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# Where Britten’s Opera Departs and Returns

By Dr. Patrick Hunt, Stanford University

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## Roman Use of the Rape of Lucretia and Artists’ Mythic Reuse: Where Britten’s Opera Departs and Returns

*Picture: The Death of Lucretia by William Blake, Graphic Arts Collection, Princeton University Library.*

Art and myth have found the theme of the Lucretia’s Rape and Death fertile despite its fearful means. Botticelli, Lucas Cranach the Elder, Joos van Cleve, Dürer, Raphael, Lorenzo Lotto, Titian, Tintoretto, Artemisia Gentileschi, Rubens, Rembrandt, Tiepolo and William Blake are among the many Renaissance, Baroque and later artists who have depicted it. Dante, Chaucer, Boccaccio and Shakespeare are just a few of the Medieval and Renaissance writers who have retold Lucretia’s tale in various versions, as did Machiavelli in his satire MANDRAGOLA.

In music, Benjamin Britten’s iconoclastic tragic opera is one more modern repondering of its possible meanings. Several questions need to be addressed. Whether it ever happened or not, before these later reuses by artists and writers, how did the Romans perceive the Rape of Lucretia? Can we bridge these retellings? How unique is Lucretia’s story in the original 1946 version of Britten’s opera, THE RAPE OF LUCRETIA? In Veronika Kaer’s and Beate Willma’s fresh interpretation of Britten, the opera breaks radical ground in its William Blake allusions and new reading of the old story. While some may find their interpretation marginal, it is sufficiently plausible to make us stop and think anew about the much-politicized story.

Roman mythology often makes violence a needed vehicle for dynamic change, a vengeful catalyst for social transformation. Based on Livy’s telling, Poets like Ovid (FASTI II.811-12) conclude that a brief victory like Sextus Tarquinius had over Lucretia could also destroy a kingdom:

“Why gloat, victor? This victory will cost you. How much a single night cost your kingdom!”

Although propagandized by Augustus for his own uses, for Romans of both the Republic and Empire, the story of Lucretia’s suicide (mors voluntaria) was an emblem of salvific sacrifice. Her rape by Tarquinius and tragic suicide provided the spark of public anger that burst into a revolutionary flame, overthrowing the several plus centuries of Tarquinian Etruscan domination over Rome and starting the Republic in 509 BCE if history happened as tradition would have it.

In the first century BC-AD the Augustan historian Livy’s HISTORY OF ROME I,57-59 tells Lucretia’s story in prose, and Ovid’s FASTI II.721-852 in Augustan poetry is derived from Livy’s version just a few years later. Many other Roman writers summarize the story of Lucretia, including Valerius Maximus in his MEMORABLE DEEDS AND SAYINGS 6.1.1 and Seneca’s AD MARCIAM 16.2, both in the first century AD, and Cassius Dio’s ROMAN HISTORY II.15 fragment in the second to third century AD. Although it has not survived, one Cassius Parmensis circa 43 BC wrote BRUTUS, a Roman play with the story of Lucretia as its leitmotif. Cassius Parmensis himself did not survive long thereafter as Octavian – later Augustus – had him killed right after the Battle of Actium in 31 BC due to lack of allegiance to the Julian clan and likely role in the conspiracy against Julius Caesar along with the more famous Cassius.

Lucretia modeled virtue and chastity for ideal Roman morals, sometimes desperately needed. Historian Catharine Edwards (Edwards, 2007) notes Lucretia’s death as spectacle (p. 12), as sexual politics (p. 180) and even more telling as an interpretive stopgap for decay (p. 182):

“Livy’s version of the story...was written in the context of a Rome where adultery on the part of a married woman was shortly to become a criminal offense...lex Iulia de adulteriis coercendis, Julian law on controlling adulteries (18 BCE)...Numerous Augustan writers associate unchecked female misbehavior with the moral and political chaos of the late republic...The story of Lucretia resonates with this set of concerns and gives female chastity a distinctively political dimension...”

Furthermore, as Philip Matyszak and Joanne Berry (Matyszak and Berry, 2008: 29-30) show, Lucretia’s quietly virtuous home industry when the other women were partying was portrayed as exemplary:

“[Lucretia] represent[ed] the ideal, but not the norm. Lucretia’s behavior was something to aspire to. Hundreds of years later – when for example the emperor Augustus claimed to wear only the clothes made by the women of his own family...it still resonated with the Roman public.”

For many Romans, Lucretia’s historical or even mythological suicide could be understood as a form of protection against the impurity of a pregnancy that might ensue. Better to die than to give birth to pollution. At least this was what Romans moralized, whether they lived up to it or not.

Although as Lee noted the Lucretia story seems not to have been much committed to Roman painting or sculpture (Lee, 1953:107), that the Romans found Lucretia hugely and vicariously important has not been missed by recent interpreters, including Eve d’Ambra who viewed Lucretia as sacrificing herself to the greater good of Rome and whose female heroism representing virtuous chastity (*pudor* in Latin) greatly influenced the political order in “recalibrating the balance of power” (d’Ambra, 2007:58-59); also long noted by Ian Donaldson that a myth equation has been made (Donaldson, 1982:9) :

“Lucretia is not simply Lucretia, but the figure of violated Rome; the rape epitomizes the wider tyranny of the Tarquins. The symbolism of the story runs two ways: if Rome is like Lucretia, Lucretia is also like Rome...”

Lucretia may be beautiful in every story, but that is not the only attraction for Tarquinius according to many commentaries, beginning with both Livy and Ovid. In addition to her external beauty is her internal virtue, the impossible barrier of her chastity that also excites the ravisher. Livy says (I.57),

“not only her beauty, but her proven chastity as well provoked and inflamed him.”

In FASTI II.765-66, Ovid makes the infatuation of Tarquinius even more fanned by inaccessibility, having Tarquinius engage in greater lust by moving from admiration of beauty to wanting to wreck Lucretia’s chastity, the opposite of respect:

“admiring her incorruptible virtue...diminished hope increases his desire.”

It was not lost on the Romans that much of their whole early history hinged on tales of two rapes, that of the Sabine Women at the beginning of Rome and that of Lucretia at the beginning of the Roman republic two and a half centuries later; these tumultuous events were connected spectacles witnessing a violent and insecure past that could somehow lead to a peaceful and secure future. Goffen emphasizes this Sabine link to Lucretia as well (Goffen, 1999). Yet savagery was part of the immediate Roman past as relative newcomers to civilization, just as Perowne maintained (Perowne, 1983:9).

Purging themselves of the brutality of these seminal events was a curiously necessary path to statehood; forgetting them would be impossible and tantamount to cultural anomie while memorializing them was strangely apropos to Roma herself, the palindrome of Amor. After all, it is passion in the story, says Ovid, that motivates Tarquin at night when “the sun buries its face” and when “diminished hope that increased his desire” effects an inverse proportion of virtuous love, but a love no less strong even if it is “immoral love.” The Romans could often rationalize with like questions: since when were the lusts of the immortal gods pure when they engendered heroes like Hercules through beautiful mortal women?

The irresolvable dilemma of Lucretia’s suicide is posed in many of the retellings, including Britten’s opera. Was it from shame or guilt or something else? After the Romans, it is Augustine – no paragon of virtue himself as he had admittedly wallowed in Carthage’s fleshpots - who explicitly questions Lucretia’s virtue, making her complicit in his CITY OF GOD I.19, pontificating that although it clearly started as a rape, perhaps somewhere in the act “she was seduced by her own lust”, and finally “secretly consented”, and thus compromised her conscience, being later “conscious of her guilt”. Augustine seems to ask, almost with prejudice, “What if she was betrayed by the pleasure of the act?” Sabine MacCormack has taken Augustine to task for his reading of Lucretia (MacCormack, 1998:112-13). Likewise, Susan Treggiari sagely clarifies that rape is sufficient defamation to seal Lucretia’s fate in her own eyes (Treggiari, 1993:311). Simply put, “Lucretia commits suicide in front of her husband and father because her honour has been tarnished by rape.” They were obligated to be her protectors, and now are witnesses to her shame, “through no fault of her own.” This is the high view, countering Augustine’s low view, which is after all only an interpretive argument from silence.

Artists since the Renaissance, however, have apparently often followed Augustine. Joos van Cleve and Lucas Cranach have cleverly conflated rape, suicide and fatal love with a morbid form of pleasure effacing Lucretia’s features as she fatally stabs herself. Lucie-Smith clearly suggests this reading (Lucie-Smith, 1997: 239):

“Most popular among all these rape scenes are probably the representations of Tarquin and Lucretia. The [circa 1571] painting by Titian in Cambridge offers a particularly complete working out of its implications.

Tarquin thrusts his knee between the thighs of his naked victim, and threatens her with a dagger which may be read as a symbolic penis. ...[in] the [Dresden, 1537] Cranach Lucretia...she plunges the dagger into her own breast with a slightly languishing look, which suggests she is taking a masochistic pleasure in the act. It does not take much imagination to read the painting in a symbolic sense. The dagger symbolizes not only aggression but, more literally, a phallus; the inadequate veil suggests a lost innocence, the collar, perhaps, is an emblem of servitude. Nor is this the most erotic version of the myth...[in the painting of] LUCRETIA by Joos van Cleve in Vienna...her expression leads us to suppose she is in the throes of orgasm...”

If Lucie-Smith’s interpretations are valid - admittedly male commentary on male depictions - these artists seem to have echoed Augustine. En route to modernity, how can we bridge the Romans, Augustine, the Renaissance artists and Britten? Is there any precedent in Ovid, the Poet of Love, the chiaroscuro master of love’s shadows as well as light, for Augustine and subsequent readings? Ovid hints at a darker side.

As Lee noted, Ovid foreshadows Tarquinius’ coming in Lucretia’s own imagination about her husband Collatinus in *Fasti* II.751-2:

“My man is reckless, rushing anywhere with his sword drawn.”

To this inverted fantasy of her husband fulfilled by Tarquinius, an unfortunate equation, Lucretia adds a fearful prolepsis of her own death in the following lines (*FASTI* II.753-4):

“My mind dissolves and I die, when I picture him in battle: icy cold cases my heart.”

When Tarquinius finally mounts her bed, there is a cryptic Ovidian line after her mind is “dissolved” when the intruder threatens death and infamy (*FASTI* II.810):

“fear conquered: the girl surrenders to fame.”

Although Ovid nuances a subtle personification of Tarquinius’ dual threat, “quivering” Lucretia is both “conquered [by]” and “surrenders to” not the man but rather “fear” and “fame”. This is part of the horrible physical and emotional havoc of rape, yet Ovid somehow breaks down the volitional barrier if Lucretia “surrenders” to anything.

Ovid’s primary source was Livy, and even this Augustan interpreter cannot fully shield his history from the odd hint in I.58 from the mouth of Lucretia:

“Sextus Tarquin, who, coming as an enemy instead of a guest, forced from me last night by brutal violence a pleasure fatal to me, and, if you are men, fatal to him.”

Although the agency was by Tarquinius’ brutal violence, Livy’s Lucretia admits to a “fatal pleasure” (*pestiferum...gaudium* in Latin) forced from her. This Livian phrase “fatal pleasure” is so fraught with oxymoron and contradictory impulses, a battleground of body and will. Augustine pushed his argument, possibly guessing from Livy’s use of the word “pleasure”, that the body cannot be so easily mastered by the mind and will. Most Roman interpreters of the quasi-historical tale agreed that whatever pleasure may have happened was unacceptable. This is one of the reasons usually offered why Lucretia wanted to die, “of fatal pleasure” – ensuring her death by phallic dagger - as Livy and possibly Ovid saw it and Augustine inferred, although his unfavorable comparison of Lucretia with female Christian martyr saints is too pious to accept, sticking in the craw because Augustine dehumanizes his unwomanly saints by the same measure that he humanizes the beautiful Lucretia.

Dante, who appears to have held more respect for women in general and a higher view of Lucretia than Augustine, in Canto 4 of the *INFERNO* places Lucretia (Lucrezia) in the section of Limbo reserved for virtuous pagans, “among the master souls of time”.

Boccaccio in *FAMOUS WOMEN* (*De Mulieribus Claris*) c. 1362, follows Dante in this respect by praising Lucretia (in chapter XLVIII) as the “leading example of Roman modesty” who “unwillingly gave her body” and “extolled” Lucretia’s “purity which can never be sufficiently commended.” Dante and Boccaccio thus rather decently skirt the issue of “fatal pleasure,” and Boccaccio certainly knew enough of the ribald to be less diplomatically high-minded about lascivious clergy he lampooned elsewhere.

But in the somewhat more cynical Renaissance, both Machiavelli in his 1518 *MANDRAGOLA* and Pietro Aretino suggest different possibilities for Lucretia. As Machiavelli probably intended, his satiric Lucretia who takes pleasure in her adultery is a caricature of the ancient Roman matron. Similarly, Pitkin pointed out (Pitkin, 1999:48): “Mandragola is not a recapitulation of the tale of Lucretia and Brutus in ancient Rome, but a satire on or an inversion of it.” In 1537 Aretino wrote a letter to Malatesta and queried, “What did you think of Lucretia? Was she not deranged to listen to the prompts of honor? It would have been clever if she had her fun with Messer Tarquin and lived.”

As already shown from the commentaries of Livy and Ovid, Tarquinius is not only moved by Lucretia’s looks but also her virtue. In his 1594 poem *THE RAPE OF LUCRECE* Shakespeare lifts this idea from these sources about the effect of Lucretia’s chastity on the already-smoldering Tarquinius:

“Haply that name of ‘chaste’ unhappily set  
This bateless edge on his keen appetite” (lines 59-60)

By first using “Haply” (“by chance”) set against its euphonic double antithesis of “unhappily”, Shakespeare the poet of subtlety implies a clever poetic figure that is close to an extended chiasm transferred epithet by first separating the adjective “baleless” and its expected noun “appetite”, but then allowing the reconnecting of “baleless” and “appetite” by inserting in the middle another internal transferred epithet for the “keen-edged” sword of Tarquinius, all of which is driven by the virtue of “chaste” Lucretia. Lust and its euphemized “appetite” are thus linked to the sword he brings to her bed, which sword is a metaphor for his violent lust that is all the stronger given her expected resistance. Melissa Mathes, echoing Livy, agrees on this added incentive that Lucretia’s chastity gives to Tarquinius in her seminal study on the meanings of the heroine to later ages where Mathes states (Mathes, 2001:28):

“Tarquin rapes Lucretia not only for her beauty but also for her chastity.”

From secret to manifest, the external beauty of Lucretia attracted Tarquinius to her internal beauty; conversely for him the internal embers burst into an external flame.

In another later interpretation, only one of many Lucretia depictions that could be closely examined, the work of Peter Paul Rubens show him as one of the most classically erudite painters, as Elizabeth McGrath has often demonstrated in such studies of Rubens (McGrath, 1997: 226-27). In Rubens’ complicatedly enigmatic Tarquin and Lucretia, circa 1610, now in the Hermitage in St. Petersburg, there are elements found nowhere else in art about Lucretia. Examining Rubens’ painting, some see the lack of an obvious knife in the hand of Tarquin, where others see the dagger as almost entirely hidden, with just the barest hint of the hilt above Tarquin’s lower back and implied in his fist. McGrath mentions the dagger is concealed to “suggest [Tarquinius’] vain hope” of winning Lucretia by persuasion. The painting is loaded with ambiguities that allow multiple readings.

Why would Rubens hide the knife with which Tarquin reputedly violently threatened Lucretia? Ever one to foreshadow, Rubens may also subtly suggest that the dagger is instead suggestively “buried to the hilt” in Tarquin himself, a foreshadowed “wounding” because his rape will lead to his own downfall and death. Raping his kinswoman Lucretia will also become a reflexive “rape” of himself, exactly as Ovid promised above (FASTI II.811-12), which text Rubens probably knew in its Latin original. Plus, Lucretia will also later flourish a hidden, fatal dagger. This yet-unrevealed but intended violence to her, his secret dagger about to be shown, also provides by its absence the “innocent” pretext Tarquin uses to gain entry to her house before entry to her body. To the left in the Rubens painting behind Tarquin is a naked, scraggly-haired hag with a striking viper uncoiling from her right arm. Eye-popping melodramatic with uncontrolled force, she is also the gray color of death. Her sagging breast with its enormous nipple – suggesting she has long suckled something ugly or something with a fierce appetite (Tarquin’s lust?) - may imply she is a harbinger Fury, the ancient punisher of blood violence, as McGrath suggests, not the least because the Furies were always iconographically associated with serpents. She holds a burning faggot in the dark background and is somewhat paralleled by the dark-winged Cupid (yet without his bow weapon, which echoes the hidden dagger) leading Tarquin onward, the epitome of his burning desire. There might be another deliberately ambiguous allusion as well. Since Rubens probably knew his Ovid, he could have also remembered the preceding lines of FASTI II.712-16 just before the drunken fete that first sets Tarquin’s lust in motion:

“Look (unspeakable) a snake slithers from the altar  
and rips the entrails from the dead flames.”

“Dead flames” is an oxymoron as well as a premonition of sacrificial ash, although the sacrificial augury appears incomplete if any entrails were unconsumed by fire. Ovid says the omens of the Tarquin rulers on their altars were misconstrued here:

“Phoebus is consulted, this oracle pronounced,  
the princeps kissing his mother will triumph...  
The ingenuous crowd misconstrued the god.”

So perhaps princely sons kissing their mothers were not so pure either, even prophetically incestuous such as the princely Tarquin about to rape his kinswoman Lucretia. Was anything else misconstrued – like Tarquinius and Lucretia together? Taken in ensemble with this awful prologue omen, all the elements in Ovid are also here in Rubens: snakes resembling entrails, the dark passion of Tarquin, the punishment already augured, death aflame, the secret dagger of lust, and shining Lucretia violated. One wonders in the absence of any proof if the hidden dagger Lucretia uses to kill herself by daylight is the same one that Tarquin brought to threaten her by night. Such a connection – not revealed in the story - might be too ironic to be directly stated. However erudite, Rubens imbues his master painting with both Lucretia’s ambiguous alarm as well as fear the hag embodies and also confirms the resolute will of Tarquin.

Veronika Kaer and Beate Willma pose fresh, intriguing insights on Rubens’ painting. In Western painting, Eros-Cupid usually represents desire, and here he is looking back at Tarquinius while leading him onward to Lucretia. But perhaps Kaer and Willma also have a valid point wondering if this winged figure possibly represents a new religion (coming Christianity) relative to the hag representing an old religion (Roman “paganism”), especially since both are holding burning brands for light. This would not be the first time such old-new religion symbolism occurs in a distinctively symbolic mythological vignette, as in Nativity and Magi imagery where Mithraic astrologers (the old religion) bow the knee to a baby (the new religion). Such symbolism would have been clearly known to Rubens. Kaer and Willma also see no dagger in Tarquinius’ right hand, and if there is one, it is almost entirely hidden. Kaer and Willma instead interpret that there is no coercion or rape depicted here, which is radically profound if Tarquinius

was somehow totally maligned for political gain by Brutus and others.

Tarquinius’ left hand is very suggestive because it is right over Lucretia’s loins. Equally fascinating as an extrapolation from the Rubens painting – adding support for Kaer and Willma? - is that Lucretia seems to be also reaching out to the loins of Tarquinius, whether to stop him or touch him, a very ambiguous gesture. Most traditional interpretations would deduce her hand is there to stop him. Rubens would probably have been very aware of the confusing renditions of the story that also allow Lucretia to eventually willingly be “coerced” and to in the end submit to Tarquinius’ desire because she could not stop herself. As a very erudite painter, Rubens could easily allude to more than one interpretation or tradition in this painting full of ambiguities.

Rubens could have also been intentionally ambiguous about the snake in this painting. Snakes have often been identified with virile phallism in global symbolism, much like swords and daggers. Kaer is right to mention that in Judeo-Christian history, snakes have been negativized into cultural images of evil. In contrast, in the earlier Pre-Apollo Pythian Oracle shrine at Delphi, dating back to the Bronze Age, the snake of the earth goddess Gaia was not at all a negative image but one of chthonicity. Plus, in Greek mythology, snakes on the caduceus wand of Hermes are also powerful earth magic symbols of mating snakes, with this wand also having power to open up the earth itself for leading souls to the Underworld (Hermes Psychopompus).

It is also interesting that the Rubens’ pattern on Tarquinius’ garment appears very womblike directly over his abdomen, which may be coincidental – however unlikely in Rubens, where nothing appears coincidental – and certainly intriguing. In addition, the snake is not associated with the winged “Cupid” figure, which would be consistent with the snake’s absence from Judeo-Christianity as the winged child, but present with the older hag as Roman paganism. If one looks, however, at the GOSPEL OF JOHN 3:14-15, there Jesus associates his death as Son of Man on the cross with the Old Testament event of the serpent lifted up in the wilderness. This usually is interpreted to mean that people have to be desperate to look beyond the viper that bit them (“sin” in the Old Testament passage of NUMBERS 21:5-9) to the means of salvation, however ugly it might appear. So Jesus somehow transformed the snake as he did the cross into something positive, a reversal of expected symbolism.

There is also another strange counterbalance found only in Rubens to date in that the animals here are snake and dog, generally antithetical creatures for humans since snakes are often malevolent and dogs often represent guardian fidelity, in this case helpless. The snake on the arm of the Fury – McGrath identifies her as Tisiphone (who avenges homicide, of which suicide or mors voluntaria is the reflexive self-murder) – may even allude to another part of the [Junius] Brutus story, where an oracle Wiseman newly offers (Wiseman, 2008:292-99) may deal with “a snake barking like a dog” also mentioned as a prodigy in Pliny’s NATURAL HISTORY VIII.153. In the Rubens painting, the dog and snake may be foils or may hint at this early narrative of Tarquinian overthrow as well. Could Rubens have again implicated Brutus, as Wiseman infers from antiquity where “the barking snake...represents Brutus himself” in the old oracle?

Britten’s version of Lucretia is far removed from these literary and artistic precedents (especially in Kaer’s and Willma’s interpretation), although connected to Augustine and Christianity in unexpected ways, including possibly being informed by the visionary reforming spirit of William Blake instead as Kaer and Willma suggest. While it is not a direct continuation of Augustine, its Duncan libretto “strays even further from the Roman story” (Wiseman, 2004:11 & 136). Lucretia’s own view of herself in the opera seems painfully separated from the Roman view, however much that ancient one may have been propagandized. In the libretto, as Wiseman points out, Brutus appears as a cynic. He is no better than Tarquin, and perhaps as much or more a villain in the opera, more misogynistic than Augustine:

“Women are chaste when they are not tempted.  
Lucretia’s beautiful but she’s not chaste.  
Women are all whores by nature.”

Unfortunate observations like this from the opera’s Brutus are not shared by humanity at large – although some medieval clergy might have resonated - and hardly fit any tragedy of rape, but this Brutus may support Kaer’s and Willma’s possible reading that the rape could also have been a Roman lie. Such miasmatic lines as those of Brutus above can shade a character’s persona without revealing the intent of Duncan (or Britten). On the other hand, we can echo Pitkin’s sense of Lucretia’s growing worry about “the dangers of her own sexuality.”

In his brilliant Britten biography, David Matthews shares that the opera’s ever-present chorus duet “place the pagan tragedy within the Christian context of forgiveness.” An acclaimed composer himself and at one time Britten’s assistant and copyist (1966), Matthews offers insights found nowhere else (Matthews, 2003:86-87):

“In any case, Christianity’s profound silence about sex means that it cannot solve the real moral dilemma of the opera, which is whether or not Lucretia acquiesces in her rape. There is no obvious sign of this in her terrified protests against Tarquinius’ intrusion into her bed, yet both libretto and music disclose more ambivalent feelings. Lucretia confesses that ‘In the forest of my dreams / you have always been the Tiger’, and Tarquinius claims ‘Yet the linnet in your eyes / Lifts with desire / And the cherries of your lips / Are wet with wanting’; the music at this point does not give the lie to his observation. The whole of this scene is superbly handled by Britten and is full of the wildness, fervour and confusion of sexual desire. When Lucretia makes her confession to Collatinus, fragments of Tarquinius’ music appear lightly in the orchestra as if to suggest that her memories are not as terrifying as she presents them...She cannot bear the thought that she might have unwontedly aroused in herself some deeper, darker level of

sexuality. The passacaglia ensemble that follows her death...and its concluding quiet attempt at reassurance...do not solve our uneasiness about Lucretia...”

Here Veronika Kaer and Beate Willma have connected the libretto’s “tiger” and the “forest” to Blake’s poetic visionary flaming “Tyger, Tyger” poem with its “fearful symmetry” and the terrible sovereign justice of “Did He who made the Lamb make thee?” Matthews also provides a crux for the ambivalence of the opera:

“Britten and Duncan were brave in asking disturbing questions about sexuality, but these are so challenging that what may easily seem like Christian platitudes are inadequate to answer them.”

The putative “Christian” theme of salvific sacrifice in the opera is a radical one; the natural “purity” of love and passion another altogether. As Ryan states (Ryan, 1997:69), apropos about Blake’s perceived tension between natural and state religion:

“For Blake, fallen mankind’s natural religious sense was radically corrupt, so that religion, which ought to indicate the path to redemption, became a nearly insuperable stumbling block to it.”

Such a view of moral religion is likely applicable here in this opera version of the Lucretia story, especially given the amorality of passion once the body takes over its own instinctive drive to natural (read unstoppable) sexual climax, regardless of social convention, religion and moral enculturation. We mostly accept the historicity of tradition that Lucretia was raped in the old Roman story, but as Matthews wonders, what happened in the process to her body and soul? Theoretically, the opera may also suggest that Christ may forgive, but what if we cannot forgive ourselves?

How prescient are Kaer and Willma in connecting William Blake to this Lucretia opera? Blake’s “Death of Lucretia” engraving from 1797 (see above) proves he knew the Lucretia story. It is most interesting that Blake’s image does not depict Tarquinius at all. It only shows Lucretia dying and the man we assume to be Brutus raising the knife overhead (strengthening Kaer’s and Willma’s new reading), although it does not prove that Britten or Duncan knew the Blake image of Lucretia. If Kaer and Willma, however, have connected Blake and Lucretia more strongly, some evidence is there from Blake’s art to back them up. In the Blake, we only see a fragment of the story’s end, but a telling one if it is indeed Brutus holding the knife upraised, like a crime in which the last person holding the deadly weapon is also implicitly guilty. If, as Britten’s opera plots it, Brutus schemed to throw Tarquinius and Lucretia together, knowing how Tarquinius felt about her, hoping for personal political gain, Brutus may be the most guilty party in the mix. We do not know, however, exactly how Blake interpreted Lucretia since he is unusually original in his interpretations and rarely mainstream in historical orthodoxy. Nonetheless, this is a profound connection Kaer and Willma make, with implications that need to be pursued, however uncomfortable they may be for organized religion and expected Lucretia traditions. Blake himself generally rebelled against state religion and connected social conventions about heresy, as seen in his *A Vision of the Last Judgment* (1810):

“He who is out of the Church & opposes it  
is no less an Agent of Religion than he who is in it.  
To be an Error & to be cast out  
Is all part of God’s Design.”

In addition, Blake questioned morality and the religious sensibility of his day in *A Little Girl Lost* from his *Songs of Experience*:

“Children of a future age  
Reading this indignant page  
Know that in a former time  
Love! Sweet Love! was thought a crime.”

Again, Kaer and Willma are probably right to read Blake as a Romantic revolutionary and to connect Blake’s Lucretia to Britten’s and Duncan’s Lucretia. Much as he loved historic Christian hymnody and sacred music, the openly gay Britten certainly knew he was outside the traditional fold of the Church with his long-honored “Love That Cannot Be Named” for his life partner Peter Pears. Thus, however they break with the majority view about Lucretia over millennia of codification - yet in possible synch with Britten and Duncan - the fresh possibilities Kaer and Willma suggest for Britten’s opera deserve further analyses. While their new emphases would unlikely ever be mainstream, the opera corpus of Britten will ultimately enfold their modern interpretation.

In one of her last threnodic lines in the opera, after she has stabbed herself, Britten’s Lucretia laments:

“See how my wanton blood washes my shame”.

If we now apply Lucie-Smith’s comments, Joos van Cleve’s dying Lucretia, circa 1523, has a look that has long fascinated viewers of whatever gender, as it could be variously interpreted as either pain or pleasure. Such ambivalence is not necessarily sado-masochistic since physiologists have shown the facial muscles in either involuntary state of pain or pleasure can appear much the same, confusingly so to a viewer out of context. Anyone who has ever looked in the face of a lover’s pleasure can recognize the confusion in van Cleve’s ambiguity. This artistic ambivalence could also be hinted at in Livy’s oxymoronic “fatal pleasure” but it is an enormously difficult theme to treat sensitively given the horrible circumstances of rape.

As Wiseman opined, the ancient Lucretia may be originally fictive and yet all too real in other ways.

Psychoanalytic therapies evidence that not-so proverbial victims of rape are often filled with self-loathing and a dread, however sadly irrational, that they were somehow responsible for the violence done to them when the body and the will do not cooperate in the tragedy of rape. This is why we humans, unable to live with shame, often prefer a comfortable lie over a terrible, confusing truth. In that sense, on the one hand, Britten’s Lucretia fully shares the sense of moral pollution that being violated brings in an act that does not stop with the mind but wholly penetrates the body, even when anguished soul and body may not always share the same will to stop, to the horror of the confused soul. Augustine, being a man, probably wouldn’t understand. On the other hand, for enough readers from antiquity to the present, there may have been hints or questions of partial collusion rather than a victim’s full coercion on Lucretia’s part, applicable to this one story but not applicable elsewhere to rape. Therein, after her rape, Britten’s and Duncan’s fatalistic Lucretia is brutally honest when talking about a flower, likely amoral in its natural state:

“...its petals contain women’s pleasures and women’s pains and all of Lucretia’s shame.”

True for any story, every generation must reinterpret Lucretia. In the end, who can say which tragic heroine, the Roman Lucretia of Livy and Ovid, knowing “fatal pleasure” or the possibly Blake-tinged one of Britten and Duncan, a self-accused “Roman harlot” who concludes “the flower alone is chaste”, is more historical? Regardless, whether he would find pleasure so darkly constrained, Blake the poet of apocalypse would probably sadly agree about the unfallen, chaste flower.

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