

Rape of Lucretia

t took the Roman historian Livy (d. 17 AD) forty years to write his 142-book History of Rome. In this excerpt, he repeats a legend which was extremely important to Romans during the Republic. The sons of the King of Rome, Lucius Tarquinius Superbus, are at Ardea, a city which the army is attempting to conquer, when they hear of the virtue of the Roman matron Lucretia.

Question:

What virtues does this story put forth for Roman society through the example of Lucretia? Why would this story have mattered to Romans?

LVII. One day when the young men were drinking at the house of Sextus Tarquinius, after a supper where they had dined with the son of Egerius, Tarquinius Conlatinus, they fell to talking about their wives, and each man fell to praising his wife to excess. Finally Tarquinius Conlatinus declared that there was no need to argue; they might all be sure that no one was more worthy than his Lucretia. "Young and vigorous as we are, why don't we go get out horses and go and see for ourselves what our wives are doing? And we will base our judgement on whatever we see them doing when their husbands arrive unannounced." Encouraged by the wine, "Yes, let's go!" they all cried, and they went on horseback to the city. Darkness was beginning to fall when they arrived and they went to the house of Conlatinus. There, they found Lucretia behaving quite differently from the daughters-in-law of the King, whom they had found with their friends before a grand feast, preparing to have a night of fun. Lucretia, even though it was night, was still working on her spinning, with her servants, in the middle of her house. They were all impressed by Lucretia's chaste honor. When her husband and the Tarquins arrived, she received them, and her husband, the winner, was obliged to invite the king's sons in. It was then that Sextus Tarquinius was seized by the desire to violate Lucretia's chastity, seduced both by her beauty and by her exemplary virtue. Finally, after a night of youthful games, they returned to the camp.

LVIII. Several days passed. Sextus Tarquinius returned to the house of Conlatinus, with one of his companions. He was well received and given the hospitality of the house, and maddened with love, he waited until he was sure everyone else was asleep. Then he took up his sword and went to Lucretia's bedroom, and placing his sword against her left breast, he said, "Quiet, Lucretia; I am Sextus Tarquinius, and I have a sword in my hand. If you speak, you will die." Awakening from sleep, the poor woman realized that she was without help and very close to death. Sextus Tarquinius declared his love for her, begging and threatening her alternately, and attacked her soul in every way. Finally, before her steadfastness, which was not affected by the fear of death even after his intimidation, he added another menace. "When I have killed you, I will put next to you the body of a nude servant, and everyone will say that you were killed during a dishonorable act of adultery." With this menace, Sextus Tarquinius triumphed over her virtue, and when he had raped her he left, having taken away her honor. Lucretia, overcome with sorrow and shame, sent messengers both to her husband at Ardea and her father at Rome, asking them each to come "at once, with a good friend, because a very terrible thing had happened." Spurius Lucretius, her father, came with Publius Valerius, the son of Volesus, and Conlatinus came with Lucius Junius Brutus; they had just returned to Rome when they met Lucretia's messenger. They found Lucretia in her chamber, overpowered by grief. When she saw them she began to cry. "How are you?" her husband asked. "Very bad," she replied, "how can anything go well for a woman who

has lost her honor? There are the marks of another man in your bed, Conlatinus. My body is greatly soiled, though my heart is still pure, as my death will prove. But give me your right hand in faith that you will not allow the guilty to escape. It was Sextus Tarquinius who returned our hospitality with enmity last night. With his sword in his hand, he came to take his pleasure for my unhappiness, but it will also be his sorrow if you are real men." They promised her that they would pursue him, and they tried to appease her sorrow, saying that it was the soul that did wrong, and not the body, and because she had had no bad intention, she did no wrong. "It is your responsibility to see that he gets what he deserves," she said, "I will absolve myself of blame, and I will not free myself from punishment. No woman shall use Lucretia as her example in dishonor." Then she took up a knife which she had hidden beneath her robe, and plunged it into her heart, collapsing from her wound; she died there amid the cries of her husband and father.

LIX. Brutus, leaving them in their grief, took the knife from Lucretia's wound, and holding it all covered with blood up in the air, cried, "By this blood, which was so pure before the crime of the prince, I swear before you, O gods, to chase the King Lucius Tarquinius Superbus, with his criminal wife and all their offspring, by fire, iron, and all the methods I have at my disposal, and never to tolerate Kings in Rome evermore, whether of that family of any other."

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