A Psychological Reading of the Rhetoric in Shakespeare’s *The Rape of Lucrece*

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I

Shakespeare is commonly acknowledged to be one of the greatest writers of rhetoric. One major reason that general readers attempt to read the original text of the bard is that so much is lost in translation. The translation usually cannot retain subtle nuances embedded, for instance, in the original rhetoric such as metaphors and puns. This is especially true of Shakespeare’s narrative poems. It is important to pay attention to his choice of words not only to enjoy his work to the fullest but to grasp the core ideas of the work. While much scholarly research has been done on the sources *Lucrece* draws on and the historical and political implications at work in the poem, not much of it has been done on the dynamics of the poem itself. In fact as Weaver notes, “The most significant criticism of *Lucrece* in the last fifty years has made the form of the poem a secondary consideration and focused instead on decoding its politics. Following a ground breaking study by Coppélia Kahn, scholars have reconstructed legal and social discourses upon which Shakespeare draws in his representation of Lucrece” (421). In addition, the majority of
recent criticisms mainly tend to explore Lucrece’s despair of being raped and the damage the sexual violence causes to the private and to the public. However, it is important to notice that the first part of the poem—as one can devide it into three actions—is devoted to describing Tarquin’s mind with the bard’s use of rhetoric illuminating Tarquin’s psychology. In this paper, I will explore how Shakespeare’s wordplay together with the construction of the poem leading up to Tarquin’s rape reveals his mind.

II Tarquin’s Motivation

Many critics have pointed out that Tarquin’s sexual conquest primarily stems from his desire to outdo his competitor and friend Collatine. As Clarke argues, “Tarquin’s motivation is not sexual; it is prompted by male competition, and it is a power struggle, not so much with Lucrece herself, but with her husband Collatine, to whom she ‘belongs’” (185). That Tarquin has already made his decision to carry out the deed even before he actually meets her is a clue supporting this observation. It could also be said that “. . . in Lucrece gender roles are almost oppressively conventional: a feminine eloquence that cannot move a male will is pitted against an appetite that simply sees and seeks to take what it wants” (Burrow 93). Not only do Lucrece’s words pleading with Tarquin to take pity on her follow the socio-cultural convention but also the descriptions of Lucrece’s virtues leading up to it. Shakespeare’s use of rhetoric in Lucrece has to do with what Vickers says about canonical legacy. This