The Possession of Adonis and Lucrece

Tarquin captures the violence of his desire with a simple statement: "Yield to my love; if not, enforced hate" (*The Rape of Lucrece* 719). Although Tarquin claims to find Lucrece beautiful, the underlying sentiment behind his desire to have sex with Lucrece is a desire to challenge her unavailability. Because Lucrece is married to his friend Collatine, Tarquin does not possess her. The norms surrounding marriage during the Elizabethan Era meant that "a married woman was legally subject to her husband in all things," including her choice to copulate (Wiesner 37). Tarquin does not possess Lucrece's sexuality, and because he does not, he rapes her to challenge Collatine's ownership through claiming her virginity for himself. Similar to Tarquin, Venus also finds Adonis beautiful because of his unavailability. Adonis shows no interest in Venus and wishes to hunt a boar, which ultimately claims his life in a way that Venus could not. Despite being the object of desire for many individuals in the past, Venus is "rendered powerless by the very power—love—that she represents" (Kahn, *Venus and Adonis* 77). In response, similar to Tarquin, Venus also attempts to possess Adonis for herself to reassert her control over her own life. Thus, Shakespeare captures the obsessive qualities inextricably associated with possessive love. Venus attempts to possess Adonis through gaining control of three aspects of his existence: his body through her words and actions, his image with her gaze, and his identity through feminizing him. On the other hand, Tarquin attempts to possess Lucrece solely through taking her virginity from Collatine, comparing her virginity to a stolen treasure and a conquered city.

Characterized as both predator and conqueror, Venus attempts to dominate Adonis' body through her disarming words and aggressive actions. Initially attempting to woo Adonis through hyperbolic description and sensual imagery, Venus draws from the "courtly love" tradition of the male poet "sing[ing] praises" to a female subject to "win[] her love," flattering Adonis with her

words (Wiesner 19). Within the first few lines of *Venus and Adonis,* Venus praises Adonis as "thrice fairer than [herself]," "sweet above compare," and "more white and red than the doves and roses are" (*Venus and Adonis* 7–10). When her efforts to flatter Adonis remain unsuccessful, Venus resorts to physical force. Venus attempts to "smother [Adonis] with a kiss," and a short while later, her desire escalates into an attempt to "murder [Adonis] with a kiss" (18, 54). By comparing Venus to an "eagle" and Adonis to a "prey," Shakespeare captures the animalistic relationship underlying their dynamic (55, 63). But he also adds another dimension to Venus' animalistic infatuation with Adonis' body by relating capturing a prey with conquering of a city:

> Now quick desire had caught the yielding prey,
> And glutton-like she feeds, yet never filleth.
> Her lips are conquerors, his lips obey.
> Paying what ransom the insulter willeth:
>
> Whose vulture thought doth pitch the price so high
> That she will draw his lips' rich treasure dry. (547–552)

Venus extracts the "treasure" from Adonis' lips with the instinct of both a predator and a soldier, which places a moral equivalency between the instinctual desires of a predator and the exploitative desires of a soldier. Kahn captures the moral ambiguity regarding Venus' love with a question: "Which is more irrational, amoral, and 'inhuman': a hungry eagle or a soldier who rapes?" (Kahn 80). Venus genuinely believes her affection to be natural, and as the female embodiment of love, her passion highlights the neurotic tendencies that fallen within her conception of love. When Adonis does not yield even to her appeal to dominance, she returns to a sensual tone, comparing her body to a park and inviting Adonis to "feed where thou wilt, on mountain or in dale" or where "the pleasant fountains lie," which is a metaphor for her genitalia

(*VA* 232, 234). Although her invitation to her 'park' could be interpreted as a "quasi-maternal source of nourishment," her treatment of Adonis as prey reframes her offering as more a space "where deer were fed and protected, only in order to assure that they were available to be hunted and killed" (Kahn 79). The nature of Venus' love resides in a desire to possess Adonis' body for her sexual pleasures. Through the metaphors of Venus being both predator and conqueror, Shakespeare captures the instinctual and exploitative nature of Venus' desire to possess Adonis' body. Venus wishes to dominate Adonis' body for the dual purpose of using Adonis' body for her sexual pleasures and controlling his physical autonomy to prevent him from "[lending] embracements unto every stranger" (*VA* 790). Through the use of of her words to entice and her actions to seduce, Venus attempts to become Adonis' sole sexual partner with the purpose of possessing his body.

Throughout *Venus and Adonis,* the drive for possession also manifests through Venus' drive to see Adonis. Unlike the Lucrece in Shakespeare's *Lucrece*, Adonis has greater physical strength than Venus, and he is able to escape Venus' unwanted advances unto his body. But, even though Adonis can evade Venus' lips, he cannot evade her eyes. Venus demands to continue looking at Adonis and wishes for Adonis to return her gaze: "What see'st thou in the ground? Hold up thy head. / Look in mine eye-balls, there thy beauty lies: / Then why not lips on lips, since eyes on eyes?" (138–140). Venus attempts to use her possession of Adonis' image to justify her attempts to gain possession of his body, and the implication of her statement is that Venus' gaze *causes* the beauty of Adonis. In other words, Venus, as a seducer with many masculine traits, dictates the value of Adonis' beauty with her gaze. Regardless of Adonis' perception of himself, Venus aestheticizes Adonis to an image in her mind, thus invalidating Adonis' existing identity through privileging her own perception of him. Because Adonis does

not wish to have his existence invalidated through Venus' gaze, similar his avoidance of Venus' lips, Adonis also avoids Venus' eyes, which manifests through an invisible battle:

> O what a war of looks was then between them:
>
> Her eyes petitioners to his eyes suing;
>
> His eyes saw her eyes as they had not seen them;
>
> Her eyes wooed still; his eyes disdained the wooing. (355–358)

Venus demands Adonis to love her with the same fervor that she loves him, and doing so, she elevates Adonis to "the object of Venus' undivided attention" (Froes 306). Despite Adonis showing resistance to Venus' tokenization, primarily through his assertion that he does share the same passions as her, Venus ignores his claims because she does not privilege Adonis' sentiments when constructing her image of Adonis. Her desire to see Adonis represents a continuous desire to reaffirm her portrait of Adonis defined through the illusion of her lust. Shakespeare, through the words of Adonis captures the duality of love and lust with a simple statement: "Love is all truth, Lust full of forged lies" (*VA* 826). In that sense, Shakespeare implies that Venus does not love Adonis as she claims, which mirrors the "realignment of love and lust motivated by the newfound valorization of marriage in the course of the century following the Reformation" (Belsey, *Love as Trompe-L'Oeil* 276). Even after his death, Adonis continues to live as an image in Venus' mind. Venus expresses tremendous grief after Adonis had been fatally wounded by a boar, but a focus of Venus' lament had been Adonis' eyes. She asks: "Why hast thou cast into eternal sleeping / Those eyes that taught all other eyes to see?" (*VA* 951–952). Because Adonis could no longer meet Venus' gaze, he "was melted like a vapour from her sight," both metaphorically and literally (1166). But, his image is still retained in Venus' mind, and she continues to possess the flower that took Adonis' place. From an account

by one of Shakespeare's contemporaries, Alexander Niccholas, "lust is everything that love is not… lust is what does not last" (Belsey, *Love as Trompe-L'Oeil* 276). At the sight of Adonis' injured body, Venus "reprehend[ed] her mangling eye" because the object of her lust has been disfigured (*VA* 1065). The qualities of the flesh that Venus had heralded no longer defined Adonis; the boar had taken away Adonis' pristine image in addition to his life. Through seeing Adonis with her gaze, Venus reduces Adonis, both when alive and dead, to an image of her lust.

In addition to her efforts to possess Adonis' body and image, Venus also attempts to possess Adonis' identity through feminizing his identity. Venus initially asserts her masculinity through bragging about her previous romantic conquests, particularly her relationship with Mars, who, in his pursuit of Venus, had "hung his lance, / His batt'red shield, his uncontrolled crest," and learned to "sport and dance, / To toy, to wanton, dally, smile and jest" (103–106). Through describing her ability to feminize Mars' identity within her previous relationship, Venus emasculates Mars in order to establish her own masculine presence. Mars, in his efforts to woo Venus, relinquishes his identity as a masculine figure and becomes the possession of Venus. He no longer engages in the same activities that define his identity as the god of war and becomes Venus' "prisoner in a red-rose chain" (110). Thus, Shakespeare suggests that the act of being possessed is inherently emasculating. Venus' possession of Mars operates on a similar framework as her attempted possession of Adonis; her love manifests through a desire to possess identity. Despite having affections for Mars at one point, Venus moved onto Adonis when her cravings to possess Mars were realized. Similar to the loss of novelty associated with a children and toys, "the moment when the desiring subject takes possession of the object, something slips away, eludes the lover's grasp, and is lost" (Belsey, *Love as Trompe-L'Oeil* 265). Once Venus replaces Mars' existing identity with a feminine alternative that she imposes, she loses the thrill

of the chase to possess and seeks to satisfy her desire with another identity to feminize. Venus' love, in this regard, is condemned to the chase by "the promise of a presence that it fails to deliver" (Belsey 261). And, as the embodiment of love, Venus' constant drive to possess through feminizing more identities implies a cynical understanding of love, particularly that love is a state in "perpetual dissatisfaction and despair" (Belsey 263) However, Adonis' rejection of Venus represents a rejection of love altogether. He has no interest in courting the goddess of love; instead, he wishes to hunt boar with his boys. "'I know not love,' quoth he, 'Nor will not know it, / Unless it be a boar, and then I will chase it'" (*VA* 409–410). Although Adonis does not explain his preference to hunt as opposed to stay with Venus, the act of hunting among adolescent males in the Elizabethan elite served as a means of "[initiation] into masculinity" (Kahn 83). Venus attempts to feminize Adonis into "a woman's world of words, comfort, and pleasure," but Adonis "seeks initiation into a man's world of deeds, competition, and danger" (Kahn 83). Because Venus' love is inherently feminizing, the reciprocation of Venus' love would prevent Adonis from earning social acceptance among his masculine peers. In this sense, Venus is condemned to dissatisfaction because Adonis represents an identity that cannot be possessed. While Mars had been willing to emasculate himself for the pursuit of Venus, Adonis does not even want Venus' love. When Adonis becomes a casualty of his own hunting, Venus interpreted his death as "the foul boar's conquest on her fair delight / Which seen, her eyes are murdered with the view" (*VA* 1030–1031). While Venus had been unable to feminize Adonis with her love, the boar "sheathed unaware the tusk in his soft groin" and violently emasculates him (1116). The boar becomes successful in his conquest to feminize Adonis in the way that Venus had not been. Thus, although Venus desires to express her love through feminizing

Adonis, the boar removes all means for Venus to realize her love. Without the ability to end her pursuit in possessing Adonis' identity, Venus is condemned to the chase.

Tarquin, unlike Venus and her unsuccessful attempt to possess Adonis, imagines Lucrece as Collatine's treasure and takes possession of Lucrece through thievery. Introduced as "Lucrece the chaste," the defining feature of Lucrece to those around her is her virginity, characterizing Lucrece where "[her] identity depends on her fidelity to her husband" (*RL 7;* Belsey, *The Rape of Lucrece* 96). Collatine contributes to the dehumanization of Lucrece through his rhetoric of defining Lucrece through the various feminine aspects of her identity—such as her "incomparable chastity" and her "unmatched red and white"—to his male peers (*The Argument* 12; *RL* 11). Thus, to the men around Collatine, which includes Tarquin, Lucrece only exists relative to her feminine characteristics: chastity and beauty. But, because Collatine does not explicitly describes the sexual parts of her body, Shakespeare "[conveys] the impression that [Lucrece] is surprisingly beautiful without admitting any suggestion that she might be physically desirable" (Kahn, *The Rape in Shakespeare's Lucrece* 51). Collatine reduces Lucrece to a means to assert his masculinity through his ownership of Lucrece's virginity as her husband, which reduces Lucrece to be an individual "who has dedicated her body to her husband" (Kahn 49). Tarquin, in response, "takes a cue from Collatine" and "treats Lucrece as property which, if it can be owned, can be stolen" (Belsey 98). Despite his boasts, Collatine has not solidified his ownership through the act of taking Lucrece's virginity, which, despite his proprietorship, means that Lucrece's virginity is only owned by Collatine in name. But, because Collatine's masculinity depends on his ability to keep Lucrece chaste, he is, most likely, unwilling to give her virginity to Tarquin. In doing so, Collatine inspires Tarquin's lust to steal the "rich jewel" that is Lucrece's virginity, repeating to himself that "[he] must deflower" her, which refers to

taking her virginity (*RL* 85, 348). Before Tarquin arrived in Lucrece's chamber, he encountered locks on her bedchamber door that deterred his advance:

> The locks between her chamber and his will
> Each one by him enforced, retires his ward;
> But as they open they all rate his ill,
> Which drives the creeping thief to some regard:
> The threshold grates the door to have him heard. (302–303)

Tarquin, as the "creeping thief," breaks the locks to steal Lucrece, the "rich jewel." As a thief who is breaking into a room to steal a possession, Tarquin also breaks through mental barriers in his heist to steal a valuable possession from Collatine. Venus also describes her seduction with the metaphor of breaking locks: "Were beauty under twenty locks kept fast / Yet love breaks through, and picks them all at last" (*VA* 575–576). But, unlike Tarquin, Venus references Adonis, the treasure, only in context to herself. Tarquin, on the other hand, constructs Lucrece as a possession relative to Collatine in addition himself. Through the act of raping Lucrece, Tarquin would simultaneously betray his friend Collatine's hospitality and his reputation as a member of Roman royalty. But, despite his musings, Tarquin considers rape as a question of honor between him and Collatine, which ignores Lucrece's sentiments from the equation. His violation of Lucrece's chastity is the result of a "competition between [] two men for the possession of Lucrece" and does not include Lucrece herself (Kahn 54). Lucrece, after her rape, becomes complicit in her dehumanization because she also contextualizes the rape only relative to her husband's honor without accounting for the emotional damage she incurred at the hands of Tarquin. Although she intends to redeem her chastity through suicide, Lucrece understands that her husband has been emasculated by Tarquin for his inability to retain his wife's chastity:

So thy surviving husband shall remain,

The scornful mark of every open eye;

Thy kinsmen hang their heads at this disdain,

Thy issue blurr'd with nameless bastardy. (*RL* 519–522)

Even after her suicide, Lucrece still exists as a matter of ownership, which can be seen through the dialogue between Collatine and Lucrece's father:

The one doth call her his, the other his,

Yet neither may possess the claim they lay.

The father says ' She's mine."—'O mine she is,'

Replies her husband; 'do not take away

My sorrow's interest; let no mourner say

He weeps for her, for she was only mine,

And only must be wailed by Collatine.' (*RL 1844–1851)*

From the beginning of the poem, Lucrece had been characterized as a possession, and even in her death, she continues to be characterized as a possession. But, despite the claims in ownership, Lucrece's father had lost his legitimacy to possess Lucrece when he transferred ownership of her to Collatine through marriage, and Collatine had lost his control over Lucrece because her virginity had been stolen and claimed by Tarquin.

Through the act of taking Lucrece's virginity, Tarquin conquers the source of Lucrece's identity that would signify ownership over her. Tarquin describes the sleeping Lucrece: "Her breasts like ivory globes circled with blue / A pair of maiden worlds unconquered" (407–408). Referring to the sexual elements of Lucrece's body as "unconquered" territory, Tarquin contextualizes Lucrece into a matter of conquest between two rival powers. Similar to Rome and

other powerful nations' ruthless wars against its neighboring territories, the conquering nations did not consider the sentiments of the conquered when considering to conquer. While Collatine had claimed Lucrece through his marriage to her, Tarquin seeks to challenge Collatine's alleged proprietorship through violent conquest. Tarquin does not believe that Collatine would give up his claim to Lucrece's chastity nor that Lucrece has the right to decide her sexual partners for herself. After Tarquin successfully forces his entry into Lucrece's bedchamber, he explicitly announces his intention to Lucrece: "Under that colour am I to scale / Thy never-conquer'd fort" (480–81). Collatine, in his absence, had left Lucrece unguarded in her own bedchamber, and Tarquin sees Collatine's absence as an opportunity to claim Lucrece, the undefended city, through an attack:

> Smoking with pride, marched on, to make his stand
> On her bare breast, the heart of all her land,
> Whose ranks of blue veins as his hand did scale;
> Left their round turrets destitute and pale. (489–492)

Through grabbing Lucrece's breast, which only Collatine, as her husband who controls her sexuality, has the right to grab, Tarquin hopes to seize possession of Lucrece's sexuality, which would allow Tarquin, similar to Rome, to claim ownership over territory he does not have the right to claim. Despite Lucrece's defiance, Tarquin "batter[s] down her consecrated wall," which compares his forced entry similar to a conquering army breaking through the city walls (723). After he finishes with his rape, Tarquin leaves Lucrece in state of ruin because he has successfully possessed the source of her identity, similar to a fort that would signify control over a given territory: Lucrece's virginity. Lucrece, after her rape, is described similar to the state of a conquered city:

Her house is sacked, her quiet interrupted,

Her mansion battered by the enemy;

Her sacred temple spotted, spoiled, corrupted,

Grossly engirt with daring infamy. (1170–1173)

Tarquin desires to steal Collatine's possession because the law prohibits the him from doing so. Yet, Tarquin does not respect the law and nevertheless performs the prohibited deed. His attitude mirrors the attitude of Rome's disrespect for the sovereignty of its neighbors. Similar to Tarquin's desire to steal possessions that he does not have the right to have, Rome wages wars against territories out of a desire to conquer territory it does not have the right to claim. In this sense, Shakespeare "links non-consensual sex with a tyrannical regime: Tarquin's violation of his friend's wife not only damages her but also shows him unfit to govern the state" (Belsey, *The Rape in Shakespeare's Lucrece* 90). When musing about his rape, Tarquin only contextualizes Lucrece relative to him and Collatine, but in throughout the poem, Shakespeare "consistently implies a parallel between the private act of expropriation and the ruthless wars notoriously conducted by the Tarquin family against Rome's neighbours" (Belsey 98). Through suicide, Lucrece's redeems herself and causes Tarquin's exile, but she does not ever free herself from his possession. The act of possessing Lucrece's virginity signifies ownership over Lucrece, and Tarquin, through having Lucrece's virginity, supersedes the other means of possessing Lucrece. Because Lucrece cannot retract the stealing of her virginity, Tarquin permanently holds ownership over her, and even in her suicide, Tarquin continues to hold onto the part of her identity that signifies possession over her existence.

Through articulating the various facets of ownership in existence that Tarquin and Venus strive to possess in Lucrece and Adonis, respectively, Shakespeare underscores the possessive

nature of desire that challenges many contemporary notions of femininity and love. Through the characterization of Venus and Adonis, Shakespeare comments on the validity of the Aristotelian sources that defined many Elizabethan conceptions of gender. While the Venus in Ovid's *Metamorphoses* had been restrained in her approach, the Venus found in Shakespeare's *Venus and Adonis* had been characterized as a "sweaty, muscular rapist" and deviates from the defining features of passivity associated with women during the time (Hulse 95). Venus' desire is characterized as "coals of glowing fire," which had been the same metaphor used to describe Tarquin's lust for Lucrece, "the coal which in his liver glows" (*VA* 35; *RL* 98). Adonis, on the other hand, had been described as "frosty in desire" (*VA* 56). The interactions between Venus and Adonis challenge the notion that women were "colder and wetter" while men were "hotter and drier," but supported the conception that women were in need of men's heat (Wiesner 32). Lucrece, in Shakespeare's *Lucrece,* contrasts Venus' aggression and exaggerates the submission that Venus challenges. Venus is overly masculinized, and Lucrece is overly feminized, but the two characters represent opposite ends of the same spectrum: the possessor and the possessed. Despite her resistance, Lucrece, through the act of being rape, becomes possessed by Tarquin because she had her virginity, which signified ownership over her, taken from her. Adonis, on the other hand, resists Venus' attempts to possess him and is successful because ownership over him does not depend solely on his virginity but other aspects of his existence such as his body, image, and masculinity. Regardless, as soon as Tarquin and Venus had set their gaze upon them, Lucrece and Adonis were doomed to be possessed.

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