

A VERY COMMONPLACE BUT PAINFUL CASE:
A STUDY OF *VENUS AND ADONIS*
AND *THE RAPE OF LUCRECE*

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When a woman ventures to allure a man into making love to her more than one thing can transpire. If the woman is ugly, her unattractiveness may prompt the man to spurn her. In this case the male's ego could be swayed to the point of constraining him to infer the proposal to be an obnoxious one simply because he, instinctively, assumes he is entitled to enjoy a better looking woman in his bed. When the woman in question is both young and beautiful the predicament changes not a little, but a great deal, in relation to the man's riposte, not to say society en general. In case of rejection, independently of reasons, a note of immodesty will most likely strike the man's ego merely because owing to her beauty she is bound to be considered a meritorious prize. If he accepts to be seduced by her, hardly anybody will reason in terms of a purely libidinous aggression, not to say rape, but in terms of snatching a permissible advantage of the situation. Only when the man says no because he is not aroused by her beauty, could he then stimulate uncomfortable emotions not only in women but also in men.

Of course, we are not speaking of love but of sexual desire, or lust if you will. Since the two poems we are going to examine in the light of lust offer no other alternative, this detail must be clarified for they have absolutely nothing to do with love but with lechery and violence. Properly their thematic nucleus shows the way in which society looks at both brutal and unwanted sexual intercourse, and sexual harassment, according to the gender of the person who is sexually pestered or raped.

When the victim of sexual abuse is a woman the panorama changes and not a little. The most elementary reason justifying this change must be sought in the unquestionable fact that a woman can be raped, not a male. Bearing this in mind, it is evident there is a technical problem when it comes to sex, lust and violence: a quandary which under no circumstances must be slighted, since,

when doing so, to speak of being unwittingly but grossly unpragmatic is a must, in addition to the fact of becoming socially and appropriately gruesome, not to say thrillingly biased. If a woman is raped or merely seduced, indeed, not only her honour is at stake but that of her family, due, mostly, to both social and biological reasons: she can become pregnant, not her rapist or debaucher. Antithetically to this, when a man is ravished by some lascivious lady, nobody will consider him a stained human being not only because to prove the contrary is insurmountable during his wedding night, but also because in case of pregnancy he can, unlike a woman, if so he wishes, profess the child not to be his. Moreover, to maintain that assuming the prospect of a man committing suicide because he couldn't manage rebuffing a wanton lady, notwithstanding her behaviour, is very difficult. What is conflicting in this type of drama argues not against but in favour of this drastic affirmation which by no means constitute a trifling assertion: had Lucrece being a man, surely she would not have killed herself. On moral grounds, however, there should not exist any type of disconnecting line to clearly separate both situations on grounds of gender.

Bearing these preliminary contentions in mind, we wish to examine two poems written by W. Shakespeare: *Venus and Adonis* and *The Rape of Lucrece*. Two poems dealing with rape, seemingly different and yet not all that different when overlooking not only the Ovidian touch that singularizes the former but also the Senecan one which permeates the latter. If we have to speak of differences, they have to be linguistic, nothing more. Certainly Shakespeare has used dissimilar linguistic strategies, the result being thus an ambiguous disagreement ensuing from linguistic selection rather than from the reality intrinsic to both predicaments. Yet, this in itself constitutes a dangerous fallacy, for it begs a rather vexing question, that of the manipulation of linguistic rules and tropes according to gender. Thus it becomes an issue of veneers: impositions, as it happens with *Venus and Adonis*, dictated not by a pragmatic approach to the thematic core of the text but by social mores and poetic conventions, not to say the moral fibre of the narrator.

In both poems what provokes lust and therefore the ultimate death of the victims is beauty. Adonis, very much like Lucrece, is young, beautiful, and chaste. Ignoring, or putting aside on a musty cupboard the fact we are dealing, in the case of *Venus and Adonis*, with a myth, we hope to be able to bring the myth down to the ground of the pragmatics of the commonplace.¹ Once this

done, we shall not treat Venus as the goddess of love, begging love, but as a married lady trying to seduce a young and chaste boy who, in turn, does not want to be seduced. We shall also disregard the sources of *The Rape* for the very same reason we are overlooking the mythical in *Venus and Adonis*.

The bringing down mechanism compels to consider as point of departure of this inquiry both setting and time. *Venus and Adonis* takes place in the open, whereas the setting of the scandalous act of *The Rape* is private, closed and therefore pragmatically claustrophobic: a room, a bed with a sleeping lady in it protected by curtains, and a man who wants her at any price. The action in *Venus and Adonis* takes place during the day while that of *The Rape* at night. The function of the oxymorons open/closed, public/private, day/night, moon/sun, awake/sleeping is evident. It has nonetheless a subtle but distorting effect, so sharp and so well organized that it serves to overshadow what is really authentic in *Venus and Adonis*, bringing thus into the limelight the purely dramatic, not moral, in *The Rape*. Notwithstanding time or place, both narrators have depicted two unwilling human beings who have become objects of obsessive desire simply because they are lovely and chaste. When pondering both Adonis's wishes and the setting in which Venus approaches him, his predicament cannot be more dissimilar to that delineated in *The Rape*. Adonis has been placed in an open space, in an ample stretch of ground illuminated with natural light to see where to go. Accordingly the feelings of inevitability are not so overpowering in *Venus and Adonis* as in *The Rape*, but to feel thus is unfair, since a pragmatic approach to death proves the contrary.

Coincidence or not, the fact is that the opening line of *Venus and Adonis* refers to the sun: a polysemic metaphor, an image that is also astutely manipulated in *The Rape* but in a very different context however similar the plane of meaning is. Here the sun is real ("Even as the sun with purple-colour'd face/ had ta'en his last leave of the weeping morn,"),² not a trope of Adonis's sexual appeal in the eyes of the sexually aroused Venus, as it is the case with Tarquin. But, in spite of the pervading ironic tone that suffuses *Venus and Adonis*, well achieved by means of the Ovidian rhetoric used by the poet to describe the course of events, pragmatically speaking, the actual fact is that with or without the trope, this morning is not going to be like any other morning for Adonis. Although the trope is no more than a poetic rendering of a conventional vehicle of a life-giving image, it is effective regardless of the way in which we decode it. One level of meaning invites to see the tears of that day as semiotic

signs foreshadowing what is going to happen that specific "day" or "morning": that they both are not going to see Adonis alive when the sun rises next "day" in the "morning". Another request is that of a cognitive understanding of "weeping" in terms of alienation, and therefore in terms of time, being time a component causing misery since time is separating the sun from the early morning, a time of day that has left behind the hindmost vestige of the shadows of the night. Both exegesis are poetically climactic because a realistic, not to say a purely utilitarian decodification of the poetic discourse shows how time waxes into the murdering instrument that kills Adonis: the time Venus forces him to waste spurning her sexual advances. Be this what it may, the irony is superb: the oxymoron heat/water shows how ineffective the "morning" tears are in the face of the pitiful destiny of a young man whose lack of culpability is the same than that of Lucrece, not to say more.

To think about a ruthless predicament, or demise, when it comes to Adonis's fate is atypical. The general tendency is that of reasoning in terms of sex and so tags such as those of *hubris* or silliness on his part: it is not for nothing that the poet has depicted a boy conceited enough to say no to a lovely woman who wants nothing of him except sex. With this type of logic naturally enough the tears cannot last long. The heat is too strong and prosaic, but equally poetic because it emanates from the body of a woman who is young and glorious to look at.

The language that has been employed to describe Venus's heat is different from that used to depict Tarquin's. These rhetorical means therefore govern, of course, the way in which heat, with all its semantic corollaries, is perceived, and yet it is the same kind of heat.³ To accept this demands seeing Venus's wooing in a different light than that prescribed by society, beginning first with the rejection of the myth, and ignoring after Adonis gender, altogether a demanding recognition to achieve unless a change in the perception of roles and sex takes place, a transformation that must be both socially and poetically genuine. A transposition that must be solid enough to render plausible moving towards a pragmatic parity, the type of parity that, willingly or not, Shakespeare attains in spite of his ornamented rhetoric not to mention his frequent classical tropes. Part of the problem inherent in the challenge of achieving a pragmatic reading of the poem has been put forward by the poet himself, who clearly knows that the trope "weeping morn" is too velvety, too

archetypal, to have an enduring effect, hence all that remains is a conventional poetic cliché. A flamboyant poetic paradigm which, besides its flexibility, functions at a primary level of significance like a trivial embellishment, so that what emerges is not a pragmatic reality, that of an experienced woman bent on seducing a boy, but a bucolic setting implied not in the physical description of the place but in the opening trope of the poem. Yet, despite being weak, banal or easy to forget, it is paradoxical and ironic due to its internal poetic value, which is immense: nature is "weeping" because an act against the natural order of things is about to be committed in an open and bucolic space, the type of literary setting that hardly leaves room for violence or unwanted sex because it is apocalyptic.

Bucolic or not, banal or worthy, the trope insidiously points in the direction of transgressions, however light or short lived, tolerated by society and so poetically admissible to the point of being, at times, poetry what seems to falsify the truth native to the poetic core of the poem. Water in the shape of tears become towards the end of the poem a corollary of nature surpassing the trope "morning dew", for the tears, combined with the sun's hue, function as pragmatic marks of real mourning in the face of death, drastically ironic since death at the beginning is no more than a poetic plausibility that becomes pragmatically real in the end, accurately signalled by the newly born sun who has a "purple-colour'd face", the hue of untimely death, a merciful being trying to ease the morning's pain with what he has, heat. A heat that is healthy when compared with that of Venus, which is destructive.

Although there is a paradoxical abuse of poetic clichés in the inaugurating tropes of *Venus and Adonis*, the irrefutable truth is that a boy is going to be detained by a wanton woman, being the aftermath of her approach more drastic for Adonis than that faced by Lucrece, since her death is a voluntary one, whereas that of Adonis is not.

In both works the poets bring to the surface structure their thematic nucleus without much of a preamble. The almost direct entrance into the topic contrasts with the way in which the narrators stop continuously to offer photographic details of both the bodies and thoughts of the victims and their assailants. In *Venus and Adonis* the first person to appear on scene is the victim: "Rose-cheek'd Adonis hied him to the chase./ Hunting he lov'd, but love he laugh'd to scorn" (*Venus and Adonis*, 3-4). This presentation seems to be applicable to men only. Adonis is no exception regarding love in this

fashion. Troilus feels the same, thus Troilus is an antisocial fool, and so is Adonis. In both cases the narrators' poetic measure of their sentiments is negative precisely because it is social and thus normatively poetic, not pragmatic. The poetic *double entendre* inherent in the lyrical disapproval of Adonis's attitude, leading to an ambiguous rejection of Adonis's right to feel as he does, stems from social rules, the reader's gender, and conception of sex for sex's sake. All these items may induce to question the worth of poetic justice, for the tragic end of Adonis presupposes that poetic justice is a fallacy, not the contrary, unless the falling into same trap that the poet has, or pretends to have fallen into, that of translating sex for love, is almost inevitable.

If gender were changed, surely the poet would not have treated Adonis's scorn as he does. Poetic conventions would hardly permit him to say that a woman laughs and scorns *love* when in fact he is talking about lust instead of genuine love. A decent lady must laugh at the folly inherent in sex, otherwise she is not chaste. Wherefore, when a woman is not virtuous seldom will she admit it, since the maintenance of the established social order does not permit her to do such a thing openly. So, what is "scorn" in a man is virtue in a woman, and what is censurable hilarity in a young fellow is, repeatedly, modesty in the weaker sex. Adonis is both mindless and arrogant because he says no to a beautiful wedded woman, while a charming young girl is spotless and virtuous when expressing the same viewpoint if coveted by a man.

The way in which the poet has treated the problem of genre is ingenious: a man is not the wooer, but a woman who "like a bold-fac'd suitor gins to woo him" (*Venus and Adonis*, 10). Certainly the poet's sagacity lies in the fact that a woman cannot court a man in this fashion because this type of linguistic construct is not feminine. It is not for nothing that Venus does not approach Adonis as a woman does, but "like" a "bold-fac'd suitor". Only a man can be, and is, a "bold-fac'd suitor" when wooing the lady he yearns to conquer. The antithetic, however subtle, handling of sexual perspectives according to gender is conspicuous enough so that it has to be treated in the light of a humorous if not trivial poetic parody of sexual seduction; a travesty that begins to take full force in the following stanza:

Three fairer than myself' thus she began,
The field's chief flower, sweet above compare,

Stain to all nymphs, more lovely than a man,
 More white and red than doves or roses are,
 Nature that made thee, with herself at strife
 Saith that the world hath ending with thy life.
 (*Venus & Adonis*, 7-12).

The inversion of roles renders the situation poetically comic, not to say fictitious. She implicitly talks first in terms of her own beauty to say he is three times more beautiful than herself. The numbering, if not the irony inherent in the figure she uses, gives her comparison such a mythical undertone, such a degree of artifice that it becomes meaningless in spite of being poetic. How can a person be three times more beautiful than another? Why three and not twice? This numeric hyperbole leads to a possible poetic impossibility, that of delineating him more lovely than a man: a not inconceivable probability that is dramatic because there is a great deal of truth in it: Adonis is a boy not a man. Emphasis on his lack of sexual maturity places Venus -or any other woman- in a very unfavourable light. Yet, notwithstanding being objectionable, its gradation depends on gender, for it does not seem to be the same to try to seduce an inexperienced young girl "more lovely than a [woman]" because she is a girl, than trying with a young man.

The trope "red and white" sounds silly when applied to a man while it is exemplary and legitimate if used to describe a lady's beauty. When Tarquin perceives Lucrece's face in terms of a battle of these two hues, there cannot be any kind of objection to the way he sees her, only to his reaction, that of wanting her independently of her feelings. Venus seems to be merely silly due to her longing to be possessed by a boy whose face is "white and red", whereas Tarquin is odious and bestial on account of the fact that he is offering Lucrece what Venus wants of Adonis: sexual penetration. Lucrece's refusal is heroic while Adonis's is stupid, or at least faulty. A cosmetic-like reading of both poems prompts to see the victims in this light, nonetheless an attentive and pragmatic cogitation on the inverted meaning of the oxymorons under discussion, operates as a dissuading measure when it comes to feel so certain about what is expected in the way of feelings in regard to the quarries' brutal death.

When removing from *Venus & Adonis* what is usually poetically denoted by natural light, warmth, open fields and so forth, a not so humorous

picture takes shape because these are constituents which, indeed, must be attended to from a pragmatic point of view. Of course achieving this demands to forget their lyrical disposition: only this makes credible Venus's depiction as a hot animal transpiring like an average human being, transcending, at the same time, what is prosaic not to say preposterous without destroying what, in spite of its trite nature, is stationary poetic. Venus's transpiration is more funny than a purely sexual transpiration, seeming thus less unbecoming, not to say more natural or deliberately less antipoetic, than it really is when bearing in mind her gender. A hot sun is there to help her to sweat, so perspiration must be expected independently of sexual lust.

A bucolic setting has been used by the narrator of *The Rape* to describe Lucrece's bed. However it is purely poetic and therefore fictitious, an arrangement that involves unadulterated poetry, constituting thus a symbolic language arising from what N. Frye defines in terms of apocalyptic imagery. Lucrece's hand rests on "the green coverlet; whose perfect white/ Showed like an April daisy on the grass" (*The Rape*, 394-5). If this is not enough to mark differences and analogies, the time is night and Lucrece cold and virginal, wherefore her perspiration can be described with a very different wording. Hers is not, but "resembles" the "dew of night", in addition to the fact that it can be pearly owing to the type of light which illuminates her chamber, that of the moon. Tarquin is all fire, it being a fire that violently contrasts with a symbolic setting that is in full harmony with what Lucrece represents: a microcosms abounding order and virtue. Her bed accordingly symbolizes a bucolic universe, the type of world that authorises the poet to depict her perspiration with a standard simile: it is like solid and cold pearls. Hers, unlike that of Venus, is the type of perspiration which, regardless of Tarquin's fire cannot be consumed by heat, since violence -even though Lucrece fails to perceive this- cannot morally destroy her private and exemplary world. What is grotesque in Venus becomes a jewel on Lucrece's skin: yet, a pragmatic reading of the word "sweat" cannot destroy the fact that it is perspiration nonetheless, regardless of its cause. The problem lies not in the "sweat" but on its effects on the seducers: Adonis is not aroused by Venus's sweat while Tarquin is.

Parallels and contrastive dissimilarities do not stop in the setting, or in the time of the day or in the type of linguistic devices used to describe perspiration. The animal imagery is very expressive, not so say similar. The

problem lies in the fact that they seem to be different constructs according to the person described. In Venus's case, however violent the imagery is, it is less effective than that used in Tarquin's. The reason does not lie in the imagery but on the subject of application. One can hardly see a woman in terms of an eagle, being eagles symbols of power, of royalty, of men, not women. Troilus is the eagle of Criseyde's dream, and Don Quixote speaks of eagles when talking about males hovering over their victims: lovely wedded women. Without a comic inversion of roles based on gender, the poet could not have used a similar imagery to that of *The Rape*, arousing a different response to it.

Venus, in spite of Adonis "bashful shame", kisses and touches him as if she were no more than a vulgar animal in heat:

Even as en empty eagle, sharp by fast,
Tires with her beak on feathers, flesh, and bone,
Shaking her wings, devouring all in haste,
Till either gorge be stuff'd or prey be gone-
Even so she kiss'd his brow, his cheek, his
chin,
And where she ends she doth anew begin.

(*Venus & Adonis*, 55-60).

Albeit being puissant, the imagery used to show Venus's sexual assault, is nonetheless less impressive than that used in Tarquin's case. It is not however a question of a poet who lacks the necessary poetic dexterity to make it powerful, but of gender. The problem posed by gender seems to have constrained the poet to load his quill with much ink to enhance the power inherent in a beautiful face, a countenance which, in the case of Adonis, functions like a concealing mask, not to say ameliorating factor, of the violence inherent in Venus's sexual assault, a catalyst which in no way functions in a similar manner in *The Rape*. Venus is not merely an eagle but a dangerous one because she is an "empty eagle", feeling the type of hunger that only Adonis can satisfy, meaning thus the word "empty" its opposite, repletion, or crudely expressed, sexual penetration.

What serves to expand the sexual metaphor is a fallacy. To think of Venus as a poor woman, sexually fasting, is difficult, unless fasting ought to be taken as a construct of a sexual desire that is so uncontrollable that both

"fast" and "sick-thoughted" must be joined in a single metaphor, one which shows Venus's need to devour all "in haste". Tarquin is not an eagle but "the grim lion [that] fawneth o'er his prey/ Sharp hunger by the conquest satisfied,/ So o'er this sleeping soul doth Tarquin stay," (*The Rape*, 421-3). To speak in terms of an eagle or of a lion when sex is at stake does not make much of a difference. Both animals are dangerous, both are at the top of the leader in Chain of Being according to their degree. In addition to being dangerous, their appetite makes them even more so: their hunger is real and thus it must be satisfied through the annihilation of their victims.

The animal imagery conveys in both poems a radical sense of urgency. If the rhythm of *Venus & Adonis* slows down, it is not because of a lack of urgency, but due to Adonis's unresponsive reaction to sexual stimulation. A woman, unlike a man, can be raped without any ceremonial wooing, hence the poet does not need to use more than a few lines to describe Lucrece's rape. What gives body and volume to *The Rape* is not the rape, but Tarquin's doubts and Lucrece's mental battle with herself once she has been raped, a conflict that ends when she resolves she must kill herself.

The words more frequently used by the narrator of *The Rape* cover an ample semantic field of the concept "shame". Words like "shameful", "dishonour", "hateful", "vile", "fame" or "slandered", so often repeated, falsify reality, for an unwillingly violated woman does not become a dishonourable human being, only her ravisher. However the wording is poetically correct when a pragmatic reading of the word honour is not considered. Tarquin, unlike Venus who is "sick-thoughted", is full of "false desire"; spurious not because the crave is not real, but because the nature of the desire renders it "false" in the sense of treacherous, and dishonourable. The motive is the same, but it is not quite the same to be "sick-thoughted" than to need to "quench the coal which in his liver glows" (*The Rape*, 47). If Adonis yields, the word "shameful" and "dishonour" is not applicable to him, therefore the question of stained honour would be under any light, in his case, totally superfluous.

Independently of the sexual outcome of Venus's wooing, the irony lies in the fact of a poet who is poetically unable, not pragmatically, to speak of honour in regard to Venus, her mythical nature being one which does not allow him to do so. Or to put it better, that of Venus's husband who is about to become what Collatinus becomes: the husband of a dishonoured wife. However

the issue of "honour" is not overtly touched in *Venus & Adonis*, simply because Venus is Venus, not a mortal woman, it being a poetic fallacy operating only at a fallacious level when it comes to Adonis, who in spite of his mythical nature is "the poor fool [who] prays her that he may depart" (*Venus & Adonis*, 578). However unpleasant when it comes to the issue of honour, Venus's case is not better than that of Collatinus, if not worse. An unwilling body and mind does not render a wife unchaste, so Collatinus's honour, unlike that of Venus's husband, cannot be stained.

Adonis's pleading is as ineffectual as that of Lucrece's. The reasons are different but pragmatically viewed equally sound. Adonis wants to grow into manhood, to know himself:

'Fair queen', quoth he, 'if any love you owe me,
Measure my strangeness with my unripe years.
Before I know myself, seek not to know me.
No fisher but the ungrown fry forbears.
The mellow plum doth fall, the green sticks
fast
Or being early pluck'd is sour to taste".

Venus & Adonis, 523-28).

This is solid reasoning, not idle talk. Lucrece's address to Tarquin is equally effective, but in both cases it is of no avail. Venus keeps on trying and Tarquin rapes Lucrece. Both Tarquin and Venus are approaching the wrong object, being the reasons of their approach the same: Adonis is a desirable prey because nobody has enjoyed him yet. Had not Collatinus spoken of Lucrece's chastity, Tarquin would not have bothered to rape her.

Being Tarquin a soldier, a martial man, he proves to be a failure. A good soldier who has the power to command never mistakes the citadel he must take by force. To do so would render him a poor one, a dishonoured one, and yet he attacks the wrong citadel. Honour is not an issue that touches Lucrece or Adonis, but the wooers. Venus is a married lady so that a husband is in the background not to say a bed she is morally staining, for we are not speaking of technicalities, but of being sexually unfaithful if she could. Tarquin's honour is destroyed, and Lucrece knows this well enough. Her debate thus lies in the issue of making Rome know he is a dishonoured soldier, a decision that

becomes effective only if Rome has an ocular proof of her chastity, strong enough to raise an outcry.

Venus's unchaste disposition has been accepted not as a wife's foulness but as Venus's who is not an unhappy mortal like Desdemona, Lucrece or Lavinia. The inversion of roles in *Venus & Adonis* brings to mind some sort of misrule accepted by society but only during the festival of "misrule", an occasion for fun, mirth, and gaiety. Misrule thus functions as a social coating deforming reality to the point of causing the reader to smile at Venus and Adonis instead of frowning. However, misrule is in the air; Adonis addresses himself to Venus as "fair queen", being the word queen one loaded with social significance and therefore social duties. The qualifier "fair" operates on two different levels of meaning: one that of her beauty, the other involving "fair" behaviour not to say being a "fair" queen to her subjects.

This type of subtlety is not needed in *The Rape*, "misrule" has been represented by Tarquin, and the consequences of his "misrule" are wider than those of Venus due to his real, not mythical, social position in the Chain of Being: a fact that says a great deal about social attitudes towards sex and therefore gender. Gender conditions the opening of *The Rape*, an apt opening in consideration to the way in which lust and rape are viewed by men. The first image is demonic in opposition to the first image of *Venus & Adonis* which is apocalyptic. We have a "besieged" city, that of Ardea, the city that Tarquin leaves because sexual desire is promoting him to treat Lucrece as a "besieged" city, being himself the attacker. The poet uses, when possible, the type of rethorical means needed to soften Venus's hot desire and cries outrage when talking of Tarquin's. So he speaks of "Lust-breathed Tarquin" and "Sick-thoughted" Venus. This differentiation is fallacious: both want sex from the object of their fixation, regardless of the method they have to use in order to overcome their resistance.

However subtle, in the case of Venus, the narrator implies that Venus's motives are those of Tarquin. This subtlety vanishes when it comes to *The Rape*. Lucrece's husband has been bragging about two things while talking to his war companions: one that Lucrece is beautiful, two that she is chaste. The first is of little importance, the second seems like an oddity. Any husband should take for granted, unless experience has proven the opposite, his wife's chastity. Collatinus does not do so, thus implying that his wife is the exception

confirming the rule: wives are not chaste. The connotations inherent in Collatinus's boasting are very serious. It is not merely a question of a man who is not circumspect, but of a man who claims to have what other husbands seldom have: "Lucrece the chaste".

The word "chaste" seems to act as the triggering factor, not Lucrece's beauty. Tarquin has not seen her and therefore it is difficult to think that the word beautiful is enough to inflame him thus. If we consider Lucrece a rare exception, it is small wonder to see a man of Tarquin's nature becoming so sexually aroused. Lucrece is something rare, and he wants both: to enjoy it and to destroy her as a rare being. Envy and pride is what promotes the disaster, these being two sentiments which singularize both Tarquin and Lucrece, the type of sentiments which drive Lucrece into undertaking the worse kind of revenge she can think of to destroy her destroyer: suicide.

When Lucrece is raped she feels so dishonoured she kills herself; when Lavinia is raped Titus Andronicus kills her. Both must die. Only one voice, that of Brutus, tries to open the reader's eyes to an obvious reality. Lucrece, and anyone who feels like her, is a fool. A fool, because instead of killing herself she ought to have killed Tarquin. Yet, it seems that for Lucrece the shedding of her blood becomes necessary if she wants to destroy Tarquin. What Brutus says seems to be reasonable enough whereas the poetical description of Lucrece's blood seems to contradict him: her blood is no longer purely blue, or red, but mixed with black.

Lucrecia kills herself and Tarquin is the only one to be blamed, this being another fallacy which the poet leaves in the air as part of a set of literary conventions which Lucrece accepts. Pride is the real motive of Lucrece's death, not to say revenge. She has been conquered by force and by force she is going to destroy her foul conqueror. Collatinus is not Titus Andronicus ready to kill an innocent woman because she must not outlive her shame. Considerations such as motherhood have been ignored by Lucrece, whose desire to be revenged is as strong now as Tarquin's need to rape her was. A pragmatic reading of her suicide shows there is a great deal of egotism and *hubris* in Lucrece's view of herself as a chaste wife: the same type of pride which prompted Collatinus to speak of her chastity in terms of the uncommon, not the commonplace.

Lucrecia knows she has been the victim of lust, not love. The type of lust that quenches its fire as soon as the object arousing it has been conquered: this is humiliating, for enduring love is one thing and a passing whim of lust

another.⁵ The fist can ameliorate the fault, the latter aggravates it. Lucrece perceives this with a terrifying lucidity. Tarquin leaves her house as soon as he rapes her, so like a thief with the object he had wanted. Small wonder it is then she fears some sort of collusion between them, a repulsive one since the word "love" cannot be uttered to redeem his "impious act".

The poet has nothing against love but against lust for lust's sake. Ovid felt the same, being the legacy of his feelings his *Ars Amatoria*. Love according to the laws of nature has nothing to do with the type of emotion that both Ovid and Shakespeare saw as a plague afflicting mankind: lust.

Ovid depicted love, not lust, in terms of the sexual ecstasy of the *Song of Songs*, the lyric alienation of Dante and Petrarca and the burning martyrdom of the mystics. Shakespeare, like Ovid, or El Arcipreste de Talavera, was not only aware of the universality of both love and lust, but of its consequences, being the most consequential angle of lust the untenable stupidity of calling it love. So, according to Shakespeare, "lust" in *Venus & Adonis* and *The Rape of Lucrece* is the embodiment of a passion we wrongly tend to call it love, or love's sickness, since concupiscence more often than not involves brutality. Love can be sin, virtue, honour, dishonour, power and submission, but not violence or rape. There is nothing new in the way Shakespeare depicts lust. What nevertheless baffles the critic is the multivalence of values inherent in both poems, not to say what is socially acceptable or not, and therefore its consequences. Writers such as Andreas Capellanus, El Arcipreste de Hita, Ariosto, Giovanni Boccaccio or even Chaucer dealt with lust, but wearing knowingly the rhetorical mask of love, attesting with it the universality of lust in addition to the problem inherent in its judgment when wrongly it is called love.

Thus, the main idea of this work has not been that of discussing if we can "forgive them" as John Klaus put it,⁴ but of using the correct pronoun, which in *Venus & Adonis* must be *she* and in *The Rape* *he*. To lust after a given person may be unavoidable, but to try with violence, persistence and force to quench it, is bestial: an act which does not even beg the question of forgiveness, for regardless of gender, rape and sexual violence has been and must be always condemned.

A pragmatic reading of both *Venus & Adonis* and *The Rape of Lucrece* proves that the poet, in spite of poetry, is portraying a human

experience that is destructive, often leading to the death of the victims of lust. However ridiculous, the truth is that Venus becomes blinded by her sexual desire, a passion that causes, directly or indirectly, Adonis's death. Had she not detained him for so long, perhaps the boar would not have killed him. To think that because Venus is following Ovid's advices in *Ars Amatoria* and *Remedii Amoris* she is not mistaken, is wrong -Ovid never mentioned rape, violence and physical coercion. This Venus is not the delicate sea-goddess that Sandro Botticelli painted but a huge, beautiful and powerful woman of unusual strength for her delicate sex, in short a Greek Amazon aroused by a young boy who must satisfy her carnal desires at any price. The ideal concept of femineity has been destroyed by Venus's behaviour, a woman "who governed [a man] in strength".

In both poems chastity is rewarded with death. Adonis's death, however, does not have the same significance as that of Lucrece in relation to the treatment of chastity during the Renaissance. Lucrece's position in relation to Tarquin's assault brings forth two problematic issues that were recurrent in the literature of this period: the struggle between her husband's honour and the preservation of her chastity. Lucrece chooses to save her husband's honour while her own is befouled by Tarquin's irrational will. Her heroic act becomes a stain that has to be erased with her own blood acting thus till the very end according to literary conventions. It is not for nothing that she asks to be revenged for the outrage that has been done to her. She does not ask to be forgiven, she does not want to be a picture, like that of Paris and Hellen of woe and death, she wants to be death herself bringing death on her destroyer.

Adonis, unlike Lucrece, does not become a death like monument, only a flower, "a treasure that the world has lost", not a real boy with a mourning mother crying; "Alas, poor world, what treasure hast thou lost!" (*Venus & Adonis*, 1075). But the world cannot feel his death as Collatinus does Lucrece's: he is myth, being the cause no other than gender, thus constituting a very commonplace but painful case. He dies alone, without uttering a word of complain to the "world" for he has been killed not by Venus's lust, but by a rude boar. The pain caused by Lucrece's death is confined to the reduced space of her home, that of Adonis to the "whole world", a world that has not, and cannot really see him as he was, being so its pain the final fallacy of the poem, since only the flower remains. Unlike him, Lucrece becomes a visible monument, something to look at with wonder and sadness. She is shown as an

example of chastity through the streets of Rome, unconsciously echoing her family the pride and amazement that Antonio felt in *The Revenger Tragedy* when he realized that his wife killed herself because she was chaste.

NOTES

1.- Even though we are ignoring both myth and sources, we wish to point out some of them. For *Venus and Adonis*: Ovid's *Metamorphosis*, Book IX "Salmacis and Hermaphroditus", Book X "Venus and Adonis", Book III "Narcissus and Echo". For *The Rape of Lucrece*; Ovid's *The Fasti*; the lamentation theme from the *Heroides* and perhaps Chaucer's *Legend of Good Women* and Guillaume de Lorris's *The Romance of the Rose*. The plot of the *Rape of Lucrece* can be traced already in Homer's *Odyssey* in the person of the faithful Penelope. It became a predominant topic during the Renaissance literature not only in England but in all Mediterranean countries. Perhaps it is worth noting that some critics have argued that Clapman's *Narcissus* must be taken as a source for *Venus and Adonis*. See Charles Martindale and Colin Burrow, "Clapman's *Narcissus*: A Pre-Text for Shakespeare's *Venus and Adonis*?" *English Literary Renaissance*, vol. 22 (Spring) 1992, n°. 2, pp. 147-63.

2.- *The Complete Works of Shakespeare*, ed. G. L. Kittredge. Grolier (1958). All quotations from this edition.

3.- Shakespeare is no exception when depicting women's lust in a humorous if not Ovidian fashion. Some parallels ought to be drawn with *El Libro del Buen Amor*, by El Arcipreste de Hita. He encounters shepherdesses who are depicted very realistically for they are coarse and vigorous. Thus the horse episode in *Venus and Adonis* is as ludicrous as the incidents experienced by Hita in the hands of those powerful women. Love, if not lust, can be ridiculed in both cases not only because of gender but because of the physicality of gender.

4.- See "Venus and Adonis: Can We Forgive Them?" *Studies in Philology*, vol. LXXXV (Summer), 1988, n°. 3, pp. 353-77.

5.- An impressive study of violence in *The Rape* is that of Katharine Eisaman Maus, "Taking Tropes Seriously: Language and Violence in Shakespeare's *Rape of Lucrece*", *Shakespeare's Quarterly*, vol. 37 (Spring) 1968, n° 7, pp. 66-82.