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Lucretia and the Language of Purity

Anne-Catherine Schaaf, '22

hoc illud est praecipue in cognitione rerum salubre ac frugiferum, omnis te exempli documenta in inlustri posita monumento intueri: inde tibi tuaeque rei publicae quod imitere capias, inde foedum inceptu, foedum exitu, quod vites.

“This is what makes the study of history particularly advantageous and fruitful, that you might look upon every known lesson in the illustrious memorials of the past. From these examples you and your state can choose what to imitate, and what to avoid that is disgraceful in the design or disgraceful in result”

Ab Urbe Condita, Praefatio 10-12

Early on the preface to Titius Livius' *Ab Urbe Condita*, the ancient historian tells the reader his goal: not just to describe the past, but to illustrate its moral teachings. Livy is deeply troubled by the events of his modern day, particularly with the rise of avaricious individuals, and hopes that by providing examples of strong and virtuous historical figures, *exempla*, the Roman readers of his day can become better people and citizens. For men, the goal is to gain the trait of *virtus*, synonymous with strength, self-sacrifice, discipline,

and bravery, exemplified in stories such as that of Romulus, Horatius, and Cincinnatus. For women, the ideal virtue is *pudicitia*, associated with chastity, modesty, and purity. No figure in Livy's history serves as a better *exemplum* of this *pudicitia* than Lucretia, the woman whose tragedy in chapters 57 through 59 of Book I of *Ab Urbe Condita* would lead to the foundation of the Roman republic. This paper will analyze the nature of *pudicitia* how Lucretia exemplifies it, how it drives the narrative forward, and how it relates to a greater understanding of Roman social values around gender.

Rome in 510 B.C., as Livy describes, was in a state of moral failure. The Tarquini ruled extravagantly and unjustly, violating basic social mores. Their reign began in wickedness, according to Livy, as Lucius Tarquinius overthrew and murdered his father-in-law, the king, and then his wife Tulla runs over the body, angering the gods in Chapter 48. Following his description of the early Tarquini activities, Livy foreshadows that, as their reign began with a crime, it will end in one equally horrific, *quibus iratis malo regni principio similes prope diem exitus sequerentur*, "by this anger, the evil beginning of the reign, very soon a similar end would follow." In the succeeding chapter, after Lucius Tarquinius refuses to bury his father in law, he becomes known as Tarquinius Superbus, or Tarquin the proud. As his reign continues, Tarquinius Superbus uses trickery to defeat the Gabii in

chapters 53 and 54, *postremo minime arte Romana, fraude ac dolo, adgressus est*, “at last he resorted to the tactic so unlike that of a Roman, using fraud and deceit,” war tactics that Livy considers dishonorable. Livy also describes in chapters 56 and 57 how Tarquinius Superbus forces the plebeians to provide labor for his building projects, arousing their resentment. Tarquin, as the reader can conclude, lacks *virtus* entirely.

However, in the face of moral decay, Livy will continue with his theme that just individuals can lead society on a better path. From Lucretia’s first appearance in I.57, wherein Collatinus brags about the virtues of his wife, *sua Lucretia*, in comparison with the royal daughters in law, Livy, using the language of purity, establishes her as an *exemplum* who along with her family stands in contrast to the immoral Tarquini. The exemplum for Roman women was a modest mother and wife who deferred to her husband’s and father’s authority. Our first encounter with Lucretia is Livy’s depiction of her staying up late to work spinning wool with her maids, a traditional vision of a good Roman wife (I.57). In this scene, Lucretia demonstrates *pudicitia* as she engages in a traditionally feminine activity to provide clothing for her family, and works long hours doing so. Livy deliberately contrasts her against the daughters of the king who stay up late with their friends *in convivio luxuque*, partying in luxury, implying that they lack *pudicitia*. Moreover, in earlier

chapters, Tulla, wife of Tarquinius Superbus, willfully drives over her father's body in an act of shocking disrespect to filial piety and another display of the lack of *pudicitia* among the women of the Tarquini. When the men in I.57 compare the value of their wives' virtue, they unanimously agree that Lucretia is the winner of the contest. Later, the men arrive at Lucretia's house, where she and Collatinus welcome them graciously. While Livy mentions her beauty, it is this *pudicitia*, her proven chastity, that Livy describes as overwhelming Sextus Tarquinius, son of the tyrannical king Tarquinius Superbus, with the urge, *mala libido*, to violate her (as well as possibly anger over his family losing the contest of the wives). The narrative continues to emphasize her *pudicitia*, as she later welcomes Tarquin, unknowing of his evil plans, with perfect Roman hospitality when he returns alone as a guest in chapter I.58. Lucretia, later that evening, awakens in her bed to Tarquin standing over her with his sword at her throat, his other hand on her chest, and she shakes with terror. He urges her to be silent or he will kill her. When he attacks, after resisting his every entreaty, to which Livy implies a woman with lesser virtue would have succumb, she unwillingly submits to Tarquin to avoid the greater crime against her honor. Tarquin's threat to murder and place her with a dead naked slave in the implication of what was to the Romans the worst kind of adultery. In this instance Livy

subtly reminds the readers of Lucretia's *pudicitia*, as she submits not merely to save her own life, but to avoid the defamation of her and by correlation her family's honor.

In the narrative of Tarquin's attack, Livy uses masculine and feminine language to deliberately contrast Tarquin and Lucretia. After raping Lucretia, Livy describes Tarquin with the phrase *victrix libido*, a state of glory over his "conquest" the unyielding virgin, *obstinatam pudicitiam*. Tarquin violates Lucretia, and Livy clarifies, violates Rome's most essential social mores. Lucretia, on the other hand, is powerless and terrified. After the attack, she does not try to hide her suffering and shame, but immediately calls her close male relatives, her husband and father, for aid. Lucretia, as all the men who listen to her experience agree, is blameless. Yet she, the perfect Roman woman, cannot bear to live if other women may justify adultery or immoral behavior by her example. So, motivated by the honor and shame of *pudicitia*, she commits suicide, forever enshrining herself as the perfect *exemplum* for all Roman women.

Livy takes exacting effort to describe Lucretia as the perfect wife, the matron, the emblem of the chaste and modest Roman woman. She, ultimately, represents Livy's theme of the pure, chaste, moral *exemplum* for women. Her blood is described as *castimissium* by Brutus, a superlative for the Latin term for chaste, a term that is encompassed by *pudicitias*

(I.59). She, like Rome, has been abused by the Tarquini and must be defended by noble, exemplary men like Brutus and Collatinus. It is her defining *pudicitia* that makes her what would be called today a “righteous victim”. Livy’s language, and the historical context, is essential to understanding the nature of what has happened. By the language Livy uses, readers can understand how Livy details the severity of this crime. It is a crime against hospitality, the Roman hospitality repeatedly praised by Livy, as Tarquin, the guest, committed a crime against his host. It is a family crime, an insult to Collatinus’ role as the *paterfamilias*, or head of household. The term for the crime we today would understand as rape was *raptum*, from *rapere*, meaning to seize or take. This word was associated more with abduction than with sexual assault in ancient Rome, for example Livy’s description of the Sabine women as *rapienda virgines*, abducted young women, in Book 1, Chapter 9. However, in both Livy’s time and Lucretia’s time, the act of violence against Lucretia would be considered differently. A woman in ancient Rome was not recognized by society as a fully autonomous human being who had the right to control her own body. She was the property of her husband, meaning Tarquin’s crime is not just an act of violence against Lucretia, which Livy describes with the term *violare*, but a kind of theft against her husband. It is a crime against chastity and *pudicitia*, as Brutus exclaims in

I.59 over Lucretia's bloodied body, *castissimum ante regiam iniuriam sanguinem iuro* or I swear by this blood, most pure until sullied by the tyrant, creating her *stupro infando*, her unutterable bodily shame. It is certainly physical violence as well, as Lucretia speaks of her body being *violatum* or violated, as well as a demonstration of Tarquin's belief in his social and political power to do as he pleases in a state of *amore ardens*, fierce passion (I.58).

Ultimately, this multifaceted crime becomes the downfall of the Tarquini. However, even if she kills herself, Lucretia is not passive. She tells the men gathered at her side *date dexteras fidemque haud inpune adultero fore*, "Swear with your right hands and your good faith that by no means shall the unchaste one go unpunished." Lucretia demands that the crime not go unpunished, a demand that entails what is essentially revolution. To hold the Sextus Tarquinius accountable is a challenge to the entire order that has legitimized these violations of Roman morality. Although Lucretia is an *exemplum*, even though the actual end to the reign of tyrants is carried out by men, she isn't powerless. Even as the ideal passive and obedient Roman woman, the model of *pudicitia*, she gets revenge, albeit indirectly. The men use her as a rallying point to overthrow the Tarquini. Brutus uses the idea of Lucretia's *pudicitia* to rally the Romans, emphasizing how truly terrible this crime was.

However, it is not so much her personal vengeance, but vengeance for the entire wronged city of Rome. Her *pudicitia* was at the heart of the crime, and Sextus Tarquinius' blatant violation of that *pudicitia*, as Lucretia professed before she killed herself, shows disrespect for the Roman household and the whole morality of Rome. Moreover, it through this violent crime against the model of a Roman matron that Livy impresses on his readers how evil the power hungry Tarquinius are. Lucretia becomes a rallying point, defined by *pudicitia* in life and in death. The rule of kings, as Livy informs his readers, lasted for two hundred and forty-four years. The last of these kings was Lucius Tarquinius Superbus, a tyrant who ultimately would be the downfall of the Roman monarchy which led to the institution of the consulship, and Lucretia's role cannot be minimized in this monumental change to Roman society.

Yet, the legacy is of her narrative is complicated to us as modern readers who can recognize there is something fundamentally twisted about a victim choosing to die rather than to live in shame, even if her rapist is ultimately stopped. However, in its rawest form, *pudicitia*, with all of its modern connotations of chastity, purity, fidelity, and modesty, is essentially shame. It demands that women hide themselves, that they accommodate others, but never draw attention to themselves, that they make themselves small. However, a

modern reader can still recognize there is a kind of power to her story. For it is this sadistic act of violence against Lucretia, and the response of the men in her life to her suffering, is ultimately the catalyst for the end of the tyranny of the Tarquins and the beginning of a new Republican era of government in Rome. This government, the reader can understand, is one that will return to the true Roman values, led by exemplary men. *Pudicitia* will return too, but there cannot be a female leader as *pudicitia* dictates that women behave in the opposite manner—passive and deferential. Instead, Lucretia becomes a remote ideal, a woman who cannot fail, because she has become the idea of virtue itself. *Pudicitia* was destroyed in an act of violence under Sextus Tarquinius, but with its return, more acts of violence will continue, only legitimized by Roman society. In Rome, as in the United States until 1993, marital rape was not a crime. *Pudicitia* will continue to serve as a justification for the right kind of violence, a cultural teaching for women that their only way to be deserving of honor is to sacrifice and suffer, to participate in the denial of their own individual and collective agency. Perhaps in the modern world, however, we can achieve what Livy and Lucretia couldn't—to resist all those who abuse their positions of power, while also ensuring a future for victims where they are not weighed down by shame manifested by our culture, but rather empowered to fight back

against their abusers, as well as any system of shame and injustice that would play a role in silencing them.