BATTERING RAM, IVORY WALL – PHALLIC SYMBOLS AND AGGRESSION IN SHAKESPEARE'S *THE RAPE OF LUCRECE*.

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Abstract

This study examines how symbolism is used to suggest sexual aggression in Shakespeare's *The Rape of Lucrece*. Symbols such as a Roman blade, a battering ram and other seemingly innocent objects in the poem are examined for implicit evidence of sexual conquest. The study argues that Shakespeare employs such symbols to make the phallic aggression perpetrated against Lucrece repulsive to readers and to highlight the power dynamics at work in the poem. The essay concludes that Shakespeare expresses disapproval of the violence committed against Lucrece without betraying the mores of English society.

Keywords: aggression, conquest, phallic, symbolism, violence

1. Introduction

The English language is full of expressions predicated on sexual aggression. For example, countries are often said to be "raped." This expression refers to the unlawful invasion of a territory and the plundering of its resources. Annexation of a territory may be achieved through various means such as conquest through a militia. The conquest of land and the penetration of a woman have, therefore, come to be understood as symbols in some contexts. For example, the incursion into a territory is often metaphorically referred to in terms that entail sexual innuendo. This view is supported by Heather Dubrow, in her work *Captive Victors: Shakespeare's Narrative Poems and Sonnet,* (1989) who argues that, because of the association of the gates with the female genitals, the notion of rape is latent in the image of a city under attack (p.94). Smith (2005) in his work *Disgrace*: *The Politics of Rape in Shakespeare's Lucrece* similarly makes the connection that the rape is first and foremost a political act with grave consequences. It is a moment that transforms the Kingdom of Rome into a Republic (p.20). Based on what the two critics cited above posit, one may argue that Shakespeare's language is coded and its meaning is derived from the culture he shares with sixteenth century English society. Such shared cultural practices include religious and secular imagery, medical beliefs and artistic conventions.

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Military metaphors have become part of the English language over hundreds of years. Such metaphors are drawn from the experiences of those who took part in wars. In their book, *Metaphors We Live By* (1980), Lakoff and Johnson give examples of metaphorical thinking. They argue that English-speaking societies conceive of "argument as war" (1980: p.4). They give as examples such expressions as "He *demolished* his argument," and "He *attacked* every point in my argument." The words "demolished" and "attacked" are literal when used in the context of the battleground. However, when used in other linguistic domains, they become conceptual metaphors to the structural metaphor, "argument is war". There are several other structural metaphors drawn from the battlefield such as "football game is war", "love is war" and "electoral campaign is war". Because of frequency of usage, some of the military metaphors seem to have lost their figurative lustre and tend now to be understood as literal expressions. In Shakespeare's *The Rape of Lucrece*, the military metaphor is strong, sustained as it is throughout the poem, and boosted by collaborative figures of thought and speech. This study evaluates Shakespeare's use of military metaphor as a vehicle to probe the unsavoury experience of rape. The main line of Shakespearean thought in this work appears consistently to be couched in "rape is war", ancillary to which is the maxim "revolution is war".

2. Decoding the symbols in The Rape of Lucrece

The symbols used in the poem are phallic and architectural. For example, after the rape, the narrative voice uses imagery of man-made structures such as a house, a fortress, a mansion and a temple to describe Lucrece:

> Her house is sack'd, her quiet interrupted,
> Her mansion batter'd by the enemy;
> Her sacred temple spotted, spoil'd, corrupted,
> Grossly engirt with daring infamy:
> Then let it not be call'd impiety,
> If in this blemish'd fort I make some hole
> Through which I may convey this troubled soul. (Lines 1170-1176)

The use of the word "temple" to refer to the human body is particularly commonplace in Shakespeare's works. For example, in *Macbeth*, Act II, scene iii, line 67, Macduff calls Duncan's body "the Lord's anointed temple". In *Hamlet*, Act I, scene iii Laertes calls Ophelia's body a

temple that "waxes with its inward service of the mind and soul". In the poem, the word "temple" prepares the reader for Lucrece's comment about her body and the lack of a passage through which her tormented soul might escape. All the man-made structures, to which Lucrece is compared, strengthen the reader's perception of her vulnerability as a victim of a patriarchal society. The house, the temple and the mansion, therefore, are symbolic of a virginal or chaste female body trying to oppose a male incursion. When Tarquin finally marches into Lucrece's bedroom, however, it is her body which turns into another architectural structure, a fort, which the Roman soldier will have to breach.

Tarquin exercises power over Lucrece because he is a man, but, more importantly because he is a member of the royal family. The social and political power he wields affords him an inordinate sense of entitlement which leads him to rape. In addition, Tarquin, although a prince, is subject to self-doubt which results in his delusions of grandeur. His fantasies of great power, success, brilliance, beauty and or ideal love are some of the facets of his narcissism. Tarquin aspires to more power than he already has. His ambition can be achieved by sexually conquering a woman who is portrayed as a paragon of beauty and moral virtue. His rape of Lucrece can be understood as a case of ambition taken to extremes. Tarquin's power over Lucrece is presented in metaphors and symbols by the narrator. Tarquin tells us that he has considered his options, whether or not to rape Lucrece, carefully and he has made the decision to let his lust take charge of his body notwithstanding the "reproach", "disdain", and "the deadly enmity" the sexual assault will cause. The stanza below is an example of metaphors and symbols that are consequent upon Tarquin's tragic decision to rape Lucrece:

> This said, he shakes aloft his Roman blade
> Which, like a falcon tow'ring in the skies,
> Coucheth the fowl below with wings' shade
> Whose crooked beak threats if he mount he dies:
> So under his insulting falchion lies
> Harmless Lucretia, marking what he tells
> With trembling fear, as fowl hear falcon's bell. (Lines 505-511)

The narrative voice employs contrasting images in the passage above. The falcon is "tow'ring in the skies", while the fowl "coucheth" below, warmed by the shadow of its wings. "Tow'ring" suggests strength and, therefore, importance while "coucheth", on the other hand,

implies apprehension. In other words, the narrative voice is using the contrasting images to express that as a prince, Tarquin is powerful and important while Lucrece is terrified by the prince's crude use of power over her. The contrasting images convey Lucrece's psychological torment and the power of men like Tarquin over women.

A Roman blade is a sword that is a mark of authority of the nobility; therefore, it is a sign of entrenched power. When he gets Tarquin to use the sword to threaten Lucrece into compliance, Shakespeare emphasises his betrayal of character and nobility. Besides being a signifier of power, the blade is also a phallic symbol, which enhances the power that Tarquin has over Lucrece. The sword, as a symbol of aggression and war, reminds us that the story of Lucrece takes place against the background of the siege of Ardea. It continues the image of yet another phallic symbol, the battering ram in line 464. ("Rude ram to batter such ivory wall.") A battering ram is one of the well-known ancient weapons first used in siege warfare of the Middle Ages to pound the gates, doors and walls of castles and towns. Huge tree trunks were used to construct the battering ram which was often fitted with a metal head at the end to strengthen it against impact with the wall. A battering ram, therefore, symbolises a penis while the metal head is symbolic of a penis glans.

Because a battering ram is a phallic symbol, when Shakespeare compares Tarquin's hand to a battering ram, he draws attention to his groins, not his hand. When he "breaches the wall to enter the sweet city" (Line 469), the reader conflates two mental representations. On the one hand is a battering ram pounding down the wall of a fortress, on the other, is the image of a man pounding down a woman sexually in similar motion. The assertion that Lucrece and the city are merged is supported by Smith's view that Lucrece is both a colonised landmass and a besieged city, and that the attack on her is, in places, indistinguishable from the larger political strife suggested by the siege of Ardea (2005 p. 22). The metaphor emphasizes that Lucrece is vulnerable. She is a landmass, a city, and at the same time an innocent civilian who is part of the spoils of war.

Tarquin uses violence-charged intimidation in his final utterance before the rape: "Yield to my love; if not enforced hate, / Instead of love's coy touch, shall rudely tear thee."(Lines 668-669). The statement that he "shall rudely tear" Lucrece is particularly horrifying. It is of a piece with the line "breach the wall to enter the sweet city" (Line

469). The adverb "rudely" also occurs in Sonnet 129, where we are told that the consummation of lust is not only savage, extreme and cruel, but also rude. Tarquin threatens Lucrece with violent sexual assault if she refuses to yield to him. He threatens crudely to tear her hymen and, metaphorically, lay her to waste like a landmass or city. The verb "tear" besides suggesting a violent rending of the hymen, also brings to the fore Lucrece's virtues that Collatine is said to have praised at the beginning of the poem; that is, her chastity and moral esteem. When Tarquin rapes her, he tarnishes these attributes. After the rape, therefore, virtue praised is villainy aroused, and chastity extolled is chastity exorcised. Tarquin tears Lucrece apart sexually. In so doing, he also tears apart the moral fabric of Rome. Shakespeare uses violent expressions such as "rudely tear" (669), and "make the breach and enter the city" to stress a horrific sexual encounter.

There is also powerful symbolism of the rape perpetrated by Tarquin in the lines "The locks between her chamber and his will, / Each one by him enforced retires his ward" (302-3). The word "enforced" suggests sexual violence; it prepares the reader for the physical violence perpetrated against Lucrece. Since Lucrece is a mansion metaphorically, she has a door and a lock. The door is her vulva, while the lock represents her hymen. Therefore, the act of forcing the doors open not only maps out Tarquin's route to Lucrece's bed, but it also foreshadows the violent act of rape. The underlying suggestion of sexual aggression encoded in the imagery of the locks that Tarquin forces open is, according to Willbern (1993), in his book, *Poetic Will: Shakespeare and the Play of Language*, in keeping with Mallarmé's "Mimique". He writes:

> The hymen is a protective screen, the jewel box of virginity, the vaginal partition, the fine, invisible veil which, in front of the hystera, stands between the inside and the outside of a woman, and consequently between desire and fulfilment. It is neither desire nor pleasure but in between the two. Neither future nor present, but between the two. It is the hymen that desire dreams of piercing, of busting, in an act of violence that is (at the same time or somewhere between) love and murder (p. 212-213).

Lucrece's body is like a jewel box in which treasure (chastity) is locked. For Tarquin to "know" her, he has to go beyond the veil (hymen) which stands between him and the fulfilment of his desire. The hymen is, therefore, like the wall of a city, the lock to a mansion's door, an entrance to the inside of the woman where fulfilment is believed to

reside. It could be argued that the hymen is representative of the line between morality and immorality. As a result, Tarquin's tearing of Lucrece's hymen is a metaphorical representation of his transgression of Rome's moral grounds. The rape that he commits breaks the values and mores of Roman society as a whole. The sexual assault is akin to breaching the wall of Rome itself. That is why the crime causes shock, revulsion and anger in the community. As a result of this breach or forced entry, the Roman society rises as one to expel the Tarquins.

However, the use of the word "enforce" in this context falls short of describing the extent of the violence committed by Tarquin. This becomes apparent when one considers that coitus, both consensual and coerced is savage, extreme, rude and cruel, as Shakespeare's Sonnet 129 suggests. Coitus by its nature is violent, especially when the woman is a virgin.

Lines 505 to 511 also make use of the metaphor of the falcon, a bird of prey, which lies close to a fowl. Tarquin is the falcon, while Lucrece is the harmless fowl. The word "falcon" (bird) puns with "falchion" (sword), and both words highlight power. The falcon is a predator, much stronger than a fowl, its prey. A prince with a falchion is also more powerful than his subject. The image of the falcon is also important because it highlights Tarquin's loss of control over his raging libido. The image is drawn from falconry, a sport in which a falconer uses a trained falcon for hunting. It can, therefore, be argued that at another level the word "falcon" symbolises Tarquin's lust. As a falconer, Tarquin has lost control over the falcon (lust) because its wings are "trustless", as indicated in the first line of the poem. The lack of control over the falcon upsets things and as a result, they "fall apart". The prospect of "knowing" Lucrece turns and turns in the widening gyre, to borrow an expression from W.B. Yeats's "The Second Coming". As a result of amoral infatuation, events spiral out of control. Tarquin's failure to restrain himself in the face of temptation is encouraged by his bloated sense of entitlement. He feels that as a prince, he is more deserving than Collatine.

There is evidence of rational argument in the predator-to-be in the stanza below:

> Yea, though I die, the scandal will survive,
> And be an eye-sore in my golden coat;
> Some loathsome dash the herald will contrive,
> To cipher me how fondly I did dote;

> That my posterity, shamed with the note
> Shall curse my bones, and hold it for no sin
> To wish that I their father had not been.(Lines 204-210)

According to the footnotes to John Donne's secular poem, "The Flea" in the fifth edition of *The Norton Anthology of Poetry* edited by Margaret Ferguson, "die" and "kill" were Renaissance slang terms for orgasm. Sexual intercourse was believed to reduce man's life span (p. 309). It is, therefore, interesting that Shakespeare uses the word "die" and its causative "kill" frequently in the poem. The poem deals with sexual excitement and death. One may argue, therefore, that in the lines quoted above, the word "die" is ambiguous. At one level it means loss of life, but at another level it may mean to have an orgasm. Tarquin is aware that he will have sexual delight, but the pleasure will be succeeded by eternal shame. The ambiguity of the word "die" becomes even more suggestive when we consider lines 363-364 of the poem. In these lines Shakespeare uses imagery drawn from entomology to describe the impending penetration: "But she, sound sleeping, fearing no such thing/ Lies at the mercy of his mortal sting." The "mortal sting" is Tarquin's deadly lust, which suggests his penis. Lucrece will not only be "stung", but she will also commit suicide. Therefore, we may conclude that the expression "mortal sting" also refers to mortality. The sting referred to here could be from a bee, or a wasp, or any other venomous insect. However, the passage below leads one to conclude that it is a wasp's sting:

> If, Collatine, thine honour lay in me,
> From me by strong assault it is bereft.
> My honour lost, and I, a drone-like bee,
> Have no perfection of my summer left,
> But robb'd and ransack'd by injurious theft:
> In thy weak hive a wandering wasp hath crept,
> And suck'd the honey which thy chaste bee kept. (Lines 834-840)

In this passage, Shakespeare employs apiculture imagery. After the rape, Lucrece equates herself to a drone whose honey has been sucked by a wasp. Wasps are some of the predators that attack bees. Therefore, the "mortal sting" in line 364 is that of a wasp. Michelle Lee (2001) remarks in the Introduction to *Shakespearean Criticism* that bees have been regarded as symbols of chastity since classical times. Shakespeare's use of this image in his poem reflects a growing interest during the Renaissance period in the virtues of "modesty and

temperance", and their link to the nation's governance by a female monarch http://www.enotes.com/shakespearean-criticism/rape-lucrece. Plant's (2001) observation is compelling, especially since *The Rape of Lucrece* was written during the reign of Queen Elizabeth I. Elizabeth was sometimes called "The Virgin Queen".

The contrast between the wasp and the bee enhances the predator and prey imagery used in the poem. It is not surprising that after the rape Lucrece commits suicide. It is the manner of her death that has attracted Katharine Maus's attention in her work *Taking Tropes Seriously: Language and Violence in Shakespeare's Lucrece*. (1986). She argues that the suicide, however comprehensible it may be, is ironically fraught with the very contradictions Lucrece seeks to avoid. She "revenges" herself upon Tarquin by completing the assault he had begun, plunging the phallic knife into the "sheath" of her breast (line 1723). In Latin, "sheath" is vagina. (p. 72). Maus's assertion lends credence to the idea that the poem thrives on paradox, oxymoron and irony.

There is a striking similarity between lines 505-511("he shakes aloft his Roman blade …") and the first stanza of William Butler Yeats' poem "Leda and the Swan" quoted below:

> A sudden blow: the great wings beating still
> Above the staggering girl, her thighs caressed
> By the dark webs, her nape caught in his bill,
> He holds her helpless breast upon his breast. (Lines 1-4)

The phrase "the great wings" is the equivalent of the "Roman blade" in Shakespeare's poem. The wings signify the power that the swan has over Leda. Leda, like Lucrece at the mercy of Tarquin, lies helpless under the swan. The swan caresses the girl's thighs, while in Shakespeare's poem, in line 463, Tarquin's hand touches Lucrece's breasts. Thighs and breasts are erogenous zones that the rapists in the two poems explore before they lay to waste their victims. The narrative voice describes Tarquin's caressing of Lucrece as exploration. Caressing is natural in love-making. Yet in the context of the poem it shows the predator's state of mental imbalance. In other words, Tarquin's lust becomes so intense that he loses his reason and distorts the rational argument which the reader witnesses in lines 204 to 210. As a result he rapes Lucrece.

It has been argued that Lucrece compares herself to man-made structures. If one uses the word "man-made" with its prefix, "man"

– meaning an adult male, the consequences of Lucrece's position in Shakespeare's Rome becomes apparent. If she is like a house made by a man, Collatine, it is likely that she will be subservient to all men. Lucrece calls neither her body nor soul her own. For example, "both were kept for heaven and Collatine" (line 1166). The line suggests that she is more or less the property of men as Carolyn D. Williams argues in her work, "Silence, like a Lucrece Knife: Shakespeare and the Meaning of Rape" (1993). The critic argues that in Anglo-Saxon times, rape was defined as the abduction of a woman against the will of her male guardian. Consent was often irrelevant and violation a side issue. The crime was essentially theft. However, the late sixteenth century was a defining moment in the understanding of rape. The statutes of 1555 and 1597 treated abduction as a separate crime (p. 99). The statutes of 1555 almost coincide with Shakespeare's birth date. Therefore, it is not surprising that he treats rape as an act of sexual coercion and not as the abduction of a woman against the will of her male guardian as had been the case before the promulgation of the statutes. It is possible, however, that the statutes "did not affect" Shakespeare's treatment of rape because the poem draws on the history of Rome. Tarquin sexually coerces Lucrece and in the process he is indistinguishable from a burglar who breaks in and enters a house; for example, he breaks the locks to reach Lucrece who is described as a jewel.

It could be that Tarquin has the idea that women are men's property when he "besieges" Collatium. If so, his narcissism finds support in the social system that keeps women at home and makes them objects of men's desire. Lucrece's body is described in terms of an eroticized landscape: "Her breasts like ivory globes circled with blue/A pair of maiden worlds unconquered" (407-408). Lucrece's breasts are like undiscovered worlds. Shakespeare employs the metaphor of exploration which is influenced by the Renaissance world of exploration and inquiry. The word "ivory" is significant to the meaning encoded in the metaphor. Ivory was one of the valuable raw materials that the explorers gathered on their voyages. The metaphor also continues the idea of violent conquest that runs through the poem. In the poem the word points to Lucrece's worth.

The depiction of a piece of land in terms suggestive of geo-eroticisation, and the description of a woman as if she were a geographical entity is common practice in English literature. It is influenced by the Age of Exploration (15th century to the early 17th century) during which

European ships sailed around the world in search of new trade routes and of gold, silver, spices, furs and fertile land for settlement. In the process, Europeans encountered different peoples and mapped lands previously unknown to them. Shakespeare's metaphors capture ideas of incursion into undiscovered territories, and we may conclude that the poet's metaphors were very likely influenced by such explorers of the Elizabethan Age as Jim Haskins, Sir Walter Raleigh and Sir Francis Drake. The description of geographical entities in terms related to the physiology and anatomy of a woman is important for the metaphor of rape in the poem. Shakespeare's metaphors perhaps influenced later works in their descriptions. In *The Rape of Lucrece* Lucrece's breasts are referred to as "A pair of maiden worlds" (Line 408). Franz Fanon also employs geo-eroticisation predicated on breasts in *Black Skin White Masks*. In Chapter Three entitled "The Man of Color and the White Woman" he writes:

> I marry white culture, white beauty, white whiteness.
> When my restless hands caress those white breasts, they grasp white civilization and dignity, and make them mine (p. 63).

The quotation is not just about a euphoric black man extolling his intercourse with a white woman, but also a classic example of the metaphorical representation of a body as a territory. Civilization itself is traditionally associated with geographical location. In Fanon's book, the breasts of the white woman are used in a similar manner to those of Lucrece. Therefore, there is also the idea of sexual conquest in the passage similar to that in Shakespeare's poem.

In lines 467 and 468 of the poem, the narrator observes Lucrece's tears "moves in him more rage and lesser pity/ To make the breach and enter the city." The metaphor of the city is used to refer to Lucrece's body. In the stanza, Tarquin touches Lucrece's breasts ("a pair of maiden worlds") as he prepares to attack her sexually. The stanza is full of sexual innuendo. In consensual coitus the touching of a woman's breast would be described as a caress. However, for Tarquin, the act is described in terms that suggest violence, not sensual love. The line "To make breach and enter the city", is particularly interesting. If we accept that Lucrece is a city, we can conclude that the line is a euphemism for rape. The wall of the city is Lucrece's hymen. Tarquin's hand batters Lucrece's breasts. The stanza then moves from Lucrece's anatomy to a cityscape, thus supporting the idea that Lucrece and the city are merged. The city wall, which Tarquin has to batter as if it

were a woman ravished by a man, suggests the vagina. Lucrece will be sexually assaulted and laid to waste as if she were a city under military attack.

3. Conclusion

The symbols of sexual aggression employed in *The Rape of Lucrece* are crucial for two reasons. First, Shakespeare could not expose his audience to a violent scene such as rape because such would have gone against the mores and values of his conservative English society. So the poet, being unwilling to compromise the message of his poem, encoded the violence without rendering it banal. He set his narrative poem within the siege of Ardea so that the battle reflects the rape and the weapons used to perpetrate atrocities in the besieged place reflect Tarquin's physiology and anatomy. Second, the reason that Shakespeare employed figures to describe the rape was to accomplish that which would have been compromised by the use of euphemism. The figures bring out vividly the gravity and repulsiveness of Tarquin's misdemeanour. Shakespeare adroitly critiques literal violence in a décor vehicle of violence: the more gallant and therefore more respectable language of aggression involving soldiers on the battlefield serves to point up the parody in aggression by a man against an innocent and defenceless woman. Rape in whatever guise is condemnable act.

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