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Shakespeare's Representations of Rape

Abstract

The essay surveys representations of rape in selected Shakespeare's works. The subject fascinated Shakespeare throughout his career. It appeared for the first time in his early narrative poem *The Rape of Lucrece* and in one of his first tragedies *Titus Andronicus*. Though his later works, unlike these two, do not represent sexual assaults upon women graphically, rape is present in almost all his Roman and history plays (e.g. *Coriolanus*, *Henry V*, *Henry VI*), comedies (e.g. *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *Measure for Measure*) and romances (e.g. *Cymbeline*, *Pericles*, *The Tempest*). Since in Shakespeare's England the social structure prioritized male power, women were treated as men's property. Any accomplished or attempted sexual violation of women polarized male legal and emotional bonding, and it also disrupted and/or empowered homosocial solidarity. A preliminary study of the presence and dramatic use of rape shows a distinctive evolution in Shakespeare's attitude to this omnipresent subject. One reason for this change might be a shift in the legal classification of rape in Elizabethan England: from a crime against (male) property to a crime against an individual.

Key words: Shakespeare, rape, Lucrece, suicide, patriarchy, gender, politics, Elizabethan England

The omnipresence of images of rape in European literature demonstrates that violence against women has been deeply woven into the very fabric of Western culture.¹ Catharine MacKinnon goes so far as to comment:

If sexuality is central to women's definition and forced sex is central to sexuality, rape is indigenous, not exceptional to women's social condition. In feminist analyses a rape is not an isolated event or moral transgression or individual interchange gone awry. (183)

Furthering her argument, she classifies rape as "an act of terrorism and torture" and places it "within a systemic context of group subjection, like lynching" (172). Although MacKinnon's attitude to "rape" may *prima facie* seem controversial, it deserves further consideration in the light of its representation in Shakespeare.

The word "rape" appeared for the first time in Latin as "suprare" and "rapere," meaning to "defile, ravish, violate," and "disgrace." When it entered fourteenth-century English it was with the sense of "seize prey, abduct, take by force," from which the word "rape" assumed its current legal connotation (OED, 2415–2416). "Historically,

1 This essay is a part of my monograph in process.

and until very recently,” according to Karen Bamford, “rape has been defined in law as a crime of property, in which the rapist was understood to have stolen the value of a female’s sexuality from their male proprietor” (2).

Since the social structure in Shakespeare’s England was based on male dominance, it advanced the priority of legal and emotional male bonding. Consequently, in his texts the raped and silenced female body at the same time usually serves as an object in transactions between men, disrupting and/or empowering their homosocial solidarity. Generally, all of the sexual assaults, accomplished or attempted, polarize the male community. They either start political antagonisms or intensify homosocial solidarity between the supporters of the injured male – e.g. brother, husband, father, friend, or cousin.

The subject of rape fascinated Shakespeare throughout his career: it was included in his early narrative poems, and it re-emerged as one of the main themes in his romances, e.g. *Pericles* and *The Tempest*, written at the end of his career. Yet, over the years his attitude to the representation of rape changed. The very atrocious nature of rape was emphasized in his early works, e.g. *The Rape of Lucrece* and *Titus Andronicus*, whereas his later texts do not describe the specific act of ravishment so graphically. One of explanations of the evolution in Shakespeare’s dramatic renditions of rape might be his move from Latin sources to sources coming from his contemporary early modern culture (e.g. Chaucer, Boccaccio, Brooke), which represented a world that, among other things, started treating women as individuals. The other reason might be the slow change in the early modern legal attitude to rape. At that time, the conception of rape, as Barbara Baines says, was slowly beginning to shift from that of a crime against property to a crime against a person (72–73). It is also possible that the honing of Shakespeare’s dramaturgical skills influenced his presentation of the horror of rape. As his mature plays demonstrate, rape was still very much in the center of his interest, especially in the works of Jacobean dramatists. Nevertheless, he presented it without actually traumatizing his audience by displaying its brutality and fiendishness on stage.²

Both *The Rape of Lucrece* and *Titus Andronicus* narrate events in ancient Rome. Although their rape plots are usually treated as historically doubtful, and generally classified as mythical or legendary, this does not diminish their value as presentations of antiquated attitudes towards rape. They show women as brutalized victims in patriarchal society described by Ovid and Livy. Shakespeare’s *Lucrece* comes from Ovid’s *Fasti* (I, 721–852) and Livy’s *Ab Urbe Condita*, also known as *The History of Rome* (chapters LVII–LX), which by Shakespeare’s day had already been disseminated in various versions in many European countries (Donaldson 19).³ Both sources narrate the events of 509 BC, when Sextus Tarquinius, the son of Tarquin the king of Rome, raped Lucretia (Lucrece), the wife of Collatinus, who was one of the king’s aristocratic retainers. As a result, Lucretia committed suicide. Her body was paraded in the Roman Forum by the king’s nephew. This incited a full-scale revolt against the Tarquins led

2 Harold R. Walley, for example, calls *The Rape of Lucrece* “a key document in the record of Shakespeare’s coming of age as an artist” (487).

3 For the Elizabethan attitude to Shakespeare’s poem see Krystyna Kujawińska Courtney (“Shakespeare’s *Rape of Lucrece*: Selected Problematics of the Poem’s Initial Reception,” 59–74).

by Lucius Junius Brutus, which resulted in the banishment of the royal family and the founding of the Roman republic.⁴

The story of Lavinia, Titus Andronicus's daughter, is partially based on Livy's story of the rape of Virginia, which follows to the rape of Lucretia (chapters LXI-LXII). According to his account:

a second atrocity, the result of brutal lust, [...] occurred in the City and led to consequences no less tragic than the outrage and death of Lucretia, which had brought about the expulsion of the royal family. Not only was the end of the decemvirs the same as that of the kings, but the cause of their losing their power was the same in each case.⁵ (2)

Virginia, a plebeian woman who was betrothed to former tribune Lucius Icilius, probably lived in c. 451 BC. When she rejected the advances of the decemvir of the Roman Republic, Appius Claudius Crassus, he raped her and turned her into his slave. Despite the legal efforts of both Icilius and her father, famed centurion Lucius Verginius, Claudius won the case at the Forum. Seeing that defeat was imminent, Verginius insisted on speaking with his daughter alone. During their meeting he killed Virginia since he believed that her death was the only way to liberate her and her family (its male representatives) from social disgrace.⁶

In *The Rape of Lucrece* and in *Titus Andronicus*, Shakespeare also makes intertextual allusions to Ovid's *Metamorphoses* (c. A.D. 8). Distraught after her rape, Lucrece recalls various mythical stories of sexually brutalized women (e.g. Io and Philomela). In *Titus Andronicus*, Lavinia uses the book itself to explain to Titus, her father, and Marcus, her uncle, what has happened to her – her rape and mutilation by Demetrius and Chiron – by drawing attention to the story of Philomela's rape.

Serving as the centerpiece of Shakespeare's two ancient Roman stories, rape is not only used in his texts as a convenient metaphor for political chaos and disorder. Heavy-handed references and presentations of rape suggest the playwright's direct interest in rape as an oppressive act against women in a patriarchal society. In Lucrece's case, we have a wife who takes initiative only to perform what would be her husband's duty: she calls for revenge upon Tarquin, her assailer, and bravely commits suicide to stop any disputes concerning her honor. Thus, she appears as a model wife, although to some feminist critics her suicide seems "improperly self-assertive" for a woman (Maus 663). Most critics, however, agree that "Shakespeare's Lucrece is not a passive, wronged woman [...]. Within the terms set by Shakespeare's poem, Lucrece's suicide is a positive, constructive, and self-creative act" (Bromley 90). Lavinia is Lucrece's opposite. She is the Renaissance model of the obedient woman/daughter, who totally submits her mind and body to her father's will. She does not protest when she is objectified well

4 In her essay "Woman, Language, and History in *The Rape of Lucrece*," Philippa Berry states that Aristotle enumerates the abuse of women (rape, violation, breaking up marriages) as the main causes of tyrants' downfall (35).

5 If not indicated otherwise, all translations are mine.

6 For a discussion on the relationship between historical narrative and poetry see Krystyna Kujawińska Courtney ("History and Poetry in William Shakespeare's *Lucrece*," 57–66).

before her rape, accepting her role as the object of negotiation between her father and her brothers when they discuss her marriage (Baines 161).

Paving the way for different kinds of female endurance when suffering rape or its threat, *The Rape of Lucrece* contains the most tragic utterances attributed to a brutalized woman in early modern English literature. In addition, the poem highlights all the political implications of rape, the majority of which are still present in our contemporary legal, social and cultural attitudes to this sexual atrocity. One of these is the popular conviction that any sexual assault should be treated as a coercive invitation to sensual pleasure. Since, generally, any woman adamantly refuses, and society treats her most chaste when she says “no” to the sexual gratification with which the assailant tempts her, Lucrece’s case is controversial. Her silent acceptance of Tarquin’s brutal ravishment out of fear of his threats has for many centuries evoked academic, especially legal and theological, disputes. In the past, as is the case nowadays, rape was often treated as a struggle between the victim and the attacker and frequently constructed as a contest between virtue and vice. At the same time, the discourse devoted to the ongoing war between virtue and vice evokes another social pattern – a pattern reflecting the patriarchal structure of society in which women, defined as male property, are treated as tokens of exchange between men. In this context, as well as in other works by Shakespeare, Lucrece’s and Lavinia’s rapes become something men do to other men’s property.

Another common response to rape was the patriarchal discomfort in talking about it, which *The Rape of Lucrece*, *Titus Andronicus* and many other of Shakespeare’s plays reveal. Lucrece does not disclose Tarquin’s sexual assault in the letter she sends to her husband – Collatine – yet she expresses her trauma to herself in her long narrative, sometimes classified as a stream of consciousness. Her narrative complaint divulges a complex interplay of contradictory impulses within her mind: it shows both her suffering and her shame as experienced in her cultural and social context.⁷ And indeed, it is her eloquence that allows some critics to call her one of the best attempts at realist characters drawn according to Elizabethan standards. Carolyn D. Williams also classifies her as the archetypal rape victim, “struggling to state her case in a way that will get her the fair hearing she desperately needs, but fears she will never obtain” (109).

At the same time, for some feminist critics of *Titus Andronicus*, Lavinia’s enforced silence is posed as simply an oppressive requirement of patriarchal culture. Her initial refusal to name the rapists, represents sexual assault as an act when “womanhood denies [their] tongue[s] to tell” and which is a “worse-than-killing lust” (2.3.174–175).⁸ In a way, Lavinia’s insistence not to say the word “rape,” demonstrates that in the patriarchal society which Shakespeare presents in his works even talking about sexual assault could bring shameful disgrace upon a woman.

Yet, Lucrece’s and Lavinia’s psychological and physical sufferings are so brutally oppressive that even some men, who watch and suffer with them, find their silence troubling. They seem to understand that revealing the brutal crime would endanger the safety of the raped women, yet it is necessary for the fathers, the current or future

7 For a detailed rhetorical analysis of Lucrece’s narrative, see Dubrow (80–168).

8 All citations from Shakespeare’s works come from *The Riverside Shakespeare* (1974).

husbands and the brothers to defend their property, to avenge their loss. After all, as long as Lucrece and Lavinia do not testify about their rapes, the crime goes undetected and unpunished. In addition, in *The Rape of Lucrece* and *Titus Andronicus*, as well as in many other works by Shakespeare, male family honor depends on the victims' willingness and ability to tell that they have been raped. Only then can the men carry out their revenge and regain their social standing.

In these two texts, Shakespeare also shows that the raped women are classified as a problem by their community. Firstly, they denote potentially explosive grievances between men; secondly, they themselves are seen as threatening the social law and order. In *The Rape of Lucrece*, the suicide of the violated woman empowers her husband and his companions to provoke a rebellion that allows them to change the political system – from monarchy to republic. A similar situation takes place in *Titus Andronicus*. Feeling dishonored, Titus revenges Lavinia's rape and disfigurement by inflicting a most disgusting brutality upon her rapists – he not only kills, but also bakes their bodies in a pie, which Tamora, their mother, eats during a banquet. By killing Lavinia, he brings his daughter's suffering and social degradation to an end. Further, his actions evoke political repercussions: Saturnin, the Emperor, and his wife Tamora are killed, and Lucius, Titus's eldest son, seizes power in Rome.

As even a cursory survey of *The Rape of Lucrece* and *Titus Andronicus* shows, male aggression and female subordination and sacrifice constituted a powerful appeal to the early modern imagination, thus they frequently appear in various guises in many other plays of Shakespeare. In *Two Gentlemen of Verona*, a play written early in his career, the threat of sexual violence is present throughout. Male characters strongly objectify women as possessions that can be taken by force, stolen or even given to other men as "gifts." When the Duke encourages Valentine to "[t]ake [...] Silvia, for thou hast deserv'd her," Valentine replies "I thank your Grace; the gift hath made me happy" (5.4.145–146). Aware of the possible dangers, Julia disguises herself as a man to avoid "loose encounters of lascivious men" (2.7.12), while in the forest the outlaws tell Silvia that their captain "will not use a woman lawlessly" (4.1.13). Yet, as the play culminates in Proteus's attempt to rape her, he declares:

I'll woo you like a soldier, at arm's end,
 And love you 'gainst the nature of love: force ye. [...]
 I'll force thee yield to my desire. (5.4.57–59)

Fortunately, Valentine comes to Silvia's rescue, and the play finishes with male bonding over the division of women. Valentine, who gets Silvia's hand, reunites with Proteus, who returns Juliet's love. Even the outlaws are forgiven their crimes by the benevolent Duke of Milan.

Although in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* the question of rape is not presented in an explicit way, sexual violence is introduced in the opening lines. While preparing their wedding, Theseus officially reminds Hippolyta:

I wo'd thee with my sword,
 And won thy love doing thee injuries;

But I will wed thee in another key,
 With pomp, with triumph, and with reveling. (1.1.15–17)

In other words, Shakespeare allows one of his main male characters to announce that it is possible “to transform something like rape into something like a legitimate marriage” (Levine 211). Hippolyta, as Oberon and Titania reveal, is not the only object of Theseus’s sexual brutalities. Although under her influence he assumes the role of a considerate ruler at the end of the play, his earlier decisions show him to be a misogynist prioritizing the interests of men over those of women: he takes the side of Hermia’s father, who plans to bond her with Demetrius against her will (1.1). The play, as Laura Levine demonstrates, is permeated with examples of sexual coercion imposed upon, among others, Hermia, Helena and Titania (210–227).⁹

Since men rape what other men possess, it becomes, in part, a disastrous element of male rivalry in many of Shakespeare’s other plays, especially those whose plots center on war. In *Henry V*, Henry warns the citizens of Harfleur, the town his army besieges, that their “pure maidens fall into the hand / Of hot and forcing violation” (3.3.20–21). In *Coriolanus*, Cominius reminds Rome that the city cannot defend itself against the ruthless Volsces’s invasion. Furthermore, the citizens and the Senator responsible for banishing Coriolanus, who is now at the head of the foreign army, are certain they will have their daughters ravished and “see [their] wives dishonour’d to [their] noses” (4.6.82–84). In *Henry VI* part 2, Jack Cade, the leader of the commoners’ revolt, instigates his comrades to fight by threatening that if they do not fight their opponents, the aristocrats will “ravish [their] wives and daughters before [their] faces” (4.8.30–31). Before the battle of Bosworth, Richard III uses the same technique. He also appeals to his soldiers’ sexual honor. If they lose, Richmond’s army “will lie with our wives [...] / Ravish our daughters” (5.3.336–337). No doubt, in Shakespeare’s presentations of war, the tools of mass murder are dramaturgically refined. What strengthens the cruel manner in which opposing armies slaughter their enemies is the realization that rape intensifies the blood extermination of the opponents. The brutal assaults on their women are treated as the ultimate humiliation and disgrace.

Almost all of Shakespeare’s romances share the sexual discourse of early modern popular culture; however, they do not approach the subject as simplistically. Distinct from plays written by other Jacobean playwrights (e.g. John Fletcher’s *The Tragedy of Bonduca*, *The Tragedy of Valentinian*, *The Queen of Corinth*; Tomas Middleton’s *The Revenger’s Tragedy*, *The Maiden’s Tragedy* and Thomas Heywood’s *The Rape of Lucrece*). Shakespeare’s plays do not show male sexual misbehavior as an ordinary male, heterosexual activity (Bamford). Often, rape is presented as a threat that somehow is not realized. Although in *Pericles*, the threat of rape hangs over Marina, she manages to protect her chastity despite being sold to a brothel. The owners of the brothel discuss rape as a way of subduing her:

fie upon her! She’s able to freeze the god Priapus, and undo a whole generation. We must either get her ravished, or be rid of her. When she should do for clients her fitment,

9 The source materials Shakespeare used for this play are filled with examples and imagery connected with stories of rape as presented in Greek and Roman mythologies.

and do me the kindness of our profession, she has me her quirks, her reasons, her master reasons, her prayers, her knees; that she would make a puritan of the devil, if he should cheapen a kiss of her. [. . .] Faith, I must ravish her, or she'll disfurnish us of all our cavaliers, and make our swearers priests. (4.6.3–12)

In *Cymbeline*, a potentially bloody sexual assault is avoided because of the rapist's inefficiency. When in a cockish and arrogant mood, Cloten, who does not even think that raping Imogen is wrong, fantasizes about killing Posthumus and raping Imogen, his wife, while wearing Posthumus's clothes. He just wants to get his way, and believes nothing and no one will stop him.

What mortality is! Posthumus, thy head, which now is growing upon thy shoulders, shall within this hour be off; thy mistress enforced; thy garments cut to pieces before thy face: and all this done, spurn her home to her father; who may haply be a little angry for my so rough usage; but my mother, having power of his testiness, shall turn all into my commendations. My horse is tied up safe: out, sword, and to a sore purpose! Fortune put them into my hand! (5.1.16–23)

Guiderius, Imogen's brother, kills Cloten in a fight and the death of the clownish buffoon turns the potentially tragic situation into a comedy. In a way, Cloten foreshadows Caliban, who has the same design upon Miranda in *The Tempest*. He confesses previously attempting to rape her, but, instead of showing contrition, he openly admits in front of Prospero, her father, that if he had succeeded he could have "peopled [...] / This island with Calibans" (1.2.353–354). As if having learnt to guard his daughter's chastity, Prospero watches her meetings with Ferdinand, whom he has chosen for her husband.

A few years ago, Lawrence Stone explained in his so precisely documented monograph that "both state and Church, for their own reasons, actively reinforced the pre-existent patriarchy within the family, and there are signs that the power of the husband and father over the wife and children was positively strengthened, making him a legalized petty tyrant within the home" (Stone 7). Yet, in some of his works Shakespeare undermines this ruthless status quo. It is true that his rape victims may serve as emblems of women's plight, demonstrating that they have less power than men. Nevertheless, Shakespeare does allow his female characters to speak about their trauma and abuse, which reveals the stoic dignity of their suffering.

Further, Shakespeare stresses the significance of a sympathetic male response to an abused woman's state. Marcus's comment upon seeing brutalized Lavinia is one of the best examples. He says:

Do not draw back [Lavinia], for we will mourn with thee
O, could our mourning ease thy misery! (2.4.56–57)

The sequences of rape, which so overwhelmingly permeate Shakespeare's works, may be treated as a testimony as to why men sexually assault women. And the reasons have not changed over time. After devoting two full-fledged texts to rape, however, Shakespeare began decrying the warped patterns of male authority in a more artistically sophisticated way. His later plays demonstrate that the destruction of a woman's body and sense of being is more important than the value of homosocial bonds in patriarchal society.

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