

What Was the Real Point of Lucretia's Death? An Argument for Allegory

Did Lucretia's suicide after her rape in book one of Livy's *Ab Urbe Condita* successfully restore honor to herself and her family? This is a controversial question. Suicide after sexual misconduct, including rape, has been a recurrent theme from the ancient to modern world. Suetonius in chapter 65 of his *Divus Augustus* wrote that Emperor Augustus longed for the self-inflicted deaths of his daughter and granddaughter on account of their sexual escapades. Ian Donaldson in his book *The Rapes of Lucretia* wrote that "suicide after rape was such a common phenomenon that as late as 1184 it was a major factor leading to the council of Nime's condemnation of suicide under canon law".¹ Finally Nadera Shalhoub-Kevorkian, in her 2002 article "Femicide and the Palestinian Criminal Justice System," documented six case studies where women were killed for "actual or perceived behavior . . . generally involving their sexuality . . . as such 'immoral' behavior is believed to tarnish the honor of the woman's family."²

However there are four men who argue that Lucretia's suicide was not necessary to restore honor to her family. These men are the ones whom Livy placed at Lucretia's death: her father, husband, Publius Valerius, and Lucius Iunius Brutus. In fact these men beg the Roman matron to not kill herself. One must then wonder why Lucretia insists upon dying for her rape. This paper will argue that Livy constructed the episode of Lucretia's rape and death not as a didactic story of feminine honor but as an allegorical tale representing the end of Rome's monarchical rule and the rise of the Roman Republic.

¹ Ian Donaldson. *The Rapes of Lucretia*. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1982), 30.

² Nadera Shalhoub-Kevorkian. "Femicide and the Palestinian Criminal Justice System: Seeds of Change in the Context of State Building?" *Law & Society Review* 36, no. 3 (2002): 578.