

The Rape of Lucretia

(Livy *Ab Urbe Condita* 1. 57-59)

57. [During the siege of Ardea] the young princes passed their idle hours dining and drinking together. Once when they were drinking at the quarters of Sextus Tarquinius where Collatinus Tarquinius too was dining, they fell to talking of their wives. Each praised his own in extravagant terms, and when rivalry grew warm Collatinus declared there was no need for words when a few hours would show them how far his own Lucretia surpassed the others. "Why don't we take horse, if we have energy and enterprise, and inspect our wives' characters in person? The best proof is what a man sees when he comes unexpected." They were all flushed with wine. "Come on, then," they cried, and galloped off to Rome, where they arrived as darkness was beginning to fall. From Rome they went to Collatia, where they found Lucretia very differently employed from the princes' wives. These they had seen whiling their time away in luxurious banqueting with their friends, but Lucretia was sitting in her parlor, late in the evening, busy with her wool, surrounded by maids working by lamplight. The award for womanliness went to Lucretia. She received the Tarquins and her husband graciously, and the victorious husband courteously invited the princes into his home. It was then that Sextus Tarquin conceived a villainous desire to force Lucretia's virtue; not her beauty alone but her proven chastity pricked him on. But for the present they concluded their nocturnal escapade by returning to the camp.

58. A few days later, unbeknownst to Collatinus, Sextus Tarquin went to Collatia with a single attendant. His design was not suspected, and he was graciously received and after dinner brought to a guest room. When everything seemed safe and everyone asleep, fired with passion and with sword drawn he approached sleeping Lucretia. Holding her down with his left hand on her bosom, he said: "Silence, Lucretia! I am Sextus Tarquin. My sword is in my hand. You will die if you utter a sound." Frightened out of her sleep, the woman saw there was no help but only imminent death. Then Tarquin declared his love, begged, mingled threats with prayers, brought to bear all the arguments that could sway a woman. When he saw she was obdurate, that not even fear of death would move her, he compounded that fear with scandal: by her corpse, he declared, he would place the dead body of a slave he would murder, so that it would be said she had been killed for foul adultery. With this awful prospect victorious lust downed stubborn modesty as if by violence, and Tarquin departed, exulting in his ruthless assault on a woman's honor. Downcast at her disaster, Lucretia sent the same message to her father at Rome and her husband at Ardea: "Come with a single trusted friend; you must do this and do it quickly; a horrible thing has happened."

Lucretius brought Valerius, Volesus' son, and Collatinus brought Junius Brutus, with whom he chanced to be going to Rome when his wife's messenger encountered him. Lucretia they found sitting

downcast in her room, and when her husband asked, "Is all well?" she answered, "All ill. What can be well for a woman when she has lost her chastity? The print of a strange man is on your bed, Collatinus. But only my body has been violated. My spirit is guiltless. Death shall be my witness. But pledge your honor with your right hands that the adulterer shall not go unpunished. Sextus Tarquin is the man who last night returned hostility for hospitality and by force of arms won the pleasure that is my bane, and his too if you are men." They took the pledge in due order, they consoled the sick-hearted woman by turning the guilt from the helpless victim to the sinning agent: "It is the mind that sins, not the body; where there is no intention, there is no blame." "What he must pay," said she, "is for you to determine; as for me, though I absolve myself of sin, I do not free myself of punishment. Never shall unchaste woman cite Lucretia's example as a plea for life." She had hidden a razor under her dress; this she plunged into her heart, and fell dying upon her wound. Husband and father raised the death wail.

59. The others were paralyzed with grief, but Brutus drew the dagger from the wound and held it before him, dripping with blood. "I swear by this blood," he said, "so chaste before tyrannical brutality, and I call you, gods, to witness: By fire, by sword, by whatever force I can command I will banish Tarquin the Proud with his accursed wife and all his children; and never will I allow him or anyone else to rule over Rome." He then handed the knife to Collatinus, then to Lucretius and Valerius as they stared in amazement at the miraculous change in Brutus' character. As he directed they took an oath; their grief began to change to anger, and together they followed Brutus' lead as he called upon them to overthrow the tyranny at once.

They carried Lucretia's body from her house into the forum where a crowd collected, astonished at the un-heard-of outrage. Each man had his own complaint to make of the violence and depravity of the tyrant's family, and they were moved by the father's sadness. However, Brutus rebuked them for their tears and idle complaints and incited them to take up arms, as befitted men and Romans, against those who engineered this persecution. The bravest of the young men volunteered their arms immediately and the rest followed suit. Lucretia's father was left to hold Collatia; guards were posted to prevent the news of the rebellion from reaching the king, while the rest set out for Rome under Brutus' leadership.