

Lucretia's Lines of Flight

Multimodal Representations of the Rape of Lucretia

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Abstract: Lucretia's rape and her inner turmoil after the violation has been the subject of countless poems, dramas, paintings, and musical compositions over the past two millennia. In my paper, I focus on how the myth of Lucretia appears Benjamin Britten's opera, The Rape of Lucretia (1946). In particular, I would like to address the 2013 Glyndebourne performance directed by Fiona Shaw (and adapted to the screen by Francois Roussillon [2015]). I will examine how Shaw departs from Britten, and how her staging enters into discussion with long-standing interpretive traditions to re-create Lucretia's ethical and psychological stance.

We must invent our lines of flight, if we are able, and the only way we can invent them is by effectively drawing them, in our lives. Aren't lines of flight the most difficult of all? Certain groups or people have none and never will.
(Deleuze–Guattari, A Thousand Plateaus)

Lucretia's rape and her inner turmoil after the violation has been the subject of countless poems, dramas, paintings and musical compositions over the past two millennia. Rembrandt's painting (1666, Minneapolis Institute of Art; fig. 1) condenses Lucretia's whole drama into one poignant image and is a representative example of the key elements of the legend: her chastity, violation, and her suicide. It is not simply a harrowing painting of a dying woman; the visual narrative subtly explains why Lucretia has taken her life. Her robe is open, displaying her

undergarment and exposed body. The slit in the top of her nightgown is interpreted by Mieke Bal as the “hymen of the innocently sleeping Lucretia,” while the lower, bloody slit depicting the oblong wound may be seen as a displaced representation of her sexual violation (108). Lucretia’s rape and suicide are visually conflated in the bright red of her soiled gown, this is what the dagger—pointing to the loin, the locus of her destruction—also suggests. Her fate is literally in her hands: her right hand holds the dagger; her left hand clutches on a cord with which she calls her father and husband to avenge her ordeal, or, more metaphorically, to draw open the curtain so that she/her story may become visible. The cord, towards which her gaze is directed, represents the future: Lucretia’s call to be remembered.

Indeed, her call to be remembered has been heard (as can be seen in the numerous works which depict, discuss, and comment on her fate), but her voice has been mostly stifled. In the first part of my paper, I give a brief outline of the major interpretive traditions that appeared in the visual and written representations of her story over time. The diametrically opposed evaluations of Lucretia—saint versus sinner, martyr versus criminal—indicate that her violation and suicide was a controversial subject, which invited multiple retellings and reconsiderations. Lucretia as a trope did not evolve diachronically; the contrasting elements lived side by side, and just which interpretation had a greater currency at a given moment depended on the actual historical, political, social, and ethical questions of the day. Deleuze and Guattari’s concept of the rhizome seems particularly apt to examine the multiplicities of Lucretias: the tendrils of the rhizome that grow in capricious directions correspond to the endless multimodal representations of her story.¹ These are interconnected, like the shoots of the underground horizontal root system: each in itself self-sufficient yet related. “[T]he rhizome connects any point to any other point, and its traits are not necessarily linked to traits of the same nature; it brings into play very different regimes of signs, and even nonsign states” (Deleuze and Guattari 21). A most defining feature of a rhizome is heterogeneity. The new ideas, Deleuze and Guattari argue, are born at the ruptures, or in our case, where the (multimodal) narratives respond to and depart from one another. Deleuze and Guattari call these “the lines of flight” (9), a creation of something new from an old stem and a tendency towards change (Adkins 24).² The title of the essay, “Lucretia’s Lines

1 I am indebted to Márta Hargitai for calling my attention to the concept.

2 The idea of the lines of flight is central to Deleuze and Guattari’s concept of the rhizome, they use it over two hundred times in *A Thousand Plateaus*. Lines of flight construct “revolutionary

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of Flight,” simultaneously refers to Lucretia as a Roman matron and as a rhizome. It implies the lines (of literature, painting, or music) which circumscribe the woman and demarcate the ways she can escape her plight, and denotes the interactions between the different representations.³

In the second part of the paper, I proceed to explore how the multifarious elements appear in Benjamin Britten's opera, *The Rape of Lucretia* (1946). Besides being an exquisite multimodal representation of the story of Lucretia, it also showcases (some forty years before Deleuze and Guattari created the term) how rhizomes operate: rather than providing a homogenous—formalised, linear, hierarchised—narrative (called arborescent system by Deleuze and Guattari 327) it juxtaposes competing interpretations. Finally, through the example of the 2013 Glyndebourne performance of Britten's *The Rape of Lucretia* (directed by Fiona Shaw and adapted to the screen by Francois Roussillon in 2015), I will examine how Shaw's staging departs from Britten and enters into discussion with long-standing assumptions about agency, responsibility, and suicide to re-create Lucretia's ethical and psychological stance. I would like to show that the Lucretia resurrected on the Glyndebourne stage is masterfully freed from “the ‘seaweed’ of trope” (Robertson and Rose 1–2) and finally arises as poignantly human.

The earliest extended account of Lucretia we are aware of is by historian Livy from around 25 BC. A group of Roman generals, while away from home, make a bet over the fidelity of their wives. Collatinus, the husband of Lucretia, boasts about the incomparable beauty and chastity of his wife, and proposes that they should settle the dispute by riding out at night to call on them unexpectedly. All the wives are found revelling except Lucretia, who is spinning with her servants. Collatinus is declared the winner, but Sextus Tarquinius, the king's son, is inflamed by Lucretia and a few days later returns to her house. During the night, he sneaks into Lucretia's chamber and implores her to yield to his desire. When she refuses, he threatens to kill her together with a slave whose naked body he will place next to her in the bed, so everybody will think that she was caught in adultery. With this menace, Tarquinius triumphs over her virtue. The next day, the disconsolate

connections” (473) “forming strange new becomings, new polyvocalities” (191) and “blaze their way for a new earth” (424).

3 Deleuze and Guattari themselves range across art, music, literature, science, and mathematics in *A Thousand Plateaus* “as these new connections branch out and make further connections” (Adkins 32).

Lucretia calls home her husband and father and their menfolk to reveal to them what happened. After taking their oath of vengeance, she stabs herself. Junius Brutus, Collatinus's kinsman, incites the men to expel the hated family of the Tarquins from Rome and never to tolerate Kings.

Livy's highly influential story (related in Book 1 of *The Early History of Rome—Ab Urbe Condita*) celebrated Lucretia's heroic death particularly for inspiring Junius Brutus to lead a revolt against the Roman monarchy and establish the Roman Republic. Soon, other narratives (or lines of flight) followed by Dionysius of Halicarnassus, Ovid, Plutarch, and Tertullian, each refashioning their versions to fit their own agenda.⁴ What these early accounts share was that, through Lucretia's rape, they all formulated fundamental ideals about public/political behaviour, and about private/sexual behaviour. Paradoxically, Lucretia is hardly at all present in these stories, most of the time she does not have a voice and her only agency is to take her own life. She simply serves as a trope: an emblem of chastity and/or a gateway to political change. No wonder her story was revived at times of political turmoil: in Renaissance Italy, and notably, in seventeenth-century English and eighteenth-century French writings and paintings.⁵ In these retellings, Lucretia's body ignites political action, but the limelight is on Junius Brutus.

In 1710, Leibniz, in the final part of *Théodicée*, recounts the story of Lucretia, or one should rather say the story of the rapist, Sextus Tarquinius, as Lucretia is not even mentioned by name but referred to as “the wife of [Sextus's] friend” (372). Leibniz sees Lucretia's rape as collateral damage to achieve the best and most perfect world, and concludes, “[t]he crime of Sextus serves for great things: it renders Rome free; thence will arise a great empire, which will show noble examples to mankind” (373). Two decades later, Montesquieu calls Lucretia a “little woman” with “a foolish little vanity,” whose death was “merely the occasion of the revolution which occurred” (qtd. in Donaldson 105).

4 Livy's account is highly focused on the political aspect of the story and can also be related to the increased interest in *moral restoration* under Emperor Augustus, which climaxed in his law on adultery in 18 BC. Ovid's narrative, on the other hand, almost entirely lacks the political perspective of Livy and reinvents a highly eroticised, elegiac Lucretia. Tertullian had yet another agenda: he used Lucretia's example to “shame what he viewed as his lax Christian audience into greater chastity” (Glendinning 69). More on this in Ian Donaldson's *The Rapes of Lucretia* (1982).

5 On the proliferation of visual and written interpretations of Lucretia's story, see Susan Wiseman's *Conspiracy and Virtue* (2006) and Louise Juliet Govier's *Re-viewing Women from the Ancient Past in Late Eighteenth-Century French Art* (1999).

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In what is perhaps the best-known visual example, Botticelli's painting *The Tragedy of Lucretia* (ca. 1500, fig. 2), Lucretia in the central scene is a lifeless corpse over which Brutus is towering; he is raising his sword to call on the army to fight against tyranny. Painted at the time of political turmoil and the exile of the Medici, Botticelli conflates classical Rome and Renaissance Florence, with the statue of David on the column above (pagan) Lucretia, who is here transformed to an emblem of liberty. Similarly, in Gavin Hamilton's *The Death of Lucretia* (1763–1767) and Jean-Honoré Fragonard's *Mort de Lucrèce* (1797), Lucretia is reduced to a dead body while Brutus is the hero of the painting.⁶ In the latter, Lucretia's dead body has a symbolic function: it represents the abused nation. Her self-sacrifice is depicted as martyrdom; the frieze above Lucretia's corpse, to which Brutus points, shows martyred bodies being placed on chariots (Govier 263–265).

In her critical commentary, Simone de Beauvoir contested exactly these features of the myth: she claimed that in the typically male renderings Lucretia was a mere pretext, and her rape and suicide “had no more than a symbolic value. Martyrdom remains allowed for the oppressed; during Christian persecutions and in the aftermath of social or national defeats, women played this role of witness; but a martyr has never changed the face of the world” (184). Indeed, de Beauvoir's parallel between the heathen Lucretia and Christian martyrs is apt: since Late Antiquity, Lucretia has been depicted in numerous treatises, literary works, and paintings as (or at least, like) a Christian martyr, even a saint. Of the early Church Fathers, Tertullian, in the early third century, celebrated Lucretia's fortitude to commit suicide (*Ad Martyres*) and made her an example of chastity and conjugal fidelity (*De exhortatione castitatis* and *De Monogamia*). Fourth-century theologian St. Jerome also praised Lucretia for refusing to survive after the loss of her chastity (*Adversus Jovinianum*). These writings launched an interpretive tradition in which Lucretia is a paragon of virtue, an exemplum for Christian women (as, for instance, in Chaucer's *Legend of Good Women* or Gower's *Confessio Amantis*) and also left their mark on the iconographic tradition of the portrayal of Lucretia.

A notable example of portraying Lucretia as a Christian martyr can be found in the paintings of Guido Reni (1625, Rhode Island School of Design; fig. 3) and Artemisia Gentileschi (ca. 1627, Getty Museum; fig. 4). Lucretia is imploring the heavens; her inspired expression betrays unwavering determination to take her

6 Hamilton's Brutus greatly influenced the early artistic experiments of John Trumbull (1756–1843), visual chronicler of the newborn United States (Rosenblum 13).

life. The pearl earrings and coronets testify to her purity as does (in many paintings) the blue robe, colour of the Virgin Mary. What is interesting in the depictions of Lucretia's suicide is that in most cases we see no blood (Rembrandt's painting is one of the few exceptions) even where she has plunged the dagger into her breast. She is transported so the death of the body does not seem to affect her. This is not simply to be attributed to a pictorial convention, as can also be seen in the pictures of St. Sebastian, for instance. In the case of Lucretia, this passive resignation may be an attempt to distract the viewers' attention from the fact that Lucretia is actually taking her own life, which is a mortal sin in Christianity. In other words, these paintings focus on the uplifting nature of Lucretia's act (a painful but worthy self-sacrifice) and carefully efface any association with self-inflicted death. And for good reason. These painters consciously dissociated themselves from a distinctly different interpretation of Lucretia's death, which had grown parallel with the celebratory representations.

The first author to seriously reassess Lucretia's suicide in the light of Christianity was St. Augustine in the fifth century. In *The City of God* (*De Civitate Dei*), he proposes that rape is the violation of the female *will* to chastity rather than the violation of a woman's physical purity.⁷ Consequently, St. Augustine argues, if Lucretia did not give *consent* to the rapist, she is guilty of homicide, for in herself she killed an innocent person. St. Augustine formulates the following dilemma: "if you extenuate the homicide, you confirm the adultery: if you acquit her of adultery, you make the charge of homicide heavier; ... If she was adulterous, why praise her? If chaste, why slay her?" (29). The image of Lucretia extolled for her purity and for sacrificing her life to prevent moral pollution is profoundly challenged by St. Augustine's distinctly Christian notion of conscience. He did not believe that Lucretia took her life to protect her—and by implication, her family's—honour but assumed that she (subconsciously) must have been motivated by some secret guilt. "What if she was betrayed by the pleasure of the act, and gave some consent to Sextus [Tarquinius], though so violently abusing her, and then was so affected with remorse, that she thought death alone could expiate her sin?" (29). In St. Augustine's argument then, Lucretia's suicide was also a confession of her corruption.

7 On the historical and legal context see Jennifer Thomson's "Accept this twofold consolation, you faint-hearted creatures: St. Augustine and Contemporary Definitions of Rape" and Diana C. Moses' "Livy's Lucretia and the Validity of Coerced Consent."

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Post-Augustinian representations and refashionings of Lucretia's legend reflected on the dilemmas put forward in *De Civitate Dei* and took their stance in the "guilty or not guilty" debate. Clearly, painters like Reni and Gentileschi exempted Lucretia from all the charges. By depicting her in the tradition of Christian martyrs, they confirm her purity, and by making her suicide figurative—almost unconscious—in the paintings, the accusation of homicide is also effaced. Writers who wanted to make Lucretia an object of veneration had to contend with the notion of consent in their narratives. To eradicate any doubt about her purity, authors often introduced new elements into the text. In Gower and Chaucer, for instance, Lucretia swoons and lies in a deadly stupor, so clearly, she cannot be complicit in adultery.

But the legend of Lucretia also developed in a different direction. In these new lines of flight, especially in Northern European painting, Lucretia, once a paragon a virtue, "transformed into a semi-nude sex object" (Wolfthal 61). She was increasingly depicted as a seductress or temptress, whose physical beauty exerts influence over men. Lucas Cranach the Elder's Lucretias (painted in the 1520s–1540s, figs. 5–7) are a case in point.

Alone, set against a dark background, she attracts the viewer's undivided attention. Her suggestive pose, the flimsy veil, her smooth skin, the soft, fur-lined red velvet robe dropped from her shoulder, the rich jewellery adorning her are a feast to the eye and the touch. The exposed body and the coy facial expression are openly erotic and strangely at odds with the principal moral impulse of Livy's story. Lucretia does not appear to be adduced here as an example for Christian women to follow.⁸

Lucretia as a sensuous woman is the topic of many renderings of the myth. In Machiavelli's comedy, *La Mandragola* (ca. 1518), she is not raped but seduced and does not commit suicide but (probably) conceives at the end of the play. Cunning and sexually calculating, Machiavelli's Lucrezia is "the embodiment of dissimulation" (Matthes 261), who is consensually indulging in an adulterous affair. But Lucretia was not only refashioned in the comic mode; she also appeared in literature as a Woman of Sensibility, passionately in love with someone other than her husband. In Madeleine de Scudéry's romance, *Clélie* (1654–1661), she is enamoured of Junius Brutus, while in Rousseau's unfinished play, *Mort de Lucrece* (first published

8 Carol M. Schuler compellingly argues that these representations are more than "simple voyeuristic fantasies" to gratify "unintellectual, sadoerotic tastes," but, through their formal language recalling Late Medieval devotional imagery, they depict Lucretia's atonement for her own seductively beautiful body (15).

in 1792), she is attracted to Tarquinius to whom she was once betrothed and whom she continues to love (Donaldson 84–85).

As can be seen from this brief survey, the myth of Lucretia evolved like a rhizome, “a de-stratified, proliferating network of disjunctive yet productive relations” (Lanier 36). The narratives and visual representations are cultural appropriations: they re-formulate and exploit the story to reflect on the pressing issues of their day. What is common in most of her depictions is that Lucretia represents an abstract idea(l): chastity, bravery, victimhood, martyrdom, seduction, vanity, as the case may be; while her materiality is neglected or altogether forgotten. Benjamin Britten’s chamber opera, *The Rape of Lucretia* (1946, libretto by Ronald Duncan), sets out to revive her figure in many respects. Lucretia becomes three dimensional in more than one sense: through textual, musical, and visual representation. She is given voice (in the libretto as well as in the music), and a material presence (on stage, and subsequently on screen). The opera, in its handling of the story, reflects on both the narrative and the pictorial traditions outlined above.

The libretto was built on André Obey’s play, *Le Viol De Lucrece* (1931; translated into English by Thornton Wilder in 1933), which used Livy, and Shakespeare’s *The Rape of Lucrece* as its major sources.⁹ Shakespeare’s narrative poem with its relatively limited dramatic action and long emotional speeches is particularly well suited to the genre of the opera (fitting the plot-driving recitative and the expressive arias, respectively). Notably, Shakespeare gives a nuanced psychological portrayal of Lucrece, who is entrapped between pagan and Christian ideals after the rape (“As the poor frightened deer, that stands at gaze / Wildly determining which way to fly” [ll. 1149–1150]). Her dilemma whether or not to commit suicide (the most poignant lines in the poem) clearly echoes the ideas of St. Augustine:

“To kill myself,” quoth she, ‘alack, what were it,
 But with my body my poor soul’s pollution?
 They that lose half with greater patience bear it
 Than they whose whole is swallow’d in confusion.
 That mother tries a merciless conclusion
 Who, having two sweet babes, when death takes one,
 Will slay the other and be nurse to none.

9 When discussing Shakespeare and Obey, I use the name Lucrece for Lucretia, as is done in their texts.

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“My body or my soul, which was the dearer,
When the one pure, the other made divine?” (ll.1156–1164)

After an agonising mental struggle, Lucrece kills herself and it is left to the readers to resolve the Augustinian quandary. Obey follows Shakespeare in his focus on the psychology of his characters. His innovation is to introduce two modern narrators (La Récitant and Le Récitant, translated as First Narrator and Second Narrator by Wilder) who comment on the events, and on the thoughts and mental state of Lucrece and Tarquin respectively. While doing so, they (re-)evaluate the events by juxtaposing Roman and modern values. Importantly, the female narrator questions the need to commit suicide and implores the male narrator to change the course of His/story.

You tire me out with your History. What can Death do? What kind
of remedy is that? ...

You are going to tell me there is no choice; she must die. ... Oh, let us permit her to live! She can go somewhere. ...

What advantage could her death afford? Of what use, what good, would it be? I put the question to you. [*She turns to the audience and raises her mask.*]
Answer me! (Obey 85–86)

Obey directly implicates the audience to engage with the question. Interestingly, in the drama, Lucrece's suicide is textually suppressed. We only learn about her death from the stage directions,¹⁰ and rather than a self-willed death, it is regarded as a murder committed by the rapist: “BRUTUS: She is dead. Tarquin has slain her” (Obey 107).

In both of these sources, Britten and Duncan had superb examples of handling the ubiquitous questions of the myth while providing a subtle portrayal of Lucrece. By relying on, yet unmooring from, Shakespeare and Duncan at the same time, the opera creates a unique, if controversial line of flight.

¹⁰ Lucrece dies while her husband is interrogating her:

COLLATINE: Ah, wretched! [*Changing his tone*] Tell me—tell me: to the fulfilment of his desire.

Is that it? Is that it? To the fulfilment? ...

BRUTUS: See her ... look!

[*He leaps forward, but too late, LUCRECE sinks to the ground.*] (Obey 106–107)

Britten wrote *The Rape of Lucretia* in 1946, in the immediate aftermath of World War II, after a visit to the recently liberated Bergen-Belsen concentration camp. This would fit in with what has been said above about the re-surfacing of the story at times of political and historical turmoil and one would expect Lucretia to be representing all the victims of senseless violation (irrespective of gender). Yet (similarly to Shakespeare and Obey), the opera is not primarily concerned with the political side of the story (there is only a cursory reference to the changes—the banishment of the kings and the new rule by Junius Brutus—that Lucretia’s death ignited), nor does it exploit the rich psychological potentials which characterise Shakespeare’s poem and Obey’s drama. As the librettist Ronald Duncan stated, Lucretia was intended to symbolise “spirit defiled by Fate” (Britten, *The Rape* 62), and later he explained that the story is a “dramatisation of the conflict between the Individual and Society, ... [T]he individual is personified by Lucretia whose virtuous personality is persecuted, raped, by Tarquinius, who symbolises Society” (qtd. in Seymour 78). She is at once “spirit” and “individual” (or rather, “Individual”); the opera apparently intends to recreate her as the representation of moral rectitude. Britten’s music also shows that the composer was interested in Lucretia as a “site for tension between desire and violence” (Seymour 76, emphasis added) rather than as an individual.¹¹ As one critic noted, *The Rape of Lucretia* reflects “the composer’s creative obsession with the destruction of innocence” (Hall). These comments seem to align the opera with the interpretive tradition which depicts Lucretia as a martyr or saint. Indeed, “chaste Lucretia” is the *epitheton ornans* in the libretto, and this insistence on her chastity is also woven into Britten’s musical language. As musicologist Peter Evans noted, the unifying force operating across the opera is the use of a “Lucretia motive” (132) which essentialises her as “chaste woman” (Harper-Scott 197, 206; Seymour 79). Unsurprisingly, in the highly acclaimed 1987 performance (directed by Graham Vick), Lucretia is strikingly similar to Pedro de Mena’s poignant *Mater Dolorosa* (ca. 1670–1675, figs. 8–11).

The parallel is apt inasmuch as Duncan imposed on the story a Christian framework. Based on Obey’s narrators, he added two modern characters, called the Male and Female Chorus, who comment on the action and give an insight into the characters’ mind from a distinctly Christian viewpoint (“We’ll view these human passions and these years / Through eyes which once have wept with Christ’s own

11 On the subtleties of Britten’s musical working-out of the themes, see White (148–154), Seymour (75–98), Brett (62–69), Evans 124–143, and Harper-Scott (194–213).

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tears"). The (much-criticised) Christian epilogue, which concludes the opera, verifies Lucretia's suffering and death as redemptive and equates it with Christ's Crucifixion.

It is not only the Christian gloss that makes the libretto controversial. Despite the apparently high value it places on Lucretia (or rather, her chastity), Duncan's text is troublingly misogynistic. Lines such as "Women are all whores by nature" or "Women bring to every man / the same defection" are highly disconcerting, as is the portrayal of the rapist. Tarquinius's "strong maleness," his "panther agile and panther virile" masculinity is depicted as irresistible.¹² In his autobiographical writings Duncan frankly admitted that he identified with the rapist's potency, and even dreamt of emulating him (*All Men* 55; *How to* 146). The librettist's fascination with Tarquinius clearly affected the plot: the text intimates that Lucretia—even if unconsciously—is beguiled by the rapist ("In the forest of my dreams / You have always been the Tiger"). To hint at her possible compliance, the libretto at two crucial points departs from Livy's account and from all the other sources on which it was built. Tarquin's threat—if Lucretia refuses to yield to him, he will kill her and a slave to implicate her in adultery—is altogether left out from the opera. The omission of what was Lucretia's major consideration in the immediate sources (the protection of the honour of her family) discredits the notion of coerced consent and leaves her complicity open to speculations. To create further ambiguity, Lucretia in the scene just preceding the rape speaks clearly about her sexual frustration and desire for her absent husband:

How cruel men are
To teach us love!
They wake us from
The sleep of youth

12 These elements are altogether missing from either Shakespeare or Obey. Neither are women disparaged in their texts, nor is the rapist celebrated in any way. They both give voice to Tarquin to allow for a rich psychological portrayal of the violator, but neither would exempt him from the crime he had committed. Obey is particularly clear in this respect. Unlike in Shakespeare where Tarquin disappears from the poem after the rape, in Obey's drama, we are given a glimpse into his acts after he leaves Lucrece. Remorseful for a minute, he soon forgets about his ephemeral repentance. Sarcastic, hypocritical and debauched, he teases Collatinus ("You look very well to-day"), sentences a soldier to fifty strokes of the rod for taking advantage of country girls, and sleeps, eats, and drinks heartily ("I shall sleep for two hours. ... Is there cool wine in my tent? ... Let me be awaked at noon by my cook passing a portion of new-roasted kid before my nose" (*Lucrece* 64–65).

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Into the dream of passion,
Then ride away
While we still yearn.

As we learn from the omniscient Chorus, when at night Tarquinius steals into Lucretia's chamber, she is dreaming about her husband. Tarquinius kisses the sleeping woman who mistakes him for Collatinus and responds to his kiss. But she soon wakes and realises that she kissed an intruder. She tries to break away from him in vain: Tarquinius construes her previous reaction as suppressed passion ("the cherries of your lips / Are wet with wanting. / Can you deny your blood's dumb pleading?") and presses on against her will. The original version of the libretto depicted the rape in no uncertain terms and—echoing St. Augustine's conjecture—left no doubt that Lucretia was betrayed by "an equal lust."¹³ But the text was subjected to censorship and what remained is an ambiguous hint that Lucretia may have been complicit. The libretto from this point on is entirely convoluted: the semi-pornographic depiction of the rape is followed by the Chorus's hymn to the Virgin Mary. We know from the drafts of the libretto (Seymour 80–81) that the lines for the hymn were supplied by Britten himself to replace Duncan's profoundly problematic text, which practically formulated the preposterous notion that women always gladly yield to men:

MALE CHORUS: With his passion poised like a dart
At the heart of woman
Man becomes a god

...

FEMALE CHORUS: As an unending river
Woman flows for ever
Slaking the fierce thirst of man
With her love generous as water.

13 MALE CHORUS: He takes her hand
And places it upon his unsheathed sword.
FEMALE CHORUS: Thus wounding her with an equal lust
A wound only his sword can heal.

The Lord Chamberlain ordered these lines to be cut. He found the libretto only marginally less obscene than *Lady Chatterley's Lover* (Kildea 11).

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...

Man the thirst, she the river
Flowing on and never
Being of herself, but always of the river
Flowing to the thirst of man she gives.

With Britten's lines, Duncan's prurient reflection on rape was replaced in the final libretto with a prayer to the Virgin Mary "most chaste and pure" to "Help us to find your love / Which is His Spirit." That the composer and the librettist thought discordantly about Lucretia's story is further evidenced by the fact that the dramaturgical climax of the opera does not coincide with its musical climax. The rape scene is musically subdued, "probably the score's least inspired section" (Whittall 99). The musical climax comes at a later point in the story: Lucretia's confession to her husband is exquisitely wrought and its harrowing intensity echoes Bach's Passions.

There appears to be an almost unresolvable tension between the libretto and the score. Duncan's interest in the more salacious side of the story and his insinuation that Lucretia was enticed by Tarquinius is incongruent with Britten's preoccupation to express the tensions in a Christian framework. So, what finally evolved is two co-existing accounts within one opera. Britten's is rooted in the tradition of Tertullian and St. Jerome, linking Lucretia with Christian martyrdom; Duncan's approach, on the other hand, goes back to the tradition which depicted her as a sensuous woman, an assumption originating in St. Augustine. Rather than unifying the "tor-tuous lines" (Deleuze and Guattary 11) within the opera, Britten and Duncan created a multiplicity praised so highly by Deleuze and Guattary. "'Long live the multiple,' difficult as it is to raise that cry. No typographical, lexical, or even syntactical cleverness is enough to make it heard. The multiple must be made, not by always adding a higher dimension, but rather in the simplest of ways, by dint of sobriety" (Deleuze and Guattary 6). The result is a "radicle-chaosmos" (6) which is inevitably taxing, because it invites us to "rethink abiding correlation[s]" (303).

Unsurprisingly, the odd dramaturgy made *The Rape of Lucretia* one of Britten's most problematic operas. Neglected for decades, the opera finally found its way to repertory as can be seen in the proliferation of recent performances (Glasgow 2020, Boston 2018, Sydney 2017, Oslo 2013, Amsterdam 2011, Budapest 2014 and 2018, to mention but a few). Enacting sexual violence on stage or screen has been a challenge to modern producers and the way Lucretia's rape is presented always reflects

the director's response to the opera's troubling sexual politics. David McVicar's 2001 Aldeburgh production is shockingly explicit. In the rape scene, the so-far black backdrop becomes a huge sloping mirror which allows the audience to see Lucretia's agony from all angles. The graphic portrayal of the enormity of rape multiplied in the mirror not only gives us a very uncomfortable sense of voyeurism, but it also effectively rules out any notion that Lucretia may be complicit. In an altogether different, but no less provocative staging (Sidney Chamber Opera, 2018), director Kip Williams reversed the roles of men and women in many scenes, including the rape scene. By switching these roles, the production could comment on the libretto without overtly disrupting it while inviting the audience to reconsider the text's (and their own) sexual assumptions. To enhance the horror, both productions employed very disturbing images (a body stripped half-naked during the rape in McVicar, and a stage left in a pool of blood after the suicide in Williams).

Fiona Shaw's subdued but still poignant Glyndebourne production (2015) is exceptional for many reasons, not least because this is one of the few instances when Lucretia's story is presented from a female point of view. Shaw adds two characters who are not present in the opera (or in any of its sources): a prostitute and a little girl, Lucretia's own daughter. With this addition, the original balance of the opera—four male and four female characters—is shifted towards women. Alternatively, this can also be seen as an attempt to *restore* the balance, as in the opera “the vocal lines suggest that men act as individuals,” while women are depicted as passive types (Evans 128). Through the six females, Shaw builds bridges between generations (daughter, mother, old nurse), social classes (prostitute, maids, and the lady), and also across time: from pre-Christian, Roman times to the twenty-first century (Lucretia and her household and the Female Chorus). Indeed, female bonding is one of the major takeaways of this production.

Shaw reimagines the Male and Female Chorus as archaeologists from Britten's time who unearth a Roman villa and, with that, uncover Lucretia's story. This way, the libretto's highly improbable, detached Christian commentators become an intrinsic part of the production. The set is minimal, and there are few props; as befitting a dig, the floor is covered in dirt, Lucretia's Roman villa is represented by grey stone outlines. Most of the time the set is very dark with chiaroscuro effects of lighting. In the video version, there are close-ups rather than a dark blurry mess, which is what the audience would see in the theatre. This is very appropriate too, as Fiona Shaw's production wants to give an insight into the characters' mind; this

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is, in fact, “an archaeology of the mind” (Shaw 6). Correspondingly, she explores the *human* side of Lucretia’s story.

We get the first glimpse of Lucretia when the Male Chorus/archaeologist drags her out of the mud on a string (figs. 12–13). She is puppet-like, which may easily stand for the lifeless, fossilised image of Lucretia that had been created (in the almost exclusively male accounts) during the centuries. In Fiona Shaw’s production, on the other hand, she slowly comes to life, disengages from the Male Chorus and develops close bonds with the Female Chorus. Shaw’s directorial choice goes against the original specifications that neither the Male, nor the Female Chorus is to be involved with the action. The bond between Lucretia and the Female Chorus is particularly strong after the rape. As an act of solidarity, the Female Chorus gives her coat to the disconsolate Lucretia to help her cover her bruised body (fig. 14). The Female Chorus herself changes after Lucretia’s rape. She discards the Bible she was holding to at the beginning (fig. 15), which subtly implies that Shaw’s production probes the Christian moralising that was supposed to provide a closure to the opera.

But it is not just the religious gloss that Shaw takes issue with. Most productions which want to emphasise Lucretia’s innocence depict her relationship with Tarquinius as cold and formal. In this production, on the other hand, there is chemistry between them when they meet. Furthermore, in most stagings, Lucretia *passively receives* the advances of the man she mistakes for her husband in her erotic dream (figs. 16–17). In the Glyndebourne production, she is very active and kisses back but soon wakes and her dream turns into a waking nightmare (fig. 18).

Shaw’s choice to create an initial resonance between Lucretia and Tarquinius and Lucretia’s misdirected passionate response in her dream have profound repercussions. It recreates the incident to resemble what is now known as date rape. The question this production, more than the others, raises is compelling: is there a point of no return for Lucretia, or for any woman indeed after such a beginning? Tarquinius does not accept her “no” as “no,” even though she frantically repeats it 26 times (“No,” “I deny,” “I refuse”). Fiona Shaw clearly shows his act as a vile crime and does not contemplate, like St. Augustine and many commentators before, whether or not Lucretia was guilty. The remorseless close-ups of the scene enhance her emotional nakedness and vulnerability. Her verdict, “not guilty,” is seen in another important directorial choice about her suicide. In this production, Lucretia is figuratively dead *before* she takes her life. After the rape, she covers herself with a black blanket which looks like a shroud, and in the morning, she

is not using the corridors and doors anymore, like the living characters in the story, but crosses the walls, which only the Chorus—spirits beyond the drama—can do. By making Lucretia's death coincide with her rape, Shaw (like Obey before) relocates the blame of homicide to where it really belongs: the rapist. The Glyndebourne production does not depict Lucretia's eventual suicide as a violation of God's injunction. In contrast, Shaw introduces other pressing issues concerning responsibility by giving Lucretia a little daughter who is stirred by the shrieks during the rape and in whose presence Lucretia takes her life. In the most heart-rending scene before her suicide, Lucretia is not depicted as a Mater Dolorosa but as a real mother, clinging desperately to her daughter (fig. 19). Rather than the Christian Chorus in Duncan's libretto, it is the little girl's trauma (handed down from generation to generation), which resurrects Lucretia on the stage and on screen. The harrowing final image is a particularly provocative line of flight: the archaeological apparatus assumes a cruciform pattern and we see a woman on the cross (fig. 20)—a response to Obey's First Narrator's urge to finally complement His/story with Herstory.

Compelling and intelligent, the production takes issue with the ideologies which had attempted to fossilise Lucretia. The Glyndebourne production is a veritable contribution to Lucretia as a rhizome, but equally importantly, it brings Lucretia's story close to us as a very human predicament. Voted the new production of 2013 in the WhatsOnStage Opera Poll, Fiona Shaw's *Lucretia* is a timely tribute to all Lucretias of the past 2000 years.

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Figure 1. Rembrandt, *Lucretia* (1666, Minneapolis Institute of Art)

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Figure 2. Botticelli, *The Tragedy of Lucretia* (ca.1500)

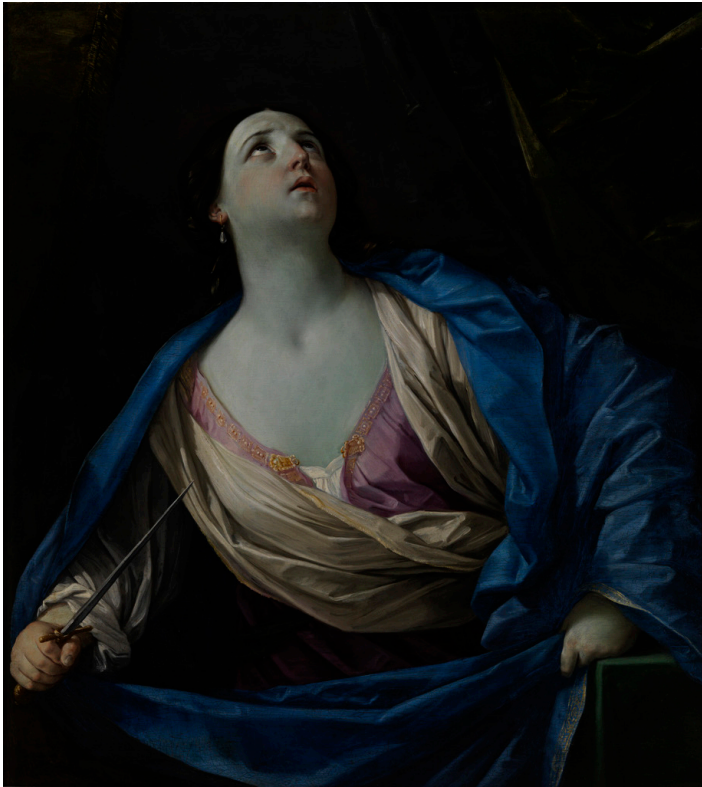


Figure 3. Guido Reni, *Lucretia* (1625, Rhode Island School of Design)



Figure 4. Artemisia Gentileschi, *Lucretia* (ca. 1627, Getty Museum)



Figures 5–7. Lucas Cranach the Elder's *Lucretias*

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Figures 8–11. *The Rape of Lucretia* (1987, dir. Graham Vick) and Pedro de Mena's *Mater Dolorosa* (ca. 1670–1675)



Figures 12–13. *The Rape of Lucretia* (2016, dir. Fiona Shaw)

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Figures 14–15. *The Rape of Lucretia* (2016, dir. Fiona Shaw)



Figures 16–17. *The Rape of Lucretia* (2001, dir. David McVickar; 2018, dir. Jeffrey Galloway)

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Figures 18–19. *The Rape of Lucretia* (2016, dir. Fiona Shaw)



Figure 20. *The Rape of Lucretia* (2016, dir. Fiona Shaw)

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