

Zeitschrift: SPELL : Swiss papers in English language and literature
Herausgeber: Swiss Association of University Teachers of English
Band: 22 (2009)

Artikel: Shakespeare's belated Lucrece
Autor: Bezzola Lambert, Ladina
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-130950>

Nutzungsbedingungen

Die ETH-Bibliothek ist die Anbieterin der digitalisierten Zeitschriften auf E-Periodica. Sie besitzt keine Urheberrechte an den Zeitschriften und ist nicht verantwortlich für deren Inhalte. Die Rechte liegen in der Regel bei den Herausgebern beziehungsweise den externen Rechteinhabern. Das Veröffentlichen von Bildern in Print- und Online-Publikationen sowie auf Social Media-Kanälen oder Webseiten ist nur mit vorheriger Genehmigung der Rechteinhaber erlaubt. [Mehr erfahren](#)

Conditions d'utilisation

L'ETH Library est le fournisseur des revues numérisées. Elle ne détient aucun droit d'auteur sur les revues et n'est pas responsable de leur contenu. En règle générale, les droits sont détenus par les éditeurs ou les détenteurs de droits externes. La reproduction d'images dans des publications imprimées ou en ligne ainsi que sur des canaux de médias sociaux ou des sites web n'est autorisée qu'avec l'accord préalable des détenteurs des droits. [En savoir plus](#)

Terms of use

The ETH Library is the provider of the digitised journals. It does not own any copyrights to the journals and is not responsible for their content. The rights usually lie with the publishers or the external rights holders. Publishing images in print and online publications, as well as on social media channels or websites, is only permitted with the prior consent of the rights holders. [Find out more](#)

Download PDF: 22.01.2026

ETH-Bibliothek Zürich, E-Periodica, <https://www.e-periodica.ch>

Shakespeare's Belated *Lucrece*

Ladina Bezzola Lambert

Shakespeare's retelling of the old Lucretia story in *The Rape of Lucrece* is marked by belatedness. Written in the wake of many classical, medieval and Renaissance writers, the poem follows a long literary tradition. It moreover confronts a debate, initiated by Augustine, about Lucretia's role in the rape, the morality of her suicide, and the legend's larger historical significance. By the sixteenth century, Lucretia had also become a popular motif in the visual arts. For Shakespeare, coming as a latecomer to the age-old preoccupation with Lucretia entails an awareness of both the danger and the potential the story holds. My essay is concerned with Shakespeare's approach to the moral debate about Lucretia. This approach depends, first of all, on the privileged access his poem offers to Lucrece's private thoughts and emotions,¹ but also on the way his Lucrece enters into dialogue with many themes and motifs employed in earlier versions of her story, with the contemporary genre of the female complaint, and with representations of Lucretia in the visual arts. Shakespeare's poem dramatizes the attempt to rehabilitate Lucretia's character and establish her authority over her story. At the same time, it emphasizes the contested nature of this authority.

A warm thank you goes to Regula Hohl Trillini for her invaluable critical eye.

¹ Throughout this essay, I will be using the name "Lucrece" to refer to the heroine in Shakespeare's poem and "Lucretia" when referring to the wider tradition.

The Construction of Textual Identity in Medieval and Early Modern Literature. SPELL: Swiss Papers in English Language and Literature 22. Ed. Indira Ghose and Denis Renevey. Tübingen: Narr, 2009. 143-161.

The Challenge: Lucretia's Ambiguous Reputation

With her canonization as an exemplary wife in Livy's *De urbe condita*, Lucretia assumed the status of an *exemplum* that was used throughout the Middle Ages and the Renaissance to illustrate virtues like "chastity" (*pu-dicitia*), "fame" (*gloria*), "strength" and "audacity" (*fortitudo et audacia*) as well as "freedom" (*libertas*) (see Follak *passim*). While this interpretation remained popular to Shakespeare's day, it was also challenged early on. The Stoic association of suicide with the highest moral values, which Lucretia was claimed to illustrate, was reenacted (and thus confirmed) by early Christian martyrs, but it turned into a liability for the established Catholic Church, which felt the need to distance itself from inherited Roman values (cf. Murray 86-122). In *The City of God*, Augustine uses Lucretia to criticize the Roman materialist view of female chastity and to focus on the "ethical and theological implications of Lucretia's act" (Trout 62). According to Augustine, Lucretia does not deserve *gloria* for the very reason that she was so intent on earning it. She used suicide to determine how society would judge her. Rather than offering visible proof of her chastity, she should have been satisfied with a clear conscience before God. This would have earned her true *gloria*; instead, Lucretia was a typical "Roman lady, too greedy of praise" (*Romana mulier, laudis avida nimium*, I.XIX). This framework, which posits that the Roman Empire is superseded by Christianity, historicizes Lucretia (Follak 55-58): from a Christian perspective, her suicide must be condemned as a typically Roman act of pride, irrespective of her role in the rape.

Augustine's treatment of Lucretia's suicide was highly influential on Christian thinking. It encouraged readings that were antithetical to the Roman and early Christian *exemplum*: rather than standing for "freedom," Lucretia's suicide is the result of the "tyrannical," secular rule of the Tarquinians; her alleged "chastity" is only a cover for her actual "voluptuousness," her enduring "fame" is the result of "vainglory" and therefore merits public scorn (Follak 123). Irrespective of whether one agreed with Augustine's condemnation of suicide as a woman's response to rape, the doubt he had sowed about Lucretia's true motivation was to prove tenacious. The subsequent debate about her character turned the story into an ideal training ground for rhetoricians. In such mock debates, Lucretia is not only given a voice; she also becomes admirably eloquent. She is, however, only the mouthpiece of an aspiring male rhetorician. The issue is not so much whether Lucretia is chaste or proud, but which position is defended more persuasively. Moreover, "her" new eloquence compromises her status as a chaste wife, whose duty it is to remain silent, and so the public stage of rhetoric reinforces doubts about her integrity.

In the course of the sixteenth century, Lucretia achieved great popularity in the visual arts throughout Europe.² Many representations of Lucretia represent her eroticism as well as her mental suffering, inviting further discussion of her morality. Lucretia's rape (or, more precisely, the moment of maximum tension immediately preceding it) and her suicide are the two most frequent motifs. Titian's famous painting of the rape (*Fig. 1*) illustrates the refinement (a word aptly out of place in the context) of a composition also used in earlier engravings, some of which may have been available in England in Shakespeare's time (*Fig. 2*).³ Lucas Cranach's Lucretia (*Fig. 3*) offers an example of the second motif. It is one of countless versions of the suicidal Lucretia that document Cranach's obsession with the story. In both pictorial motifs, the emphasis is typically placed on Lucretia's nakedness. In the rape scene, Lucretia's naked body is set in contrast with her clothed aggressor, whose knee (naked in Titian's rendering, evidently muscular in the engraving), symbolizes and forebodes the moment of brutal penetration.⁴ Representations of Lucretia's suicide are just as erotically charged: in our example, the attractive breast exposed to the viewer contrasts with the sad expression on her face, which presents a woman victimized by her beauty and at the mercy of the viewer's penetrating gaze. The dramatic contrast places the viewer in the role of a voyeur entangled in Tarquin's guilt, but also urges us to sympathize with Lucretia.

Although the expression on Lucretia's face and the arrangement of the rape scene leave little doubt about the nature of the crime, her nakedness also raises the question why her body is so openly exposed and (in Titian's example) so beautifully adorned. Is Lucretia, despite her apparent contrition, in fact a willing object of admiration and the sad face a mere pose? Moreover, Lucretia is hard to distinguish – except for her weapon – from the Danaës, the penitent Mary Magdalens and Venuses represented by the same artists. In Cranach's work, the link is particularly strong: apart from the dagger and the difference in facial expression, his Lucretia and his Venus are indistinguishable (*Fig. 4*).⁵ The problematic association emphasizes how significant the inclusion of the weapon and the evidence of Lucretia's sadness are in visual representation.

² For a discussion of Lucretia as motif in the visual arts, see Donaldson and Follak.

³ "Master L.D.," who signed this particular engraving, has been identified as Léon Daven(t), active in Fontainebleau (see Goffen quoting Jaffé 309). According to Elizabeth Truax, trade in French prints, particularly by artists working in Fontainebleau, had been established in London by the middle of the sixteenth century (16).

⁴ Bowers refers to Tarquin's "phallic knee" (7).

⁵ For the deliberate link between Mary Magdalen, Venus and Lucretia in Titian's work, see Goffen.

This, then, is roughly the context Shakespeare faced when he set out to write his poem. How could he retell this familiar story? How should he address Lucretia's moral dilemma? As a latecomer to the story's long literary, rhetorical, and pictorial tradition, he was able to exploit the story's mythographic potential and confront its risks. The challenge lay in offering a version that responded to or (speaking in the chronology of the fiction) forestalled the objections raised by Augustine and others, a version that presented a heroine who attempted to secure authority over her story and its interpretation with efficiency and an awareness of the delicacy of her situation. *The Rape of Lucrece* both stages this attempt and further dramatizes the contested nature of Lucrece's authority.

In an important study of the Lucretia myth, Ian Donaldson has argued that Shakespeare's poem is flawed by "a basic indecisiveness over the story's central moral issues" and sits uneasily between incompatible moral frameworks. Lucrece's wavering after the rape shows her

uneasy awareness of the way in which her suicide may be regarded from other cultural and religious viewpoints, seeming almost to anticipate Augustine's objection that a woman who kills herself after rape puts her immortal soul in jeopardy. (48-49)

This is very perceptive, but also inaccurate in an important respect: Lucrece's indecision between different codes of morality does not concern her own moral and religious convictions. When she refers to the "impiety" of suicide, Lucrece does not fear spiritual damnation; rather, she is concerned about the way later generations will judge her act: "Then let it not *be called* impiety" (Shakespeare l. 1174, my emphasis). Lucrece is not herself bound by Christian values; she is not concerned about the fate of her soul, but about her *fama* among men and women. Her own values remain tied to what Donaldson, borrowing an anthropological term, identifies as Roman "shame culture" (33). Rather than constituting a flaw, as Donaldson suggests, Lucrece's self-conscious awareness of other cultural perspectives lies very much at the heart of Shakespeare's late retelling of the story. His version in effect dramatizes its own belatedness and presents a heroine who evokes future verdicts of her action in order to prove them wrong. The poem is fundamentally anachronistic in structure. The ideological kinship between Rome and Elizabethan England regarding gender norms, which Coppélia Kahn has identified (22), gives special significance to the structural anachronism of Shakespeare's approach since it makes obvious how little English culture

heeded Augustine's admonition to revise the pagan materialist valuation of female chastity.

Lucrece's keen awareness of the difficulty of controlling future moral judgments on her suicide and the integrity of her person in a post-Augustinian culture is evident in the two most conspicuous and innovative aspects of Shakespeare's version: Lucrece's "complaint without audience" (Berry 33) and the long passage describing the painting of the siege of Troy. Both passages play a vital part in Lucrece's attempt to secure authorial control over her story beyond her death and are essential to Shakespeare's representation of Lucrece as a feeling and reasoning subject rather than a material, coveted object.

In a recent essay, Amy Greenstadt challenges the often-repeated view that Lucrece is "either a silenced figure or one whose persuasive powers are heavily compromised." She argues instead that Shakespeare "presents Lucrece as a powerful authorial figure" which reflects his professional concerns about his own status as author in important ways and allows him "to formulate a new ideal of literary authorship" (45-46). In so doing, Greenstadt has, I hope, turned the page on the reductive view of Lucrece as victim of patriarchal discourse. I want to develop Greenstadt's argument and broaden its implications. Rather than read Lucrece as a metaphor for how Shakespeare negotiates his own authorship, I want to consider the challenge of redrawing Lucretia's character. This challenge the poem meets by formulating her words and actions as responses to her older textual history and to more recent art forms that they either invoke and revise or supplement: the literary genre of the female complaint and representations of Lucretia in the visual arts.

A Contemporary Genre: The Female Complaint

Several classical versions of the Lucretia story emphasize the quick determination with which she commits suicide, a trait in her character repeatedly connected with her "virility." Ovid calls Lucretia a "matron of manly courage,"⁶ and Valerius Maximus refers to her as the "Commander of Roman chastity, whose manly character received a woman's body through a vicious error of fortune."⁷ Shakespeare's poem is distinguished from such accounts by the long episode that he inserts between the rape and Lucrece's suicide. This includes a long private monologue in which Lucrece laments her situation and considers possible courses

⁶ *Animi matrona virilis* (II.874).

⁷ *Dux Romanae pudicitiae Lucretia, cuius virilis animus maligno errore fortunae muliebre corpus sortitus est* (VI.1.1; my translation).

of action, and a long description of a painting representing the fall of Troy, in the contemplation of which Lucrece is whiling away the time until her husband's return. The suicide itself, which the reader familiar with the legend expects, is deferred by the detailed description of Lucrece's inner turmoil. In front of witnesses, however, she is tactically clever, unwavering and efficient. Shakespeare's poem has it both ways: the private scene shows us a wavering, emotionally vulnerable, and presumably more "feminine" Lucrece; her ensuing public appearance and suicide show a heroine of undeterred conviction and "manly" courage.

The fact that Shakespeare's Lucrece voices her defense in private counters objections made against the ostentatiousness of her act and her alleged self-righteousness. The lament offers an exclusive insight into her soul which protects her from accusations of vanity. This effect is emphasized by the way in which Lucrece's lament at once evokes and sets itself off from contemporary female complaints. The literary complaints published shortly before *The Rape of Lucrece* by Thomas Churchyard, Thomas Lodge, Samuel Daniel, and others were typically first-person narratives spoken by the ghost of a "fallen woman" *after* her death and motivated by her desire to improve her reputation among the living. In contrast, Lucrece's complaint is private and mediated by a narrator; she has been raped rather than seduced; she has not (yet) been publicly shamed, and finally, she is still alive and eager to save rather than to repair her reputation. All of this works in her defense. Her character also profits from the recent psychologization of the genre: in contrast to earlier texts, the literary complaints of Shakespeare's contemporaries "break through the moral framework that surrounded similar Complaints in the *Mirror for Magistrates*" (Schmitz 132) and begin to develop depth and individual drama. They encourage the reader to sympathize with the fallen woman rather than to condemn her (see Sharon-Zisser/Whitworth 21-25). Moving in largely secular surroundings, these characters are concerned with worldly fame rather than spiritual salvation (Schmitz 115) – which is one of Augustine's central objections against Lucretia – but are nevertheless represented against a Christian background and (in the case of Daniel's Rosamond) as returning from hell. Shakespeare's Lucrece is a Roman who does not betray Jehovah since she does not know Him. The comparison with her morally weak counterparts makes her preoccupation with the human world easier to condone and highlights her terrible isolation after the rape.

A Classical Mode: Ekphrasis

The *ekphrastic* passage which describes a painting of the siege of Troy has received intense critical attention, but – surprisingly – has not been related to the rich contemporary tradition of pictorial representations of *Lucretia*.⁸ The Trojan painting confronts Lucrece with human suffering that has already become the subject of history and art, but it also draws her attention to the temporal dimension of her own story: to herself as future subject of history and art. It is the motif of silently suffering Lucretia figures in the visual arts that the poem and its heroine self-consciously envisage, which they supplement, comment on and compete with. This technique has two famous classical precedents: Ulysses, who listens to his own heroic deeds related by a bard at the court of King Alcinoos (*Odyssey* VIII), and Aeneas, who sees a representation of the Trojan War in a temple in Carthage (*Aeneid* II). Both heroes are subsequently invited to tell their own story at epic length.

The difference between these models and Lucrece's contemplation of a painting is not only that as Marion Wells has pointed out, Lucrece kills herself while both Aeneas and Ulysses return to active heroism (117). It is also that Lucrece has to leave the task of telling her own story to others. Moreover, while Aeneas and Ulysses reflect on their own past history, Lucrece identifies with a history that is not hers: the history of the Trojan War and, more particularly, Hecuba's history. There is a simple and obvious reason for this: as opposed to the heroes of the Trojan War, Lucrece does not yet have a heroic record. Yet there is more to her emphatic identification with Hecuba. It diverts from the fact that she does not identify with, nor express sympathy for, the woman whose history is much more like her own: Helen of Troy.

Helen is conspicuously absent from the Trojan painting and appears only in Lucrece's enraged outcry: "Show me the strumpet who began this stir" (l. 1471).⁹ Yet she serves as a terrible reminder of what could have happened to Lucretia had she not killed herself. Like Lucretia's story, "[t]he story of Helen was told repeatedly, with revisions, throughout the ancient world" and the question "[w]hether Paris abducted Helen or whether she consented is a debate which has exercised both

⁸ Three recent discussions of the episode are offered by Richard Meek (2006), Christopher Johnson (2004), and Marion Wells (2002). See also Maus (1998) and Heffernan (1993).

⁹ According to James Heffernan, "this denunciation of Helen could be either a covert expression of self-hatred or a desperate attempt to project onto another the strumpet role that she herself has been made to play" (77). I suggest that we project Lucrece's avoidance of the association beyond the immediate fictional context of the story onto its critical reception through the ages.

commentators and creative writers for many centuries" (Maguire 91, 97). As in the case of Lucretia, the question of Helen's guilt was used to test students' debating skills in arguing pro and contra, but by Shakespeare's time, "Helen's guilt and complicity in her abduction was a foregone conclusion" (110). This is why Lucrece emphatically associates herself with Hecuba, although this connection is much less evident.

There are obvious differences between the stories of Helen and Lucrece. Helen's "rape" involves her secret abduction rather than sexual violence (Paris is described as a narcissistic dandy and womanizer rather than a brutal rapist like Tarquin), and is willed and supported by divine force. Yet there are also striking parallels between Helen's story as related by Homer and Shakespeare's account of Lucrece. It must remain hypothetical whether these are deliberate allusions on Shakespeare's part since there is no conclusive evidence as to whether he was familiar with the *Iliad* or another source of the story.¹⁰ However, since there is at least implicit evidence from other Shakespearian texts to support the assumption that he was,¹¹ and since the Homeric echoes in Shakespeare's *Lucrece* also concern more general issues of literary shame and *ekphrasis* that are my central concern here, the parallels deserve scrutiny.

In book 3 of the *Iliad*, the goddess Isis is sent to inform Helen about the upcoming fight between Paris and Menelaus and finds her busy weaving a great purple cloth "on which she was embroidering many battles of the horse-taming Trojans and the bronze-clad Achaeans" (ll. 125-127). Helen then meets King Priam and the Trojan Elders at the city gate, is lovingly welcomed by Paris' father, explicitly cleared of any blame for the war, and asked to identify some of the most eminent Greek warriors visible in the plain. As the weaver of the battle scene, Helen is presented as a historian and Homer's *alter ego*. As a comment on that very same scene, Helen's characterization of the Greek warriors can be seen as an *ekphrastic* text which presents an interesting parallel to Lucrece's contemplation of the Troy painting.

Later, in book 6, Hector pays his brother Paris a visit to reprimand him for staying away from battle, but first finds only Helen exhorting her maids to do their handiwork – again presenting an image of womanly diligence. This aligns her with Lucrece, who in the Argument to Shakespeare's poem is spinning with her maids while the other wives are feasting (a detail found in both Livy's and Ovid's account). It also sets up a marked contrast to Paris' luxurious indolence, which is described

¹⁰ Chapman's translation of the first seven books was published in 1598, four years after *Lucrece*.

¹¹ For the argument that Shakespeare might have known the *Iliad* from other translations than Chapman's and for relevant bibliographical information, see Doloff.

shortly afterwards. Addressing Hector, Helen curses herself and predicts that she and Paris will be the subject of song (here negatively connoted) for generations to come. This prediction seems to resound in Tarquin's threat that, unless Lucrece submit to his desire, she shall have her "trespass cited up in rhymes / and sung by children in succeeding times" (ll. 524-525), and also in the lines in which Lucrece voices her fear of being reviled in the nurse's tales, the orator's speeches and the tunes of "feast-finding minstrels" (l. 817).

If the parallels between the two stories are deliberate, Shakespeare's poem might be said to attempt a double tour de force which clears both Helen and Lucrece from the charges voiced against them through the ages. Helen would then not be slandered by Lucrece, but rehabilitated by the association. In fact, despite her deprecating terms for Helen, Lucrece subsequently makes it clear that the fall of Troy is the consequence of one man's guilt: that of Paris. By thus exonerating Helen, she implicitly liberates herself from Tarquin's insult: "The fault is thine [. . .] Thy beauty hath ensnared thee to this night" (ll. 482; 485). Even as Lucrece seems to deflect attention from her own person, the painterly motif which implicitly and anachronistically dominates the *ekphrastic* episode is the famous motif of Lucrece: knife in hand, a woman not "Time's ruin, beauty's wreck" like Hecuba (l. 1451), but a dazzling beauty.

Lucrece actively evokes her own visual representation by commenting on Hecuba's ruined face "where all distress is stelled" (l. 1444). The word *stelled* refers to the act of engraving an image on a metal plate for printing. When she laments the inability of her eyes to conceal her shame, Lucrece refers to the same artistic technique: her eyes, she fears, "their guilt with weeping will unfold, / And grave, like water that doth eat in steel, / Upon my cheeks what helpless shame I feel" (754-755). The tears, the signs of her distress, are directly associated with the way in which Lucrece's sufferings turn into art, and indelibly mark her visual image by a tragic emotion that characterizes Lucrece and distinguishes her from other beautiful nudes.

Lucrece's emotion is a "moralizing" element that, helped by the truthfulness of her eyes, invites the sympathy of the beholder as well as the reader of her story. The beholder/reader has to muster a skill which Lucrece, confronted with the lustful Tarquin, lacks:

But she that never coped with stranger eyes
 Could pick no meaning from [the] parling looks [of Tarquin's eyes],
 Nor read the subtle shining secrecies
 Writ in the glassy margents of such books.
 [...]
 Nor could she moralize his wanton sight (ll. 99-104)

In confronting Lucrece, the beholder – heeding the double meaning of *sight* in line 104 – must learn to distinguish perspectives without projecting his own “wantonness” onto the object of his contemplation. Like a number of other visual representations, Titian’s painting of the rape presents “a [c]ontradictory mélange of emotions” (Goffen 204) that combines the titillation offered by Lucretia’s beautiful body with a plea for sympathy. The eroticizing of her body implicates viewers in Tarquin’s guilt, especially since each repetition of this rape in narrative or painting presupposes the viewer’s / reader’s familiarity with the story.¹² “Unlike Tarquin, however, he is encouraged to metamorphose lust into compassion” (Goffen 213). Rather than as a material object of desire, Lucretia needs to be confronted as a living, speaking, and reasoning human being, although the mute objectification of Lucretia in the visual arts destabilizes such compassionate readings.

Lucrece’s objectification and muting are also illustrated in Shakespeare’s poem. In the description of the sleeping Lucrece, Tarquin, the narrator, and the reader are joined as voyeuristic admirers of her sensuous beauty, which is absorbed with “lewd unhallowed eyes.” Compared to a “virtuous monument,” with her head “entombèd” between the swelling “hills” of the pillow (ll. 390-392), she appears to be dead already. The poem exposes the cruelty of the viewer’s gaze and contrasts the silent, apparently petrified body with its living, eloquent heroine, who tries to reason with Tarquin immediately after being brutally awakened. When after the rape, in the contemplation of the Trojan painting, Lucrece blames the artist for suppressing Hecuba’s words, she draws attention to her own earlier lament which offers privileged access to her thoughts and thus supplies the words that the painting lacks. It thereby provides a (literally) *vital* supplement to these images. Furnishing the interiority which visual images can only hint at, it urges its readers (who may be viewers) to respect Lucretia as a complete human being.¹³

¹² The principle of dependency on the viewer’s previous familiarity with the story that Heffernan has shown to be at work in the Trojan painting (76) also applies in the case of the graphic images of Lucretia.

¹³ As Greenstadt has noted, through “*ekphrasis*, Shakespeare’s poem demonstrates how Lucrece transforms herself into a speaking picture” (61). Her words may then be pro-

Suicide: Contested Authority and Passive Action

Lucrece does not only complain and contemplate, she is also determined to act. She concludes her complaint with the resolute declaration: "For me, I am the mistress of my fate / And with my trespass never will dispense / Till life to death acquit my forced offence" (ll. 1069-71). In order to force Lucrece into submission, Tarquin threatens to misrepresent her as the "author of [people's] obloquy" (l. 523) by leaving her dead body in a fictional scene of debauchery with his killed slave. With the careful orchestration of her suicide, Lucrece reclaims authority over her story.¹⁴ How much her authorial position is contested is evident from the mannerisms with which the narrator resumes his narrative after Lucrece's long speech. Lucrece asserts once again:

My tongue shall utter all; mine eyes, like sluices,
As from a mountain spring that feeds a dale
Shall gush pure streams to purge my impure tale (ll. 1076-1078)

The narrator resumes:

By this, lamenting Philomel had ended
The well-tuned warble of her nightly sorrow, (ll. 1079-1080)

The narrator's elegiac tone deprives Lucrece's declaration of some of its force and reduces her lament to maudlin entertainment. The clash is indicated through the narrator's reference to Philomela right after Lucrece has asserted that her "tongue shall utter all." In Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, Philomela has her tongue cut out to prevent her from uttering anything at all, but is brutally revenged by her sister. While in some versions (not in Ovid), Philomela turns into a nightingale which *sings* of the crime committed against her, the narrator of Lucrece's story sees in Philomela merely a tuneful bird.¹⁵ By his patronizing, detached com-

jected beyond the private circle of the immediate witnesses of her suicide onto the canvasses of the future.

¹⁴ For the repeated use of metaphors relating to authorship, writing and printing in the poem, see Greenstadt as well as Cheney.

¹⁵ Cheney, quoting Belsey, reads the reference to the metamorphosed Philomela as a figure of consolation (133). Yet Lucrece's reference to her tongue immediately before rather suggests the misplaced character of the narrator's classicizing reference and denotes irony. Moreover, just as the nightingale Philomela does not want to be consoled, but keeps hurting herself to reactivate her woe, Lucrece is eager to continue her mourning. It is in the contemplation of the Trojan painting that she finds a "means to mourn some newer way" (l. 1365). Philomela is thus emphatically *not* a figure of consolation. Nor does Lucrece seek consolation.

ments, the narrator aestheticizes the scene and turns female suffering into a source of perverse pleasure. After Lucrece's assertive words, the change of perspective is striking and dramatizes yet again the contested nature of Lucrece's position. The conflicting perspectives that the poem enacts between Lucrece and her narrator complicates the task of presenting Lucrece as responding to criticism in an "authorial" manner. Both logically and aesthetically, these conflicts add new dimensions to this complex poem and in so doing prevent her image from consolidating.

In a further assertive gesture, Lucrece pronounces her "testament" in which she symbolically distributes her possessions: her blood (stained) and her honor (regained). To outline a will, even if only a symbolic and spoken one, is clearly a masculine gesture that is unusual for a married woman. And indeed, this gesture is immediately erased after Lucrece's death when her father and her husband grotesquely quarrel over which of them has the bigger stake in Lucrece and therefore more right to grieve for her. Lucrece's assertion that she is herself the "mistress of her fate" is also belied by the narrator's declaration – ostentatiously made in *defense* of women – that women must not be called the "authors of their ill" (l. 1244):

For men have marble, women waxen minds,
And therefore are they forced as marble will.
The weak oppressed, th'impression of strange kinds
Is formed in them by force, by fraud, or skill
Then call them not the authors of their ill,
No more than wax shall be accounted evil
Wherein is stamped the semblance of a devil. (ll. 1240-1253)

However, Lucrece has just declared herself the "author of her *will*," not the "author of her *ill*." Claiming that women are too impressionable to resist the sins imprinted on them by men and that they must not be held accountable for this natural weakness, the narrator contrasts female passivity with male activity, including the activity of the male imagination. This remark is blatantly at odds with its narrative context, since it is offered as a direct comment on an instance of female sympathy between Lucrece and her maid: on first seeing Lucrece in the morning following the rape, the maid immediately notices her mistress's sorrow, even though she does not know its source. The maid's "[g]rieving herself to guess at others smarts" (l. 1238), which the narrator identifies as typically female, verbally translates her "sym-pathy" with Lucrece. This response to Lucrece's facial expression at once bears witness to a visible change and illustrates the correct interpretation of Lucrece's face. This is

the imaginative act that is also required of the viewers of Lucretia in painting and the readers of her story. In Shakespeare's time, wax was not only a material used to write on. It was also used for engraving – to hinder imprint: where the engraved surface is covered with wax, ink cannot settle. In the context of the many references to printing, writing and publishing in the poem, the comparison is significant and may be taken to stand for passive ways of influencing writing and, more particularly, historiography.¹⁶

But what *does* Lucrece do? As Kahn aptly puts it, Lucrece “stage-manages her death to maximize its social effectiveness” (39). She first writes a letter to her husband urging him to return home. In this letter, she cleverly withholds the reason for her entreaty, arguing that the story must be properly adorned with tears and accompanied by her suicide in order to achieve the desired effect:

She dares not thereof make discovery,
Lest he should hold it her own gross abuse,
Ere she with blood had stained her stain's excuse.
[...]
To shun this blot she would not blot the letter
With words, till action might become them better.
To see sad sights moves more than hear them told. (ll. 1314-1324)

Then she does “utter all.” But before disclosing her rapist's name, she makes her male bystanders swear to revenge her. Then she stabs herself. Brutus, the self-defined leader and future consul of Rome, immediately takes away her manly weapon¹⁷ – a symbol of both phallus and stylus – and thus denies Lucrece the (male) right to make history and write down her story. This is supported by the fact that Brutus at this moment abandons his madman's disguise, which protected him from the envy of the Tarquinians. This sudden change provokes wonder and approval in everyone present, “Who, wond'ring at him, did his words allow” (l. 1845). Not only does Brutus steal Lucrece's show, he also appropriates her story and has this act sanctioned by general approval. Lucrece's body is then “publish[ed]” (l. 1852) by the men in the streets of Rome to initiate political revolt. As the inheritor of Lucrece's honor recorded in the symbolic will she worded in private, the knife will, however, stay with her as the one distinctive attribute to identify her in the paintings and secure her story in accordance with her own will.

¹⁶ For the metaphors of gender used in relation to printing and publishing in the early modern period, see Wall as well as Brooks.

¹⁷ For the sword as “emblem of virile death,” the weapon Ajax uses to kill himself as opposed to hanging oneself as the feminine mode, see Loraux (36-38).



Fig. 1: Titian, *Tarquin and Lucretia*, ca. 1571
© The Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge (reproduced with permission)



Fig. 2: Master L. D. (Léon Daven or Davent), *Rape of Lucretia*
(*Tarquin and Lucretia*), etching before 1547

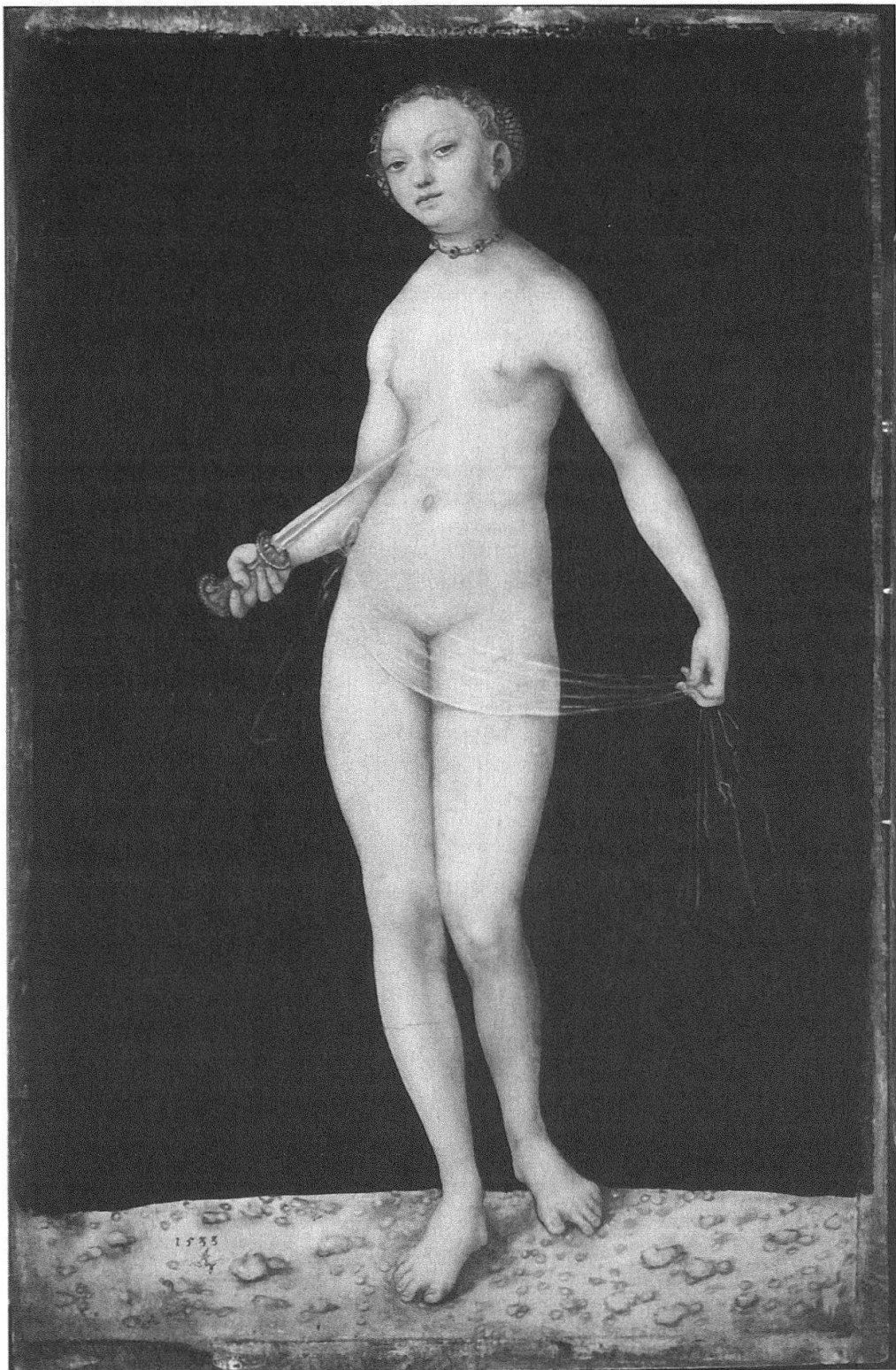


Fig. 3: Lucas Cranach, the Elder, *Lucretia*, 1533, © Staatliche Museen zu Berlin; Gemäldegalerie / Jörg P. Anders (reproduced with permission)

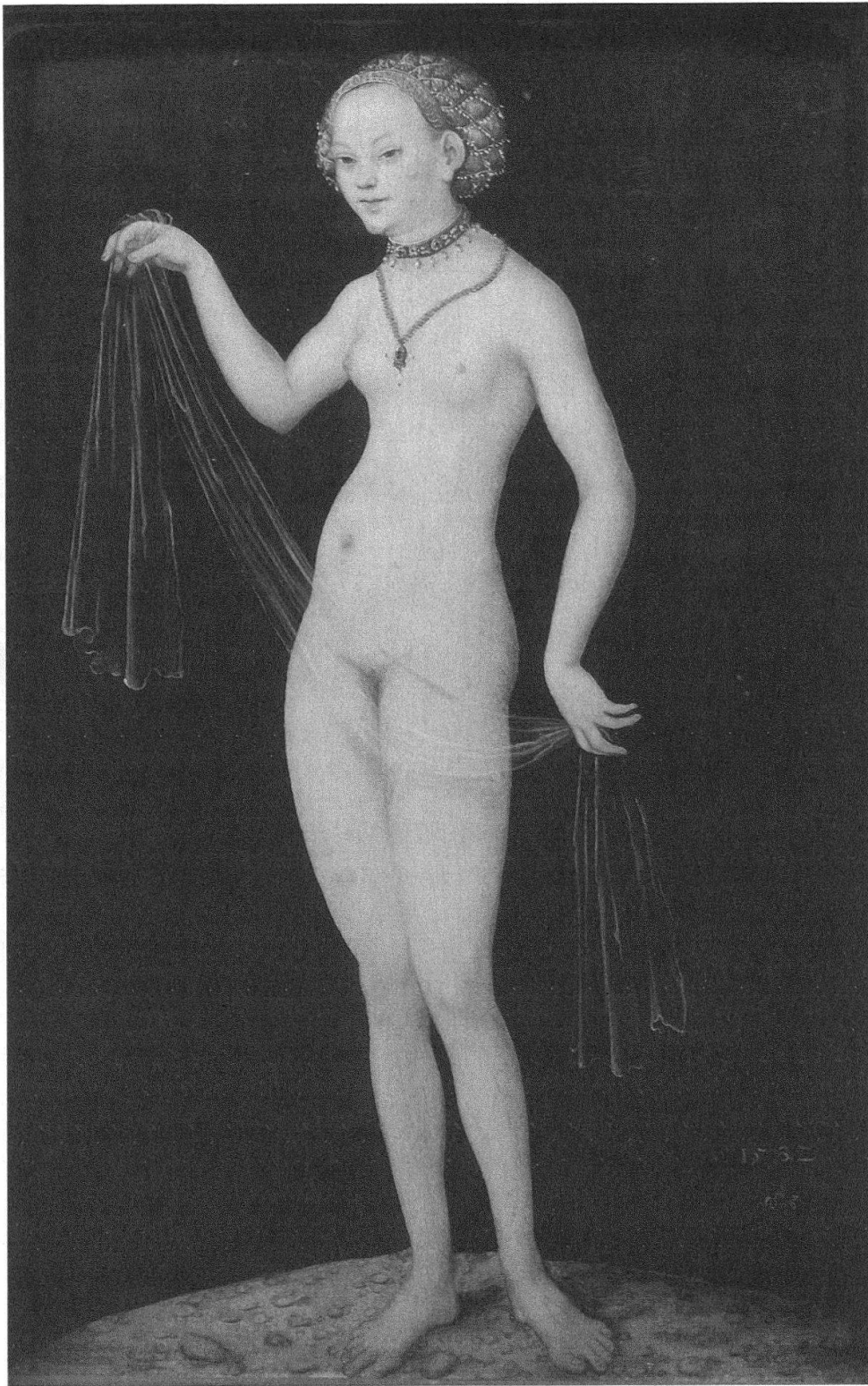


Fig. 4: Lucas Cranach, the Elder, *Venus*, 1522,
© Städel Museum, Frankfurt / Artothek (reproduced with permission)

References

- Augustine. *The City of God against the Pagans/De civitate Dei*. 7 vols. Trans. George E. McCracken. Loeb Classical Library. Vol. 1. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1957.
- Barkan, Leonard. "'Living Sculptures': Ovid, Michelangelo, and *The Winter's Tale*." *ELH* 48 (1981): 639-67.
- Berry, Philippa. "Woman, Language, and History in *The Rape of Lucrece*." *Shakespeare Survey* 44 (1992): 33-39.
- Bowers, A. Robin. "Iconography and Rhetoric in Shakespeare's *Lucrece*." *Shakespeare Studies* 14 (1981): 1-21.
- Brooks, Douglas A., ed. *Printing and Parenting in Early Modern England*. Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005.
- Cheney, Patrick. *Shakespeare, National Poet-Playwright*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004.
- Doloff, Steven. "Falstaff's 'Honour': Homeric Burlesque in *1 Henry IV* (1597-8)." *Notes and Queries* 55 (2008): 177-181.
- Donaldson, Ian. *The Rapes of Lucretia: A Myth and Its Transformations*. Oxford: Clarendon, 1982.
- Follak, Jan. *Lucretia zwischen positiver und negativer Anthropologie: Coluccio Salutati's Declamatio Lucretie und die Menschenbilder im exemplum der Lucretia von der Antike bis in die Neuzeit*. Dissertation, Constance, 2002. (Online) [cited 28 October 2008] <<http://www.ub.uni-konstanz.de/kops/volltexte/2002/914/pdf/follak01-text.pdf>>
- Goffen, Rona. *Titian's Women*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1997.
- Greenstadt, Amy. "'Read it in me': The Author's Will in *Lucrece*." *Shakespeare Quarterly* 57, no. 1 (2006): 45-70.
- Heffernan, James A. W. *Museum of Words: The Poetics of Ekphrasis from Homer to Ashbery*. Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1993.
- Homer. *Iliad*. Ed. William F. Wyatt. Trans. A. T. Murray. Loeb Classical Library. 2 vols. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1999.
- Johnson, Christopher. "Appropriating Troy: Ekphrasis in Shakespeare's *The Rape of Lucrece*." *Fantasies of Troy: Classical Tales and the Social Imaginary in Medieval and Early Modern Europe*. Ed. Alan Shepard and Stephen D. Powell. Toronto: Centre for Reformation and Renaissance Studies, 2004. 193-212.
- Kahn, Coppélia. "The Rape in Shakespeare's *Lucrece*." In *Shakespeare and Gender: A History*, edited by Deborah Barker and Ivo Kamps. London and New York: Verso, 1995. 22-46.
- Loraux, Nicole. *Façons tragiques de tuer une femme*. Paris: Hachette, 1985.

- Maguire, Laurie. *Shakespeare's Names*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007.
- Maus, Katherine Eisaman. "Taking Tropes Seriously: Language and Violence in Shakespeare's *Rape of Lucrece*." *Shakespeare Quarterly* 37, no. 1 (1986): 66-82.
- Meek, Richard. "Ekphrasis in *The Rape of Lucrece* and *the Winter's Tale*." *Studies in English Literature 1500-1900* 46, no. 2 (2006): 389-414.
- Murray, Alexander. *Suicide in the Middle Ages*. 3 vols. Vol. 2: *The Curse of Self-Murder*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000.
- Ovid. *Fasti*. Ed. and trans. Sir James G. Frazer. Loeb Classical Library. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1959.
- Schmitz, Götz. *The Fall of Women in Early English Narrative Verse*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990.
- Shakespeare, William. "The Rape of Lucrece." *The Norton Shakespeare*. Ed. Stephen Greenblatt et al. New York and London: Norton, 1997. 635-682.
- Sharon-Zisser, Shirley, and Stephen Whitworth. "Introduction: Generating Dialogue on Shakespeare's *A Lover's Complaint*." *Critical Essays on Shakespeare's A Lover's Complaint*. Ed. Sharon-Zisser and Whitworth. London: Ashgate, 2006. 1-53.
- Trout, Dennis. "Re-Textualizing Lucretia: Cultural Subversion in the *City of God*." *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 2, no. 1 (1994): 53-70.
- Truax, Elizabeth. "Lucrece! What Hath Your Conceited Painter Wrought?" *Bucknell Review* 25, no. 1 (1980): 13-30.
- Valerius Maximus. *Valeri Maximi facta et dicta memorabilia*. Ed. John Briscoe. 2 vols. Stuttgart: Teubner, 1998.
- Wall, Wendy. *The Imprint of Gender: Authorship and Publication in the English Renaissance*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993.
- Wells, Marion A. "'To find a face where all distress is stell'd': *Enargeia*, *Ekphrasis*, and Mourning in *The Rape of Lucrece* and the *Aeneid*." *Comparative Literature* 54, no. 2 (2002): 97-126.

