

Mourning Becomes Electric

The Politics of Grief in Shakespeare's *Lucrece*

A POEM ABOUT DIVISION and divisiveness in their many forms, Shakespeare's *The Rape of Lucrece* has generated a telling debate within the academy about whether its focus is on gender or on the politics of republicanism.¹ Critics have also disputed to what extent anyone or anything besides Tarquin is responsible for Lucrece's suffering: should one blame patriarchy in general? her husband's boast? the victim's own naivete?² One of the most intriguing preoccupations of this poem, however, has received little attention: its conclusion raises broad issues about the workings of loss and of mourning. The relationship between a mourner and the object of his or her grief, Shakespeare's narrative demonstrates, may be as charged and ambivalent as that between Lucrece and her husband—and, indeed, fraught in some of the same ways. A mourner's expressions of grief may also be as implicated in rhetoricity in the many senses of that term as Tarquin's self-justifications.³

The Rape of Lucrece recounts the story of a chaste wife, Lucrece, who awaits her husband, Collatine, while he is away on a military expedition. Aroused by Collatine's boasts of Lucrece's beauty, Tarquin, a scion of the ruling family, calls on her. Unable to seduce her, he rapes her and departs, "A captive victor that hath lost in gain" (Line 730).^{*} Lucrece, overwhelmed with shame, summons her husband home; after telling her tale to him, her father, and other nobles, she commits suicide. At the end of the poem, her husband and father mourn her; Brutus interrupts and, vowing revenge, leads an insurrection that culminates in deposing Tarquin's family and instituting a republican government.

Whether one maintains that the poem as a whole centres on politics in the common sense or on the politics of gender, its conclusion is indisputably concerned with many types of power. The competition between

Collatine and Lucretius, as well as Brutus's assumption of leadership, render mourning political in two different senses of that adjective (and thus, incidentally, admonish us to deploy the word in question, currently a well-worn and highly valued coin of our realm, with care). First, Shakespeare's text contrasts the apparently apolitical mode of mourning practised by the victim's father and husband with Brutus's response, which is both politic and political. Second, Shakespeare explores how and why Lucretius and Collatine themselves become rival mourners, struggling with each other. In examining such problems, the poem illuminates the imbrication of bereavement and power.

The mourners at the end of the poem manifest significantly different linguistic and syntactical patterns as the repetition and exclamation of Lucrece's relatives is contrasted with Brutus's syntax of rhetorical question and declaration. Collatine and Lucretius repeat the same words ("Woe, woe" [1802]), make the same points over and over, and the very sky resounds with their echoes: "The dispers'd air, who holding Lucrece' life / Answer'd their cries, "My daughter!" and "My wife!" (1805-06). Brutus, in contrast, scornfully demands "is woe the cure for woe?" (1821). In thus rejecting a principle of Paracelsian medicine, he rejects lyric stasis in favour of narrative movement. Brutus's repudiation of similitude and repetition on the linguistic level foreshadows his renunciation of it on the political level when he prevents the Tarquins from adding further episodes to their lengthy history of tyranny. Hence he also effects a fundamental change from the long-standing monarchical succession—not coincidentally itself a form of repetition—to republicanism.

Speech acts also distinguish the two forms of mourning. Within the global speech act of lament, Lucretius throws out a question that is not rhetorical and that neither he nor his listeners can answer: "Where shall I live now Lucrece is unliv'd?" (1754). He then delivers two commands that, being infelicitous in the technical, linguistic senses of that term, draw attention to his inability to command the forces he addresses. "O Time, cease thou thy course" (1765), he cries, shortly afterwards adding "Then live, sweet Lucrece" (1770)—but of course neither of these demands can be met.

Brutus, in contrast, opens not on a futile command but on one likely to be obeyed: "Thou wrong'd lord of Rome...arise" (1818). He proceeds to give

advice, buttressing his opinions with rhetorical questions like "Do wounds help wounds" (1822), where the answer is assumed and hence controlled. Like a skilled courtroom lawyer, he avoids asking questions whose answers he does not already know. His oration then culminates on another speech act, the vow, which he takes and invites others to imitate as well. Thus his injunctions, requests, and rituals are social, drawing in his listeners. And thus too his commands and questions strengthen his authority by asserting his possession of it, his right to issue commands and have them obeyed—much as assuming the right to protect can assume and thus intensify power. In so doing, he reminds us that speech acts may create social interactions and hierarchies rather than merely reflect pre-existing status systems, as the first generation of speech act theorists had typically assumed.⁵

If Brutus's words and gestures are oriented outwards, towards his listeners and their shared future, the same may be said of his actions. The linguistic contrast between the two responses to Lucrece's death is paralleled by the contrast between a mourning that in several senses remains rooted in the domestic and one that in several senses moves outside the home and towards the political arena.⁶ In that second, politicized version of mourning, inspired and led by Brutus, the Romans "did conclude to bear dead Lucrece thence, / To show her bleeding body thorough Rome, / And so to publish Tarquin's foul offense" (1850-52). Notice in particular that the use of the verb "publish" in relation to Lucrece's body—the term deployed in an earlier, critical reference to Collatine's boasts of her beauty (33)—signals the movement from the private sphere of home to the public arena of the marketplace, from complaint to epic action, from grief to anger, and in a sense from female to male.

This episode also shifts from female to male in that, as many critics have noted, Lucrece has moved—and been moved—from the role of a subject lamenting her rape to an object deployed in the mourning rituals of others. Incisively analysed by Catherine Belsey and other critics, the emphasis on possession and property earlier in the poem thus extends into its conclusion as well.⁷ It is telling that Brutus appropriates first Lucrece's knife and then her body, and in so doing contributes another version of chiasmus to the related but significantly different instances analysed by Joel Fineman.⁸ If the blade becomes a synecdoche for the body it has injured, so too the

body becomes a kind of knife, a weapon in Brutus's struggle against the Tarquins. Lucrece is turned into a stage property, and Shakespeare the actor knows well how props can be deployed to prop up authority.

In so doing, as we have seen, Brutus demonstrates three interrelated strategies for politicizing loss and hence establishing one's own carefully crafted and craftily careful position within that future. First, the linguistic repudiation of repetition represents and helps to establish other forms of change. Second, an assumption—in both senses of that noun—of authority generates power. And finally, controlling the immediate discursive future through such techniques as rhetorical questions both figures and fashions control over the long-term political future.

But how does the text evaluate Brutus's version of mourning against that of Collatine and Lucretius? In my book, *Captive Victors: Shakespeare's Narrative Poems and Sonnets*, I maintained that Brutus's response to Lucrece's death is deeply suspect, an instance of an unscrupulous politician appropriating tragic events to build his own political power. Though I still cannot agree with Annabel Patterson's rival contention that Brutus's behaviour is uncritically celebrated, I want to argue now for a middle position between my original assertion and her interpretation; his behaviour as chief mourner involves some of the ambivalence this and other Shakespearean texts associate with protection.⁹ Admittedly, the lamentation of Collatine and Lucretius, arguably rendered farcical by their inappropriate argument, makes Brutus's behaviour look much better than I originally acknowledged. Yet the text does not completely absolve that revenger from culpability: the repetition of "publish" surely hints that the decision to invite the public world to enter your house or, inversely, to carry the iconic representative of that house to the marketplace, can be dangerous and self-serving.

Mourning becomes political in that Brutus cleverly uses it to effectuate a fundamental change in government, reminding us that the skillful deployment of loss can be a weapon as effective as the knife Lucrece and Brutus variously deploy. But mourning is also political in this text in a second, broader sense. That is, it generates, as well as figures in, struggles for power not only between Brutus and the two other men but also between the rival mourners Collatine and Lucretius, who frenetically debate who has the greater right to *grieve*. In a poem concerned with displacement of several sorts, whether it be Tarquin's usurpation of Collatine's place in bed or the exile of the

tyrannous family, Collatine's rivalry with Lucretius is tellingly evoked in such terms: "Collatine...bids Lucretius give his sorrow place" (1772-73).

Not the least reason the poem connects mourning and rivalry this way is narratological. The desire to narrate is often an attempt to gain—or, more to our purposes here, to regain—control over realized or anticipated losses. In Hamlet's insistence that Horatio remain alive to narrate his friend's tale; in Venus's partial (in both senses) account of the would-be lover she was unable to control in life; and in so many other episodes, Shakespeare's poems and plays demonstrate that failures to affect the text of experience frequently generate a drive to effect a literal text. Witness, among many other examples, Desdemona singing Barbary's song shortly before dying.

More specifically, as that instance of Ophelia's funeral suggests, narration often involves an attempt to reassert power by conquering a rival, and this is frequently a rival associated in some way with loss. To begin with, it can be argued that all narration is grounded in rivalry. Peter Brooks has compared storytelling to the competing narratives analyst and analysand produce in psychoanalytic encounters.¹⁰ Might one not go on to assert that narrative itself is virtually always the result of a rivalry, whether overt or suppressed—that is, the competition between the present writer and contemporaries or predecessors, between earlier works in the genre and this one, or more broadly between the different ways the story could be told, such as the lyric interludes often encased in narrative, and the principal version that has been chosen? And if narrative involves, as many theorists have suggested, an agenda of controlling or even subjugating, the rival who is subjugated is often the agent or representative of loss. For example, telling stories about loss can establish a successful rivalry with those masterly narrators of master narratives, God and chance. The impulse to narrate a tale about loss is an impulse to wrest control from such powerful agents of it, rewriting the story with a different author and authority. Similarly, when Brutus publishes the story of Lucrece's fate, he substitutes his version of it for the ones that Tarquin had threatened to tell, and in so doing not coincidentally substitutes himself for Tarquin politically.

Above all, however, narration facilitates the reassertion of control by preventing or overcoming interruption, the linguistic analogue to spatial invasion. Many theories for the driving force behind narrative have been adduced—it is variously described as an impulse to gain knowledge, to

conquer a city or a woman's body, and so on. But we should add that the drive to narrate is also a drive to forestall or contain interruptions, whether actual or threatened. In their characteristic emphasis on co-operation between speakers and listeners, the discourse analysts, a varied group of linguists who study conversational interactions, often underestimate the frequency and virulence of struggles between the audience members who attempt to break into a story and the narrators who attempt to hold them at bay.¹¹ Indeed, such resistance by narrators is one of the principal ways storytelling challenges loss and the competing would-be speakers who may be associated with it. According to common rules of conversation, the storyteller has the floor until he or she establishes closure. Loss by definition interrupts an ongoing story, a relationship, a life. Hence successful storytelling counters both the interruptions effected by a death or other form of loss and the threatened interruptions of a rival narrator by insisting on its own unbroken continuity. Lucretius and Collatine break into each other's lamentations—but neither grabs the mike, as it were, from Brutus when he cuts off the Tarquins' reign and avenges the cutting off of Lucrece's life through his own uninterrupted story.

The imbrication of loss and narrative in *The Rape of Lucrece* recurs throughout its author's canon. The dynamic of loss and recovery, Shakespeare repeatedly demonstrates, involves not only telling a story but also substituting one's own version for a competing alternative one. Deprivation breeds emulation. Much as death is warned not to be proud because Donne can and will recount a more persuasive tale about it, so Shakespeare's romances substitute their narratives for those of tragedy. And so too, the final scene in *Othello* is a struggle between narratives no less driven by competition than Iago himself. Similarly, Henry V's St. Crispian Day speech trumps anticipated and dreaded loss with an alternative narrative, which is itself a tale about people telling the correct tale. The connection between loss and the competing stories about it is not the least reason for Shakespeare's characteristic preoccupation with the workings of rivalry; and that preoccupation is not the least reason for his interest in loss.

But if the rhetoric of mourning in *Lucrece* illuminates the rhetoric and rhetoricity of other Shakespearean texts, it also gestures towards new approaches to mourning itself. The conventional wisdom, as promulgated by Freud and many neo-Freudians, stresses the psychological perils of grief;

Shakespeare's poem draws attention to the political perils as well, cogently demonstrating the liability and volatility mourning engenders in both individuals and society. In so doing it demonstrates as well how mourning, even as it threatens the agency of the bereaved, can at the same time generate power and its cousin authority.

NOTES

1. See, respectively, Coppélia Kahn, *Roman Shakespeare: Warriors, Wounds, and Women* (London: Routledge, 1997) 27-45; Annabel Patterson, *Reading Between the Lines* (Madison, WI: U of Wisconsin P, 1993) 297-312.
2. See, e.g., my study, *Shakespeare and Domestic Loss: Forms of Deprivation, Mourning and Recuperation* (Cambridge, Eng.: Cambridge UP, 1999) 210n.g4; Kahn 27; Patricia Parker, *Literary Fat Ladies: Rhetoric, Gender, Property* (London: London, 1987) Chapter 7; Nancy Vickers, "'The blazon of sweet beauty's best': Shakespeare's *Lucrece*," *Shakespeare and the Question of Theory*, ed. Patricia Parker and Geoffrey Hartman (New York: Methuen, 1985).
3. Although the relationship between rhetoric and mourning in the poem has been neglected, many Shakespeareans have incisively discussed the use of language in the poem from other perspectives. See especially Joel Fineman, "Shakespeare's Will: The Temporality of Rape," *The Subjectivity Effect in Western Literary Tradition: Essays Toward the Release of Shakespeare's Will*, (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1991); Katherine Maus, "Taking Tropes Seriously: Language and Violence in Shakespeare's Rape of *Lucrece*," *Shakespeare Quarterly* 37 (1986): 66-82.
4. I cite G. Blakemore Evans, *The Riverside Shakespeare* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1974).
5. Among the best challenges to that assumption by earlier speech act theorists is Susanne L. Wofford, "To You I Give Myself, For I Am Yours': Erotic Performance and Theatrical Performatives in *As You Like It*," *Shakespeare Reread: The Texts in New Contexts*, ed. Russ McDonald (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1994): 147-69.
6. On the significance of enclosed spaces in this poem and other Shakespearean texts, see esp. Georgianna Ziegler, "My Lady's Chamber: Female Space, Female Chastity in Shakespeare," *Textual Practice* 4 (1990): 73-90.
7. Catherine Belsey, "Tarquin Dispossessed: Expropriation and Consent in *The Rape of Lucrece*," *Shakespeare Quarterly* 52 (2001): 315-35.
8. Fineman, "Shakespeare's Will" esp. 173-75.
9. For those earlier arguments, see Heather Dubrow, *Captive Victors: Shakespeare's Narrative Poems and Sonnets* (Ithaca: Cornell U P, 1987) 125-28; Patterson, *Reading Between the Lines* 301-09.

10. Peter Brooks, *Psychoanalysis and Storytelling* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1994) 46-75

11. For an overview of the movement, see Malcolm Coulthard, *An Introduction to Discourse Analysis* (London: Longman, 1977).