that of a naïve observer, but then he makes Lucrece talk about the illusion that is presented through the painting, and how poetry gives him a vantage point to not only represent something visually but also give it speech, thus expressing it more fully.

"And therefore Lucrece swears he[painter] did her[Hecuba] wrong To give her so much grief, and not a tongue."(1462-63)

" I'll tune thy woes with my lamenting tongue,<sup>[[SEP]]</sup>And drop sweet balm in Priam's painted wound." (1465-66)

The painting as an illusion is so convincing that while describing it, she relates herself to sorrow the of Hecuba and then to the wronged Helen, therefore she not only laments her grief through the painting but also gains courage to physically retaliate. As she sees likeness of Tarquin in the painted "perjured Sinon"(1521) she completely infuses herself into the painted myth and says,

"To me came Tarquin armed, too beguiled<sup>[[SEP]]</sup>/With inward vice. /As Priam him did cherish<sup>[[SEP]]</sup>/So did I Tarquin, so my Troy did perish." (1543-47)

And then she scratches with her nails the tapestry of the painting, this is both an exit and entry point into the painting, entry as this painting which seemed lacking to Shakespeare has completely enraptured his own creation Lucrece into believing its reality and exit as by destroying the very medium of the illusion, Shakespeare sends us into reality when he is talking about the illusionary sorrow of Lucrece, talking about another illusion inside the painting, similar questioning follows as in Hamlet's play within a play,

"What's Hecuba to him or he to Hecuba/That he should weep for her?" (Shakespeare)(II, ii 494-495)

We awe-struck like Hamlet, ask that how cold and unfeeling, can arouse, so much feeling in the breathing, living spectator? Thus, Shakespeare makes it vague his previous assertion of painting lacking in speech which poetry can provide, as that very painting has given Lucrece the space not only to voice out her sorrow but also the prodigious strength to her soul as to heroically look forward to her suicide, thus fulfilling the "higher essence" of an artwork, that of educating and enriching the soul.

Amy Grenstadt, explores this moment in her essay, "Read it in me: the Author's will in Lucrece", "Lucrece learns from Hecuba how to carve her visage into a map of expressing both loyalty and grief." (Greenstadt)

She gains the strength to undo the will written on her forcefully by Tarquin, "I am the mistress of my will" (1120) and she will do so with her tears, again pictorially bringing to memory Titian's Lucrece and the her eyes welled with tears (Fig.6) and use them, "To blot old books and alter their contents" (946)



Fig. 8: Detail from Titian's painting.

Shakespeare surely begins by deriding the painter, by mentioning the lacking speech in the painted picture, <sup>[1]</sup>“The painter was no god to lend her those” (1461)<sup>[1]</sup> but he surely obfuscate the reader and question as to, Whose art is higher, poet's or painter's, by making Lucrece physically and emotionally able to voice the brutality that she suffered on her body and her

person, through the illusion of the painting.

Dundas, in her essay, "Mocking the Mind: The Role of Art in Shakespeare's Rape of Lucrece ", writes, "However conventional this reference to the paragone<sup>4</sup>, the rivalry between poetry and painting, for Shakespeare it has a special interest; inevitably, it brings to the fore the whole nature of illusion, whereby the senses, with the help of imagination, are beguiled into perceiving what is not there." (Dundas)

One of the most prominent feature of both these artworks is the idea of 'gaze' that is made available to us while surveying the work at the very first glance. Titian has painted a pair of awe-struck peeping eyes from one side of the frame, looking in askance at the scene that is made available by the drawn curtains.(Fig. 7) Shakespeare has also significantly and abundantly used the motif of gaze and eyes, Rape itself is first enacted through the eyes, Tarquin"s "silent wonder of still gazing eyes" (84) ends with "cockatrice"s dead-killing eyes." (541)

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<sup>4</sup> Leonardo da Vinci, Paragone, tr. and ed. Irma A. Richter (London & New York: Oxford University Press, 1949)



Fig.7 Detail from Titian's painting

Shakespeare and Titian, in a way are playing with the modes of representation, going with the very spirit of time, Renaissance when art with a capital "A", was being established, Velázquez Las Meninas (1665) exemplary example of the same. The questions thus raised, makes one constantly hark back to the percepts of reality and illusion, and also about the relationship of the viewer and the object. One is always unsure about the actual intention of the artist thus

standing on thin ice, but that very element of artistry not only enriches the experience but also forestalls the very work of art filled with its internal emotions creating a mark on our memory. Shormishtha Panja in her essay “ Titian’s Poesie and Shakespeare’s Pictures” writes, “The reflexivity of the artists serves the function of just drawing attention to the artist’s skill but to the ‘liveless’ quality of art. In this, poet and painter are not rivals but partners, alike frustrated by nature’s effortless abundance and variety. As is painting so is poetry, ut pictura poesis.” (Panja)

The presence of visual reception on the staged performance of the crime, itself in the painting, transfers the brutality and the violence of the crime onto the reader and the peeping viewer who partakes in the crime. But places us into the same helpless domain of Lucrece, to whom is made available only a “dagger” which grants two possible options, one is to voice her suffering and create a space in the very matrix of illusion flitted with reality (and vice versa) and second is an attempt to efface herself from this four-cornered canvas, to which we are as captured.



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