

Who is the victim?:  
the power struggle of  
sexual abuse in the  
rape of Lucrece



It is clear that William Shakespeare's *The Rape of Lucrece* examines the psychological effects of rape. However, what is less clear is the effects of power that this poem portrays and how it interacts with sexual violence. Power plays a crucial part in the poem before, during, and after the act of sexual violence. This is apparent through the struggle that Tarquin has with lust, Lucrece's inability to prevent Tarquin from overcoming her, and the culpability that Lucrece feels after the fact. These three stages set up a power dynamic that centers around the act of rape.

The first instance of this power struggle comes with Tarquin's fight against the "power" of lust. In the bible, lust is clearly outlined as a sin. Matthew 5: 28 says, "But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart" (ESV Matthew 5: 28). Generally, sin is looked at as something that one fights with but is expected to overcome. However, in *The Rape of Lucrece* lust has a certain power over Tarquin. This power seems to be far greater than normal sin. It is so great that Tarquin cannot overcome it. After he is essentially defeated by lust, the poem reads, "By reprobate desire thus madly led, The Roman lord marcheth to Lucrece' bed" (Shakespeare 298). The imagery created by this line clearly shows Tarquin's inability to overcome lust. He is described as being "madly led" by this evil sin. This is interesting because the one who initiates the sexual abuse is almost always viewed as the guilty perpetrator. However, the way that Shakespeare describes Tarquin's experience makes it seem as if Tarquin couldn't do anything to stop himself because he was driven by lust. Shakespeare's use of "reprobate desire" further explains this point. By describing desire as reprobate, Shakespeare is, in a way, personifying lust

and giving it culpability. He is taking the blame away from Tarquin and pinning it on lust. While this is interesting, it does not appear to be accurate.

Many times before the actual act of the rape, it is clear that Tarquin knows that what he is about to do is wrong. The poem reads, " And in the inward mind he doth debate / What following sorrow may on this arise; / Then looking scornfully, he doth despise / His naked armour of still-slaught' red lust, And justly thus controls his thoughts unjust" (Shakespeare 183). This quotation proves Tarquin's culpability while also showing his struggle with lust. The line, " And in the inward mind he doth debate," shows the struggle with lust that Tarquin is undergoing. He is having an internal debate about whether he should commit this wrongful act or not. It is also clear that he knows that this is wrong when the poem says " And justly thus controls his thoughts unjust." These unjust thoughts represent the sin of lust that he is attempting to control. Obviously, he is unable to control it which further accentuates Shakespeare's representation of lust and the control that it has over Tarquin. A couple of pages later, it is clear that he officially lost control to lust where the poem says, " As each unwilling portal yields him way, / Through little vents and crannies of the place / The wind wars with his torch to make him stay, / And blows the smoke of it into his face, / Extinguishing his conduct in this case; / But his hot heart, which fond desire doth scorch, / Puffs forth another wind that fires the torch" (Shakespeare 309). Each of these lines signify a new internal " bridge" that Tarquin must cross.

However, he has no problem crossing these bridges because he is driven mad by lust. This is perfectly described by the quotation " But his hot heart, which fond desire doth scorch." This desire, or lust, scorches any control he

has over his heart. It has a power over him and his heart and that is what Shakespeare conveys in this poem.

The second display of a power dynamic in *The Rape of Lucrece* comes with the actual act of the rape. The account of the rape describes Lucrece as an object of sexuality while Tarquin is represented essentially as a ravenous person perturbed by lust. This is immediately apparent with the lines, “Where like a virtuous monument she lies, / To be admire of lewd unhallow’d eyes.” (Shakespeare 391). The juxtaposition presented with the words “virtuous” and “lewd” are what set the stage for the power dynamic between Tarquin and Lucrece. Lucrece is described as a sort of pious, virtuous being just waiting to be conquered. In fact, her breasts are later described as “like ivory globes circled with blue, / A pair of maiden worlds unconquered” (Shakespeare 407) Descriptions like these are what make her less of a human being, and more of an object strictly for sex. This is combined with the depiction of Tarquin who has now made up his mind and is completely overcome by lust. He is described in a way in which he seems to have almost no control over his movements. “His drumming heart cheers up his burning eye, / his eye commends the leading to his hand; / His hand, as proud of such a dignity, / Smoking with pride, marched on to make his stand / On her bare breast, the heart of all her land” (Shakespeare 435). Here, his hand, heart, and eye are described as moving on their own separate from he and his brain. This is how Shakespeare represents him as a ravenous animal led completely by lust. Similarly, he is represented as an animal who is seeking his “prey.” “While she, the picture of pure piety, / Like a white hind under the gripe’s sharp claws, / Pleads in a wilderness where are no laws, / To the

rough beast that knows no gentle right, / Nor aught obeys but his foul appetite." (Shakespeare 542). Tarquin is a "rough beast" and Lucrece is his innocent prey. He will not obey laws or social orders because of his "foul appetite." The appetite being his desire for her. He knows no gentle right because at this point all he knows is lust. This analogy is interesting because rough beasts are not domesticated. They do not know right from wrong. However, sexual predators do. That is why they are looked down upon with so much disdain in society. They know right from wrong yet they choose to ignore it. However, that is not how Shakespeare represents Tarquin here. He represents him as a rough, domesticated beast who knows nothing except for his insatiable appetite for his prey. The prey, Lucrece, can do nothing except for cower and plead for him to go away. She is powerless to his authority and appetite. This is the dynamic that Shakespeare represents.

The final instance of the power dynamic occurs after the act of the rape. It examines the psychology that occurs with victims of rape, after the fact. Immediately after the rape is over the poem reads, "But she hath lost a dearer thing than life, / And he hath won what he would lose again. / This forcéd league doth force a further strife; / This momentary joy breeds months of pain; / This hot desire converts to cold disdain" (Shakespeare 687). Here, the emotions of each individual become clear. As talked about earlier, Tarquin was filled with lust, or "hot desire." All of this hot desire and inner struggle only leads to a momentary joy for Tarquin. This joy for him leads to months of pain for Lucrece. This point is amplified in the following lines, "Pure Chastity is rifled of her store, / And Lust the thief far poorer than before" (Shakespeare 692). Pious Lucrece is robbed of her chastity, however

Tarquin and his lust gained nothing. So, all of his internal struggle and deliberation ultimately lead to a momentary joy and nothing more. What is interesting about these lines is that there is a hint of sympathy for Tarquin and lust. They leave “ far poorer than before.” While it is obvious that they did the wrong thing, Shakespeare still feels it necessary to state that they are less off now. This plays to the power dynamic referred to earlier.

However, while Tarquin is “ far poorer than before,” the effects of the rape do not take a toll on him. Lucrece, on the other hand, experiences detrimental effects. “ A captive victor that hath lost in gain / Bearing away the wound that nothing healeth, / The scar that will despite of cure remain” (Shakespeare 729). She experiences an unhealable wound. One that cannot be cured and will not get fixed. She did nothing to attract this sexual abuse yet she must bear all of the results.

On top of the incurable wound, she feels a sense of culpability. She was the victim, yet she feels like she did something wrong. ““ In vain,’ quoth she, ‘ I live, and seek in vain / Some happy mean to end a hapless life. / I feared by Tarquin’s falchion to be slain, / Yet for the self-same purpose seek a knife. / But when I feared I was a loyal wife: / So am I now – O no, that cannot be; / Of that true type hath Tarquin rifled me” (Shakespeare 1044). Lucrece wants to kill herself because she feels that she has not been loyal to her husband. However, that is strictly because Tarquin raped her so why does she feel like she’s to blame? That is the power dynamic that Shakespeare is examining. Despite the fact that Lucrece could do nothing to stop the rape from happening, she still feels like she is culpable. She even states this to her husband by saying, “‘ Thou worthy lord / Of that unworthy wife that greeteth

thee" (Shakespeare 1303). Eventually, the sadness and despair were too much and she killed herself. This also plays to the power dynamic that Shakespeare is examining. The pressure and guilt that is forced upon victims of rape is too much. On the other hand, once Tarquin was found he was simply banished. Not killed. Not took to court. Simply banished. While Lucrece, the victim of the rape, paid the ultimate price, Tarquin, the perpetrator, was given a slap on the wrist. This is because of the power dynamic that Shakespeare portrays.

In *The Rape of Lucrece*, William Shakespeare uses Tarquin and Lucrece in order to portray the power dynamic that is associated with rape. Despite the fact that Tarquin is the perpetrator, he is not portrayed as harshly as a sexual predator normally might be. Instead, he is described as being madly led by lust and thus essentially not responsible for his actions. On the other side, Lucrece is the victim of the rape yet suffers all of the negative effects because of the power struggle that is associated with rape. Shakespeare uses these representations of power to examine the psychology behind rape.