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“For one’s Offence Why Should so Many Fall”?: Hecuba and the Problems of Conscience in *The Rape of Lucrece* and *Hamlet*

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Abstract: In *The Rape of Lucrece* and *Hamlet*, Shakespeare focuses upon the effects of sin and the problems of conscience that it causes. However, he does so by shifting focus from the sinner to the one harmed by the sin. Through this shift in focus, Shakespeare explores sin as something that does not only harm the sinner and his immediate victim, but as something that strikes against the common good. Sin harms humanity in its corporate nature, and the consequences of sin—sorrows, guilt, conflicted conscience, and the desire for absolution—spread from the sinner to his victims and the larger community. At pivotal moments in both works, Shakespeare turns to artistic representations of the figure of Hecuba, sorrowing in the midst of the destruction of Troy, as a means for navigating the strained point of intersection between private conscience and the common good.

Keywords: Shakespeare; Hamlet; The Rape of Lucrece; Hecuba; conscience; sin

When discussing *The Rape of Lucrece*, it has become commonplace for scholars to mention Gabriel Harvey’s marginalia in his copy of Speght’s edition of Chaucer, in which he remarked, “the younger sort takes much delight in Shakespeare’s Venus, & Adonis: but his Lucrece & his tragedie of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark, have it in them, to please the wiser sort” (Harvey 2018).¹ Harvey identifies a relationship between *Lucrece* and *Hamlet* that has been subsequently explored in a variety of ways; Harold Walley argues that “*Lucrece* lays the foundation for Shakespeare’s whole subsequent treatment of tragedy” (Walley 1961, p. 480), and others observe certain similarities between the titular characters of the works.² Indeed, one of the most superficially obvious points of conjunction is the fact that, at crucial moments, both *Lucrece* and *Hamlet* meditate upon artistic representations of Hecuba, grieving as Priam is killed in front of her and as Troy is destroyed around her. This sorrowing figure of Hecuba performs an important and similar role in both works: as wronged mother and wife, and as queen of a city destroyed, she is a compressed symbol for the devastating effects of sin, both private and public. Shakespeare develops this understanding of sin more broadly in each work: in *The Rape of Lucrece* and in *Hamlet*, Shakespeare’s heroes are, like Hecuba, the victims of others’ sins, and though they are the victims and not the perpetrators of these sins, they nevertheless struggle with crises of conscience.

In focusing upon the problems of conscience that sin provokes in its victims, Shakespeare emphasizes a particular understanding of sin and its effects that was prevalent in medieval and

¹ For example, see (Maus 1986, p. 66; Roe 1994, p. 99; Kietzman 1999, p. 21).

² In discussing the difficulty of the situation imposed upon Lucrece, John Roe observes, “she resembles Hamlet more closely than any other Shakespearean hero” (Roe 1994, p. 113), and Andrew D. Weiner argues that both “are obsessed with a sex crime” and “obsessed with the idea of suicide” (Weiner 1995, p. 48). András Kiséry qualifies the similarities that others identify, arguing that “in spite of their superficial similarities, in political terms, Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* is of a different nature than *Lucrece*” (Kiséry 2016, p. 77).

early modern England: he depicts sin as something that harms not only the sinner or the sinner's immediate victim, but as something that strikes against the common good. In this respect, the guilty and the guiltless suffer the effects of sin. Indeed, the guiltless suffer not only as victims, as does Lucrece, but also simply because sin harms mankind in his corporate nature. Especially in late medieval England, the concept of human beings sharing a common good through being part of a common body had strong theological and political or theo-juridical associations. On the one hand, each individual Christian was understood to exist as a member of the body of Christ; on the other hand, political regimes imitated this theological language to express the view that each subject participated in a common life as a member of the king's body, the body politic.³ In *The Rape of Lucrece* and *Hamlet*, Shakespeare's focus moves outward from the sinner to the sufferers. This movement contrasts with the deep interiority we are accustomed to notice in Shakespearean tragedy; here we see how one man's sin disrupts another's conscience.⁴ In both works, sins have an effect upon humanity in its communal relations, and the protagonist is forced to try to set things right. In both cases, they seem unable quite to do so—Hamlet strains towards perfect conscience, and Lucrece towards absolution, but the efforts of both are finally muddled. In this context, Shakespeare turns to an artistic representation of Hecuba. In each case, artistic representation of the sorrowing queen of Troy enables the protagonist to address these deepest challenges of the soul, which partially lie outside the reach of any individual, since they emerge at the intersection of the individual and the corporate aspects of man's existence. Art, and in particular the encompassing figure of the grieving Hecuba, becomes the means of relating an individual's private conscience to the common good.

The understanding of each individual as constituting part of the corporate body of Christ is derived from several passages in the New Testament, most notably Paul's first letter to the Corinthians. Paul declares that, "as the body is one, and hath many members, and all the members of that one body, being many, are one body: so also is Christ. For by one Spirit are we all baptized into one body" (1 Cor. 12:12–13).⁵ Shortly before his arrest and crucifixion, Christ himself used similar language, praying for his disciples, "That they all may be one; as thou, Father, art in me, and I in thee, that they also may be one in us . . . And the glory which thou gavest me I have given them; that they may be one, even as we are one: I in them, and thou in me, that they may be made perfect in one" (John 17:21–23). In his development of this idea, Paul carefully emphasizes that the unity is real, not merely an abstraction or useful description, for, "whether one member suffer, all the members suffer with it; or one member be honoured, all the members rejoice with it. Now ye are the body of Christ, and members in particular" (1 Cor. 12:26–27). The reality of this corporate understanding is not just that all Christians find life through Christ, but that the whole mystical body suffers when one member suffers.

³ For a general discussion of the development of the conceptualization of the church as the mystical body of Christ, especially from the eleventh century on, see (De Lubac 2006, pp. 75–122). Ernest Kantorowicz famously develops de Lubac's work by showing that the "extent late medieval and modern commonwealths actually were influenced by the ecclesiastical model, especially by the all-encompassing spiritual proto-type of corporational concepts, the *corpus mysticum* of the Church" (Kantorowicz 1957, p. 194, and see esp. 193–272). *Political Theology and Early Modernity* (Hammill and Lupton 2012) contains several helpful essays, especially Jennifer Rust's "Political Theologies of the Corpus Mysticum: Schmitt, Kantorowicz, and de Lubac" (pp. 102–23) which reevaluates the ways that Kantorowicz developed de Lubac's work. Rust's *The Body in Mystery: The Political Theology of the Corpus Mysticum in the Literature of Reformation England* (Rust 2014) is an important continuation of this reevaluation, and includes compelling discussions of Shakespeare's engagement with the tradition of the *corpus mysticum* in *Titus Andronicus* and *Measure for Measure*.

⁴ This is not to deny the rich interiority in some of Shakespeare's plays, but to emphasize that, in these works, it is an interiority that is initially provoked by another's sin. For a helpful discussion and contextualization of ways in which Hamlet's internal struggles reflect both Catholic and Calvinist treatments of conscience and the internal life, see (Kaufman 2011). Kaufman writes, "Shakespeare's Danish prince seems a relic of the cultural practices favored by both Jacobethan Calvinists and expatriate Catholic pietists, all of whom came close to consecrating inconstancy and to equating "the true feeling of religion" with an intensely inward, disorienting search for consolations—among Jesuits—and for assurances of election—among puritans" (pp. 440–41).

⁵ All biblical references are drawn from the King James Version.

The pervasive nature of both the theological and political conceptions of humanity's corporate nature in late medieval and early modern England has been well documented.⁶ But to appreciate Shakespeare's immediate context, it is helpful to look at one of the more famous expositions of this conception in early modern England. In his "Devotion XVII," John Donne hears a bell ringing, and meditates,

No man is an island, entire of itself; every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main. If a clod be washed away by the sea, Europe is the less, as well as if a promontory were, as well as if a manor of thy friend's or of thine own were: any man's death diminishes me, because I am involved in mankind, and therefore never send to know for whom the bell tolls; it tolls for thee. (Donne 1990, p. 272)

Donne stresses that each individual is part of a larger body, a body that is involved in all of its members, and that grows or diminishes, is exalted or debased, as its members fare. And Donne is quite clear that he is not merely speaking in terms of life and death, but of the moral life of mankind: "The church is catholic, universal, so are all her actions; all that she does, belongs to all. When she baptizes a child, that action concerns me; for that child is thereby connected to that head which is my head too, and ingrafted into that body, whereof I am a member" (Donne 1990, p. 271). Changes in one man's moral condition necessarily affect the larger body of which he is a member. In meditating upon this, Donne is drawn out of himself and his private meditations on conscience and death, and prays for his fellow man: "I am bold, O Lord, to bend my prayers to thee for his assistance, the voice of whose bell hath called me to this devotion. Lay hold upon his soul, O God, till that soul have thoroughly considered his account" (Donne 1990, p. 274). Note that here, Donne's meditation moves from consideration of mankind's corporate nature to a charitable prayer for another member of that body, and in particular, he prays for the other soul to have time to examine his conscience, and to "perfect his account before he pass away" (Donne 1990, p. 274). Arnold Stein examines this devotion, stressing Donne's emphasis upon a good death's public and penitential aspects, and he suggests,

"The inward and outward experience [of a good death] meet in the effect upon others, and their presence is clearly important to Donne . . . witnesses are deliberately linked to the dying man by Donne's prayer, which brings him out of his own strenuous isolation to participate in the scene which he has already responded to by imagination and prayer." (Stein 1981, p. 498)

Donne's "Devotion XVII" helps us understand what Shakespeare is representing in *The Rape of Lucrece* and *Hamlet*, for it touches upon many of the same elements that Shakespeare explores when considering the troubled relations of sin and conscience with respect to the common good, and the individual and corporate aspects of human nature. Lucrece and Hamlet are similarly drawn out of a "strenuous isolation" to consider the common good, and seek through their deaths to accomplish a positive good for others, while also achieving some penitential absolution for evil which they did not commit but by which they are still in some way stained.

In *The Rape of Lucrece*, the ways in which Tarquin's sins specifically affect the political order are pronounced. The "Argument" describes the change of government that results from Tarquin's violation of Lucrece, and the poem concludes with "Tarquin's everlasting banishment" (l. 1855).⁷ Shakespeare's poem repeatedly insists that a ruler's moral evils affect the entire political body. This political element

⁶ For example, see (Duffy 2005, pp. 130–54, 303–76). Duffy writes, "the overwhelming impression left by sources for late medieval religion in England is that of a Christianity resolutely and enthusiastically orientated towards the public and the corporate, and of a continuing sense of the value of cooperation and mutuality in seeking salvation" (p. 131). See also (Shuger 2001; McEachern and Shuger 1997, esp. pp. 116–60; Hutson 2009).

⁷ All references to Shakespeare's works are from *The Norton Shakespeare* (Shakespeare 2016). For helpful arguments regarding Shakespeare's criticism of monarchy and embrace of republicanism, see (Platt 1975; Hadfield 2005, pp. 130–53). Andrew Moore argues that Shakespeare is explicitly engaging with changes in the classical definition of tyranny in early modern political philosophy in *Shakespeare between Machiavelli and Hobbes: Dead Body Politics* (Moore 2016, pp. 125–52).

is clear and pointed: Collin Burrow has noted that when Lucrece seeks to dissuade Tarquin from raping her, we witness a “textbook example of political oratory in this period: the civic aspect of rhetoric in Elizabethan England was not displayed by speaking to the Senate, but by giving counsel” (Shakespeare 2002, p. 52). Yet despite Lucrece’s eloquence, her counsel fails, and “the ideal tempering of a monarch’s passions by reason and counsel is shown only in a state of radical dysfunction” (Shakespeare 2002, p. 53). The entire Roman political body is ill with disorder, because its ruler cannot control his passions, and is deaf to counsel. Something is rotten in the Roman state. Lucrece directly addresses this point with Tarquin: “Thy princely office how canst thou fulfill / When, patterned by thy fault, foul sin may say, / He learned to sin, and thou didst teach the way?” (ll. 628–30). The prince’s evil actions pattern sin for his subjects, and part of this example is a rebellion of proper subjects against their ruler, of passions rebelling against reason. In her later sorrowing meditations, Lucrece stresses,

The baser is he, coming from a king,
To shame his hope with deeds degenerate.
The mightier man, the mightier is the thing
That makes him honored, or begets him hate,
For greatest scandal waits on greatest state. (ll. 1002–6)

Tarquin, being noble king, is all the baser in his slavish fall, is capable of greater scandal, and causes greater hatred because of the elevated nature of his office.

However, Shakespeare emphasizes that sin does not only harm the common good in the explicitly political form of the ruler affecting his subjects. When Lucrece gazes at the painting of the fall of Troy while waiting for Collatine to arrive, she wonders,

Why should the private pleasure of someone
Become the public plague of many moe?
Let sin, alone committed, light alone
Upon his head that hath transgresséd so.
Let guiltless souls be freed from guilty woe.

For one’s offence why should so many fall,
To plague a private sin in general? (ll. 1478–84)

The emphasis here is not upon the ruler corrupting his subordinates through bad example and license, but rather upon private sin as such effecting a public evil. Here the ruler is reduced to the anonymous “someone”—rather than political station, Lucrece stresses the anonymity of the sinner and the private nature of the sin. She wonders about precisely the point Donne made so clearly—“any man’s death diminishes me, because I am involved in mankind” (Donne 1990, p. 272). Tarquin’s sin is explicitly described as bringing his soul’s immortality into subjection to death (ll. 724–25), and this spiritual death diminishes Lucrece, not simply as victim, but as one of the “many moe” who must still suffer for “a private sin.” Tarquin’s sin does not just affect Lucrece because it was she he raped, nor does it only affect her because he is her political ruler. Both of these are certainly true, but she is also affected by his sin simply because in the economy of sin and its consequences that Shakespeare depicts, “the private pleasure of someone/Become[s] the public plague.”

This consideration sheds light on Shakespeare’s shifting of the penitential theme to focus upon Lucrece rather than Tarquin. Immediately before opening the door to Lucrece’s chamber, Tarquin endures a final, compressed reprisal of the “graceless . . . disputation/’Tween frozen conscience and hot-burning will” (ll. 246–47), a disputation that is the central focus of *The Rape of Lucrece* until Tarquin completes the rape. Tarquin even attempts to pray in this scene, though he quickly realizes the uselessness of prayer given his evil intent (ll. 342–50). Indeed, Tarquin’s struggles with prayer

foreshadow the more famous difficulties that Claudius faces in Act 3 of *Hamlet*—both rulers turn in some distress to prayer, but then abandon it as irreconcilable with their determinations to persist in their sinful courses. But the strangest element of Tarquin’s brief, prayerful scene occurs in a single line that prefigures the focus of the poem following the rape. Acknowledging that the heavens won’t assist him in the act, Tarquin declares,

Then Love and Fortune be my gods, my guide.
My will is backed with resolution:
Thoughts are but dreams till their effects be tried;
The blackest sin is cleared with absolution. (ll. 351–54)

Tarquin’s emphasis upon his firm resolution is entirely in keeping with what he has determined before. But his reference to absolution is sudden and strange. Does Tarquin hope to find absolution for this sin despite his ready acknowledgement that he is violating reason and morality, that he is impious and that it is the “blackest sin”? What sort of absolution does Tarquin envision?⁸ He does not develop this thought—the line sits singly, unexplained, and in the following stanza Tarquin lifts the latch and enters Lucrece’s chamber.

Tarquin’s brief reference to sin and absolution is particularly striking given the shift of focus in the latter half of *The Rape of Lucrece*. Readers might be forgiven for erroneously concluding that, based upon this reference to absolution, the work will include some examination of Tarquin’s guilty conscience after the act. Will he repent? Will he seek absolution? Will he undergo some penance? Indeed, Shakespeare almost teases his readers by alluding to this very thing after the rape is complete, dismissing Tarquin from the poem with the suggestive phrase, “He thence departs, a heavy convertite” (l. 743). Isn’t it reasonable to expect to see the effects of this willful choice upon Tarquin’s soul? If he has briefly alluded to absolution, will we witness a penitential movement or conversion? Oddly, contrition, penance, and the search for absolution are indeed the subject of the second half of the poem, but of course they all pertain to Lucrece rather than Tarquin. As Coppelia Kahn notes, “the central metaphor in the poem is that of a stain, which is repeatedly and forcefully attached to Lucrece” rather than to Tarquin (Kahn 1976, p. 47). When she kills herself in an effort to remove this stain—“The poisoned fountain clears itself again, / And why not I from this compelléd stain?” (ll. 1707–8)—she offers “her contrite sighs unto the clouds” (l. 1727). It is Lucrece who is contrite at the close of the poem. Paradoxically, after the rape the question becomes, can Lucrece find absolution, can she be cleansed of this “load of lust he left behind” (l. 734), can she find an adequate means of repenting or purging the evil that was done to her?

Shakespeare’s shift in focus from Tarquin to Lucrece after the rape moves our attention from predator to prey, from sinner to innocent victim. This shift is so surprising that it led Sam Hynes to declare, “It is an obvious weakness of the poem from this point of view that the subsequent suffering of Tarquin is ignored, that he leaves the action just at the point where he begins to interest us—it is as if we saw the last of Macbeth at his Act II exit” (Hynes 1959, p. 453). Rather than a flaw, however, this shift allows Shakespeare to emphasize his depiction of sin as something not only spiritually destructive for the sinner, and not just harmful for his immediate victim, but corrosive to the common good. In stressing this point, Shakespeare subtly changes some of the traditional points of interpretation of the Lucrece story. If Lucrece’s sense of stain in the poem might appear to suggest guilt on her part, and consequently look like a situation in which the victim is blamed for the rape, Shakespeare’s illustration of how “the private pleasure of someone/Become[s] the public plague of many moe”

⁸ Readers might well be reminded of other famous figures who attempt to manipulate confession and absolution by insincerely planning to repent while simultaneously determining to commit a sin. In Dante’s *Inferno*, Guido da Montefeltro, who accepted the pre-sin absolution from Boniface VIII, is told by a demon at the moment of his damnation, “One may not be absolved without repentance, /nor repent and wish to sin concurrently—/a simple contradiction not allowed” (Dante 2002, p. 505). This could be readily applied to Tarquin, as he determines to enter Lucrece’s chamber.

(ll. 1478–79) suggests something else. The focus upon the problems of conscience shifts from Tarquin to Lucrece; so too, while she suffers as his immediate victim, Shakespeare is deliberate to point out that she suffers as his political subject, and as a part of the spiritually corporate, communal body which together will suffer public plagues for private pleasure, a body in which for “one’s offence . . . many fall” (l. 1483). The poem suggests that Lucrece is a figure for the general destruction that sin effects, both politically and spiritually.⁹

Seeing Lucrece in this light clarifies why, despite her innocence, she is depicted in such a parallel manner to Tarquin.¹⁰ Like Tarquin who held “disputation/’Tween frozen conscience and hot burning will” (ll. 246–47), Lucrece “Holds disputation with each thing she views, / And to herself all sorrow doth compare” (ll. 1101–2). Just as Tarquin had debated within himself, “revolving/The sundry dangers of his will’s obtaining” (ll. 127–28), after the rape Lucrece “with herself is she in mutiny, / To live or die, which of the twain were better” (ll. 1153–54). And both characters’ souls are described in terms that pointedly echo Paul’s first epistle to the Corinthians, the same epistle in which Paul stressed that Christ is the head of a body that includes all Christians. Paul writes, “Know ye not that ye are the Temple of God, and that the spirit of God dwelleth in you? If any man defile the temple of God, him shall God destroy; for the temple of God is holy, which temple ye are” (1 Cor. 3:16–17). Shakespeare draws upon this description with Tarquin, writing,

... his soul’s fair temple is defaced,
To whose weak ruins muster troops of cares,
To ask the spotted princess how she fares.

She says, her subjects with foul insurrection
Have battered down her consecrated wall,
And by their mortal fault brought in subjection
Her immortality, and made her thrall
To living death and pain perpetual (ll. 719–26)

Not only is Tarquin’s soul a temple, but, now defaced by Tarquin’s sinful actions, it is subject to living death, echoing Paul’s warning that if any defiles the temple, “him God shall destroy.”¹¹ Similarly, when Lucrece determines to kill herself, she describes her soul, saying,

‘Her house is sacked, her quiet interrupted,
Her mansion battered by the enemy,
Her sacred temple spotted, spoiled, corrupted,
Grossly engirt with daring infamy.
Then let it not be called impiety,

If in this blemished fort I make some hole
Through which I may convey this troubled soul. (ll. 1170–6)

⁹ Sara E. Quay argues that after the rape, Lucrece “can no longer symbolize the wholeness she was originally constructed to reflect” and that “as the men in the poem hover over her bleeding body, they watch the life go out of their own social ‘body’ as well. The patriarchal system is significantly altered by the disruption of woman . . . the men are faced with the breakdown of their social system” (Quay 1995, pp. 7–8). See also (Kunat 2015).

¹⁰ For other points on Lucrece and Tarquin’s similarities, see (Kramer and Kaminsky 1977; Maus 1986, pp. 67–72).

¹¹ Sam Hynes has observed the ways that Tarquin’s rape is presented as a violation of himself: “the significant rape is the rape of Tarquin’s soul” (Hynes 1959, p. 453).

Despite the obvious and radical dissimilarities of Tarquin and Lucrece, Shakespeare's poem insists that we see them as reflecting certain important aspects of the other. Lucrece, though victim, is much like Tarquin in being subjected to violently disordered passions that violate her and disturb her conscience.

Shakespeare constructs this parallel between Tarquin and Lucrece to show how sin and its effects, here including a sense of guilt and the desire for cleansing absolution, move out from the sinner to the victim and beyond. By shifting the focus to Lucrece after the sin, we are forced to consider the way in which the sin of just one man, even if a "private pleasure" (l. 1478) can indeed become the "public plague of many moe" (l. 1479). The movement from Tarquin's initial internal struggle to Lucrece's subsequent guilt to the final parade of "her bleeding body thorough Rome, / [. . .] to publish Tarquin's foul offense" (ll. 1851–52) illustrates this expansion and movement from the deliberations within one conscience to the effects of those deliberations, played out on a large and most public stage. Collin Burrow touches upon this dynamic, writing, "It has been said that the poem is caught uncomfortably between two incompatible ethical models: Lucrece has a soul, and a profound sense of inward guilt; she also has a keen sense of family honour and is overwhelmed by the shame that goes with the violation of that public honour by Tarquin. Is the poem concerned with interior guilt or public shame, with insides or outsides?" (Shakespeare 2002, p. 59). The answer is that it is deliberately concerned with both; the entire structure of the poem, the specific parallels between Tarquin and Lucrece, and Lucrece's very language about sin, all contribute to the depiction of sin in the outward movement of its effects.

All of these elements are brought together with heightened effect when Lucrece meditates upon the painting of the fall of Troy. As Lucrece waits for Collantine to arrive, she turns to the painting as "means to mourn some newer way" (l. 1365). This is an important moment in a poem that consists largely of "claustrophobic interiority" (Shakespeare 2002, p. 56). When Lucrece seeks out the painting, she is preparing to move from deliberation within herself to public confession, a move from the internal to the external, from the meditative to the confessional and exhortative. The painting serves as a means of making this transition, both for the poem as a whole and for Lucrece in particular. Lucrece searches the painting "To find a face where all distress is stell'd," and she finds it in Hecuba, who is gazing upon Priam as Pyrrhus kills him. Meditating upon this work of art helps Lucrece move beyond her own internal struggles and sorrows:

... all this time hath overslipp'd her thought
That she with painted images hath spent,
Being from the feeling of her own grief brought
By deep surmise of others' detriment,
Losing her woes in shows of discontent.

It easeth some, though none it ever cured,
To think their dolor others have endured. (ll. 1576–82)

The painting draws Lucrece outside of herself; she is "brought" from "the feeling of her own grief" to a larger perspective that transcends the individual. Here, art does not remove sorrows, but eases them; it challenges Lucrece "to think" more largely about her grief, placing her particular distress in relation to others. The painting reorders Lucrece's passions by forcing her to relate her own thoughts to her community, and in this respect it reinforces the sense of a corporate, shared existence. It is the specific means of intellectual movement from the internal to the external, from the individual to the general, from the subjective to something more universal.¹²

¹² Discussing Lucrece's final confession and suicide, Christopher Tilmouth has suggested that "this alleviation of paralyzing shame is also a renewal of her conscience, but a renewal deliberately performed under a public gaze. She gathers an audience

The most striking and important aspect of Lucrece's "deep surmise of others' detriment" (l. 1579) is her finding Hecuba as the correlative figure of her sorrow, and her attack upon Helen as "the strumpet that began this stir" (l. 1471).¹³ Aside from the title *The Rape of Lucrece*, the word "rape" only appears twice in the poem; first, it appears in a brief catalog of evil things that Opportunity allows, including also envy, treason, and murder (l. 909). The second occurrence of the word is in the initial description of the painting: "Priam's Troy, / Before the which is drawn the power of Greece, / For Helen's rape the city to destroy" (ll. 1367–69). "Helen's rape" led to the destruction of Troy, the destruction of a polis—a cataclysmic, apocalyptic event for ancient Greeks. And regardless of the degree of Helen's complicity in her abduction or her love for Paris, the Trojan prince's rape of Helen, like Tarquin's rape of Lucrece, was a violation of her family as well as her self, a violation the price for which his entire city would pay. Paris' treatment of Helen is a perfect instance of when "the private pleasure of someone/Become[s] the public plague of many moe" (ll. 1478–79). Shouldn't Lucrece find her situation in some way parallel to Helen's?

Despite their similarities, Lucrece identifies not with Helen, but with Hecuba. What's Hecuba to her, or she to Hecuba? Hecuba, a figure in whom "the painter had anatomized/Time's ruin, beauty's wrack, and grim care's reign" (ll. 1450–51), witnesses the destruction of her family and her city, all as a consequence of the lustful actions of another. Hecuba, in whom sorrow is anatomized, is decidedly innocent. Lucrece meditates on this precise fact, stating,

Lo, here weeps Hecuba, here Priam dies . . .

And one man's lust these many lives confounds.

Had doting Priam checked his son's desire

Troy had been bright with fame, and not with fire. (ll. 1485–91)

Paris, of course, is primarily responsible for the tragedy, but Priam bears partial responsibility as well. Both of them die—but the figure of sorrow is Hecuba, who witnesses, suffers, and weeps. Lucrece's sense of affiliation with Hecuba, rather than with Helen, further underscores the ways in which the painting serves to adjust Lucrece's sorrow and her self-understanding.¹⁴ If she focused upon herself solely as the victim of Tarquin's lust, and the sorrows that his violence have brought upon her in particular, Lucrece might indeed have found Helen as the figure whose sorrows at least partially reflected her own. But the painting draws Lucrece out of her own grief and moves her toward an understanding of the general, and Hecuba, whose woe is repeatedly associated with the destruction of the city as a whole, becomes the figure who reflects her own sorrows. In presenting Hecuba in this manner, Shakespeare was working within a firmly established tradition that represented the Trojan queen as "a *mater dolorosa*, the epitome of grief and human suffering" (Westney 1984, p. 436). Indeed, this literary tradition generally presented "the story of the sorrowing Hecuba as a mirror in which human beings might see themselves" (Westney 1984, p. 444). Lucrece certainly sees herself in Hecuba, and thus she also sees herself in relation to the communal whole, due to the painting's depiction of the destruction of the polis that rages around Hecuba. Shakespeare's lengthy description of the whole painting underscores this point—sorrows are shown not in isolation, but in the context of woe much larger than one individual's experience of it. Seeing one's self in Hecuba can have definite

for her final act and casts it in public terms" (Tilmouth 2009, p. 510). He too sees in *The Rape of Lucrece* an exploration of the conscience as private, on the one hand, and as something that "sets the self within a field of social relations" (p. 514) on the other.

¹³ John Roe observes that "whereas it is consistent that Tarquin should partake of the qualities of both Sinon and Paris, that Lucrece should find herself caught between Hecuba and Helen seems at the same time unfair and yet unavoidable" (Roe 1994, p. 114). She may be "caught between" them for a moment, but there is little doubt that she rejects comparison with Helen and finds enough likeness with Hecuba that she can give voice to her silent sorrows.

¹⁴ Mary Jo Kietzman similarly observes that "the women are united by a shared experience of despair coupled with the position of subjection from which both view events. Lucrece's identification with Hecuba is an act that involves self-transformation" (Kietzman 1999, p. 39).

consequences, however. Tanya Pollard notes that “Euripides’ *Hecuba* was by far the most popular of the Greek plays printed, translated, and performed in sixteenth-century Europe,” and while throughout most of Euripides’ play, Hecuba “evokes tragic pathos,” she also “points to another model of tragedy: the triumph of action, and in particular, of revenge” (Pollard 2012, pp. 1064, 1067).¹⁵ Shakespeare’s Lucrece follows this model: she moves from lament to the action of public confession, with the clearly stated intent to “purge [her] impure tale” (l. 1076) and to get “revenge on him who made [her] stop [her] breath” (l. 1180).

Lucrece finds a reflection of herself in Hecuba, not as another victim of rape, but in the fact that Hecuba herself is a figure for “guiltless souls” suffering “guilty woe” (l. 1482). In this respect, Hecuba represents the suffering inflicted upon mankind in its corporate nature, both as a body politic and as the suffering body of Christ. And it is in precisely this sense that Shakespeare turns again to the figure of Hecuba in *Hamlet*. If it is impossible to identify exactly what Gabriel Harvey saw that pleased “the wiser sort” in *The Rape of Lucrece* and *Hamlet*, the works bear a close relationship with respect to their depiction of sin and its effects upon both the individual and the community. In both, we find the ruler ineffectively struggling with his conscience as he turns to prayer, and these troubles of conscience are transposed into the person whom the ruler has wronged. Furthermore, as the victims struggle with the consequences of sins that have been committed against them, a meditation upon an artistic representation of the fall of Troy becomes the direct means of moving from the internal to the external, and of communicating matters of private conscience in a public setting.

As we have noted, Claudius’ failed attempt at prayer in Act 3 echoes Tarquin’s failure at prayer immediately before he opens Lucrece’s chamber door. And just as Tarquin’s evils are explored in the political context of a ruler corrupting his subjects, so too the political consequences of Claudius’ sins are evident throughout the play.¹⁶ But it is Hamlet’s struggles with conscience and proper moral action, not Claudius’, that lie at the heart of the work. This is, on the face of it, a curious focus. Hamlet is the one wronged, both on a personal level and as a member of the suffering political state. But it is he rather than Claudius who bears the more profound burden as a consequence of Claudius’ sin. “The time is out of joint” (1.5.189), and “Something is rotten in the state of Denmark” (1.4.90) as a result of Claudius’ murder of King Hamlet, but it falls to Hamlet “to set it right” (1.5.190). The profound difficulty of the task enjoined upon Hamlet is not lost on the prince nor the audience: how can Hamlet get revenge but “taint not [his] mind” (1.5.85)? How can he keep his conscience clean?¹⁷ Indeed, the mission is so morally problematic that Hamlet and his audience must wonder if the ghost “may be a devil” (2.2.518). And even after confirming the general truth of the ghost’s narrative, Hamlet still faces the difficulty of finding a morally acceptable way to accomplish revenge.¹⁸ This preoccupation is stressed in the final scene, where Hamlet not only claims that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern “are not near my conscience” (5.2.57), but also asks “is’t not perfect conscience” (5.2.66) to kill Claudius? Though Hamlet and Lucrece are the victims of very different sins, they find themselves similarly compelled to struggle with the effects of others’ sins, and with grave questions of conscience provoked

¹⁵ Pollard offers a helpful account of Hecuba’s place in the literary traditions of sixteenth-century England, and how Shakespeare works in that tradition. Curiously, though, Pollard only gives the briefest of mention to *The Rape of Lucrece*, devoting the great majority of her attention to Hamlet’s Hecuba.

¹⁶ András Kiséry argues that “Claudius is the character in the play most exercised by the public perception of political acts and political figures” (Kiséry 2016, p. 83).

¹⁷ For Shakespeare’s depiction of revenge as it relates to his classical sources, see (Miola 1992, pp. 32–67). For a classic argument that Elizabethans, as Christians, would have thought private revenge morally inadmissible see (Prosser 1971). For considerations of *Hamlet* and revenge in relation to Reformation theological debates and changes, see (Rist 2008, pp. 27–74; Curran 2006).

¹⁸ Catherine Belsey suggests that while “private revenge is regarded as a sin, there remains the public problem of Claudius’ crimes, and here conscience confronts a new and more complex difficulty” (Belsey 1979, p. 132). Belsey identifies some of the important ways in which the matters of conscience in *Hamlet* are both private and public, both internal and externally related to the political state.

by these circumstances. Directly before killing herself, Lucrece concludes her confession to Collatine by asking a series of questions:

What is the quality of my offence,
 Being constrained with dreadful circumstance?
 May my pure mind with the foul act dispense,
 My low-declinéd honour to advance?
 May any terms acquit me from this chance? (ll. 1702–5)

These questions find an echo in Hamlet's struggle to not "taint" his mind, and to find an acceptable moral course of action despite his difficult situation.

Amidst these thematic similarities, the clearest and most important unifying element between *Hamlet* and *The Rape of Lucrece* is the role of artistic representations of Hecuba and the fall of Troy. In *Lucrece*, the painting of the fall of Troy lacks words, and Lucrece gives tongue to the sorrows depicted in the work. In *Hamlet*, the opposite is true—rather than a painting, all we get are words, drawn from a play. However, the play "was never acted, or if it was, not above once" (2.2.358–9), and the speech that Hamlet "chiefly loved" (2.2.368) is not so much dramatic as it is descriptive. *Hamlet's* representation of the fall of Troy is entirely verbal, lacking any stage action or physical representation of the event. Indeed, even within the unnamed play that was perhaps never acted, the whole speech was "Aeneas' talk to Dido" (2.2.369)—so the play would never have enacted the fall of Troy, but only related it. In *Lucrece*, we have a nonspeaking picture, and in *Hamlet* we have a speaking, descriptive nonpicture.

Whichever way Shakespeare explores the fall of Troy, however, Hecuba takes center stage.¹⁹ Lucrece had turned to the painting "for means to mourn some newer way" (l. 1365), and in Hecuba found a face "where all distress and dolour dwelled" (l. 1446). Hamlet turns to the subject by asking the player, "Come, give us a taste of your quality. Come, a passionate speech" (2.2.355–6). But while he remembers that "it begins with Pyrrhus" (2.2.373), he is particularly anxious for the description of Hecuba in her sorrows. When Polonius protests that the speech is too long, Hamlet quiets him, asking the player, "Prithee, say on. He's for a jig or a tale of bawdry, or he sleeps. Say on; come to Hecuba" (2.2.421–3). When the player finishes his description of Hecuba, Hamlet responds to Polonius' request "Prithee, no more" with agreement, "'Tis well." (2.2.443). Clearly, Hecuba is the figure who captures Hamlet's attention.²⁰ This is further underscored by his meditation in the following soliloquy, when he wonders about the player's passionate response to the lines describing Hecuba.

But, like Lucrece's, Hamlet's focus upon Hecuba initially seems misplaced. After all, Pyrrhus is a young prince who has lost a father and is enacting his bloody revenge. Priam is an old king being murdered. These figures might reasonably be expected to resonate with Hamlet. But the player describes Hecuba's sorrow as so powerful that it would have even moved "passion in Gods" (2.2.440), and that any human onlooker "'Gainst Fortune's state would treason have pronounced" (2.2.433). This claim is borne out, as the player is moved to blushes and tears by the lines he recites, and Hamlet consequently wonders at Hecuba and the player, and denounces himself, his lack of passion, and his inaction. In the player's speech, Hecuba simultaneously figures as an innocent individual personally wronged by the violence inflicted upon her family, and as a representation of the larger, innocent, suffering political body. It is in these respects that she appears as a more appropriate parallel for Hamlet than either Pyrrhus or Priam. And clearly, as in *The Rape of Lucrece*, Shakespeare draws on the

¹⁹ Collin Burrow discusses ways in which Shakespeare's representation of Hecuba in *Lucrece* and in *Hamlet* draws on both typical early modern rhetorical lessons and on Shakespeare's own reading of Virgil; see (Burrow 2013, pp. 62–71). See also (Enterline 2012, pp. 120–39).

²⁰ Part of the reason for this is that, as Marjorie Garber observes, "the desperate and grieving Hecuba, Priam's wife, running barefoot up and down, is sharply contrasted to Gertrude, who married again so quickly after her husband's death" (Garber 2004, p. 499).

literary tradition that developed from Euripides' *Hecuba*. Hecuba is a figure of sorrows that acts as a mirror in which Hamlet can see himself, and arrive at deeper self-knowledge. In Euripides' play, Hecuba finally turns from lament to revenge upon Polymestor, the king of Thrace who killed her son. "Capable of melting audiences and destroying kings, Hecuba offers a model of tragedy with both emotional and political power" (Pollard 2012, p. 1074) and Hamlet clearly follows this model.

Hecuba's sorrows, stirring up the player's passions, subsequently act upon Hamlet's, and instigate his move from internal impasse to action. Hamlet's meditation upon Hecuba and the player leads him to conclude that he should not "unpack [his] heart with words/and fall a-cursing like a very drab" (2.2.504–5). Instead of struggling entirely within himself, Hamlet turns outward to catch Claudius' conscience. Like Lucrece, Hamlet responds to Hecuba by turning from the internal to the external, by turning from his own questions of conscience to the question of the guilt of the king. Indeed, this movement is cast explicitly in terms of gaining verifiable knowledge; Hamlet insists that given the dubious nature of the ghost's intentions, he'll have "grounds/more relative" (2.2.523–4) than just its story and his "prophetic soul" (1.5.41). His subsequent enlistment of Horatio's assistance in observing Claudius watch the play confirms his ready action in pursuit of a more objective understanding.

In his meditations upon Hecuba's sorrows, Hamlet finds a way to order his own mixed passions, directing his energies toward a meaningful end.²¹ As in Lucrece's case, these ends have to do with the conscience of another whose evils are affecting the whole state. Hamlet's sudden and deadly actions that follow so quickly upon the player's speech reflect the degree to which Hecuba has changed him. Of course, Hamlet's subsequent bloody course, like Lucrece's, still presents grave moral questions—if in Act 5 he continues to demonstrate concern for doing something in "perfect conscience" (5.2.66), audiences must be troubled by the deadly rashness that Hamlet praises (5.2.7).²² Indeed, John Curran suggests that Hamlet's assertion of "perfect conscience" in Act 5 is a reductive simplification of his earlier questions of conscience, and "bizarrely incongruous with the conditions of his life" (Curran 2018, p. 2).²³ Nevertheless, Hamlet, like Lucrece, is finally concerned with the future of the state, and seeks to explain himself and clear his name. He tells Horatio: "report me and my cause aright/To the unsatisfied" (5.2.317–8), implying that such a confession would accomplish satisfaction, that it would set things right.²⁴ His vehement insistence upon having Horatio tell the story shows how it preoccupies his final thoughts. Even when he is distracted by Fortinbras' arrival, and expresses some hope for the future of Denmark in approving the fact that Fortinbras will likely become king, Hamlet still insists, "So tell him, with th'occurents more and less" (5.2.335). Hamlet wants all told, and wants it all told to the future ruler.

Neither *The Rape of Lucrece* nor *Hamlet* offer fully satisfactory solutions to the problems of conscience that each depict. Indeed, the very lack of any clear resolution to questions of conscience, sin, and absolution reflects the complicated and contradictory understandings of these matters prevalent in Reformation England.²⁵ Nevertheless, Shakespeare consistently depicts sin as something that affects more than just the sinner's soul and relationship with God. In both works, the focus upon the struggles of conscience shifts from the sinner to his victim, and Shakespeare emphasizes not just the particular

²¹ Marjorie Garber describes the pivotal nature of Hamlet's listening to the player's speech, writing, "Here at the play's midpoint it is his last glance backward, and it accomplishes something crucial for both the character and the play. Through the players, though fiction, he finds not only emotion—a way of engaging and accessing his own suppressed and unarticulated feelings—but also what he so badly needs and longs for: action. He is ready to catch the conscience of the King" (Garber 2004, p. 499).

²² Belsey argues, "the play as a whole suggests that Hamlet's mind is tainted—not in the sense that he is mad, but that he is inevitably corrupted by his mission . . . Hamlet is in no sense responsible for the situation in which he finds himself, but he becomes tainted by it, killing Polonius, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, and, indirectly, Ophelia. We can see why: as pawns of Claudius, they represent the enemy. But their deaths are evidence that Hamlet has lost his innocence. It appears that to act morally he must act violently, and yet he cannot act violently and retain his integrity" (Belsey 1979, p. 148).

²³ See also (Curran 2006, pp. 201–18).

²⁴ See (Hirschfeld 2014, pp. 65–93).

²⁵ See (Stegner 2016, pp. 1–42 and 174–80). See also (Kaufman 2011), who provides ample examples of both "Calvinist and Catholic pietists whose passions for structuring desire expressed themselves much as Shakespeare's Hamlet does" (p. 444).

ways in which a sinner's immediate victim might experience the effects of that sin, but also the ways in which sin harms the communal life of mankind, in both theological and political senses. The body politic and the body of Christ are wounded by sin, and we witness the tragic struggle for "guiltless souls [to] be freed from guilty woe" (l. 1482). In Shakespeare's works, no man is an island, and while trials of sin and conscience are depicted with a rich inward turn, they are never confined entirely to the individual. And in demonstrating this understanding of the expansive nature of the effects of sin and the problems of conscience that it gives rise to, Shakespeare employs an artistic representation of the figure of Hecuba sorrowing as a means of navigating the vexed relationship between an individual's private conscience and his participation in the common good. When Shakespeare confronts the corporate effects of sin, he turns to Hecuba to show that the sorrows of innocent victims may be fruitful, and that artistic representations of these sins and their resultant sorrows may be markedly effective in bringing individuals to look beyond themselves, and understand their places within a larger body.

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