

“No Lucrece”: *The Ambiguity of Rape in The Queen of Corinth*

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Through the lens of New Historicism, the protagonists of Jacobean drama are deeply entangled in their social milieu, their identities inseparable from the context enveloping them. This entwined existence leaves them adrift, wrestling with an elusive self-definition, and lost in the absence of a recognisable ‘within’. Confronted with the Other, these characters hover on the edge of identity, navigating a liminal space that blurs the boundaries between self and society. Against this backdrop, I propose a reading of *The Queen of Corinth*, a play presumably written in 1616-1618 by Fletcher, Field, and Massinger. Specifically, I shall attempt to show how Merione, the most important character of the play, reacts to her rape in a way that deviates from the norm, since her courageous solution challenges the prevailing belief that suicide is the sole path to preserve honour. The tragicomic resolution of *The Queen of Corinth* suggests that the wrongdoer should not meet death but rather be forced to marry the victim of his violence – a change consistent with the spirit of Fletcher and his collaborators. Merione’s decision is a momentary claim of her own self, pushing back against the skewed subjectivity imposed by the male characters’ discourses throughout the play.

Keywords: Rape, Tragicomedy, *The Queen of Corinth*, Subjectivity, Lucrece

1. Foreword

Sexual violence – especially the representation of rape – has persistently emerged as a controversial subject, reflecting social attitudes, power struggles, and gender norms. The recurring inclusion of rape imagery in European literature serves as a stark reminder of the pervasive violence against women in Western culture. This issue gains particular significance in early modern English drama, offering playwrights a powerful means to explore the intricacies of human

conduct, ethics, and the prevalent socio-cultural milieu of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

Since the late 1970s, feminist criticism has examined the social and historical dimensions of rape. Seminal works like Susan Brownmiller's 1975 *Against Our Wills: Men, Women, and Rape*, Sylvania Tomaselli and Roy Porter's *Rape: A Historical and Social Enquiry* (1986), and Lynn A. Higgins and Brenda R. Silver's 1991 *Rape and Representation*, have significantly contributed to this exploration. However, despite the widespread acknowledgment of rape as a serious social and moral issue, there is considerable debate about its motivations and definition.

Brownmiller's argument hinges on the idea that rape is not primarily about sexual gratification but rather about asserting power and control over women. She contends that rape serves as a conscious tactic to instill fear and maintain the subjugation of women within a patriarchal society. This perspective highlights the systemic nature of rape, emphasising its role in perpetuating gender inequality and silencing women's voices. However, while Brownmiller's analysis provides a rich framework for understanding rape as a manifestation of male power dynamics, it has also been critiqued for its somewhat deterministic approach. Some argue that her emphasis on the political and social aspects of rape may overlook the complex interplay of personal motivations and individual circumstances that often contribute to rape incidents.

Tomaselli (1986, 11-12) further stresses the complexity of this issue. She spotlights the combination of personal motivations and the cultural and symbolic meanings associated with it: rape, she argues, is not just a physical act of violence, but rather a tool to reinforce gender-based power dynamics and limit women's roles in society. In light of this, the insights from Higgins and Silver's work reinforce the idea that rape is shaped by its representation, thereby adding complexity to our efforts to both understand and tackle this social issue.

Higgins and Silver argue that "the politics and aesthetics of rape are one" (1991, 1), a statement which underscores the close link between the narrator's identity and the way the story is told. Viewing rape as a form of representation exposes deeply ingrained patriarchal perspectives that have historically silenced women's voices and experiences in storytelling. Both scholars advocate for an analytical feminist approach, urging a thorough examination of written materials – be they literary works, historical accounts, or other forms of

representation – that may have downplayed, overlooked, or intentionally omitted crucial facets of women's lives and struggles, owing to societal norms, biases, or historical constraints, especially as they pertain to the distressing realities of violence and sexuality.

Higgins and Silver's pioneering research on rape has deeply impacted feminist scholarship on medieval and early modern literature, offering crucial insights into the construction of female subjects. In *Writing Rape, Writing Women in Early Modern England: Unbridled Speech* (1999), Jocelyn Catty dives deep into the intricate crime of rape, unraveling its essence intricately woven into representation. The ontological link to representation leads us into the exploration of medieval and early modern rape narratives, which provide insight into the perception of women as subjects, as Robertson and Rose have noted (2001, 1). These narratives are also grounded in historical frameworks of female sexuality dating back to the classical period. Such frameworks establish enduring models that influence our comprehension as well as the very nature of female subjectivity, as pinpointed by Barbara Baines (2003, 1). She argues that the Renaissance provides a rich context for understanding the development of societal attitudes towards rape, as it entailed a revival of medieval, biblical and classical beliefs, and serves as a foundation for our present-day concerns.

An examination of early modern rape narratives shows a recurring pattern – a tendency to replace instances of sexual violence against women with alternative interpretations that include political symbolism, pornography, or religious and supernatural-driven elements. Thus, rape is very often rationalised or contextualised within a broader mythological framework¹. This intentional erasure mirrors social inclinations to subordinate female subjects, thereby perpetuating the normalisation of inherent sexual violence and, in turn, naturalising it as an essential, unavoidable aspect of the systematic oppression of women. An in-depth analysis

1 Catty (1999, 10) argues that rape can signify either a political tyranny or an individual crime. However, an overemphasis on its political dimensions may unintentionally obliterate the complex power dynamics between the sexes. In her compelling volume, *Representing Rape in Medieval and Early Modern Literature*, Baines (2003, 4) explores the complex interplay between rape and pornography, revealing the subtle erasure of sexual violence within rape narratives. These troubling representations unfairly label women as whores, their refusal paradoxically morphed into consent and their resistance misinterpreted as disturbing sign of desire.

of such narratives exposes the deeply rooted patriarchal structures embedded in representations of rape that are created explicitly to subjugate women. Robertson and Rose suggest a “model of double-reading” (2001, 9), encouraging the examination of rape in literature while maintaining awareness of its violent nature of sexual abuse towards women. This approach leads to better understanding of the narratives and prompts critical exploration of the social forces driving them. It also facilitates meticulous scrutiny of the complexities of gender, power, and representation in early modern literature, granting greater insight.

In early modern England, the definition of rape underwent a nuanced evolution. Unlike today’s clear-cut legal definitions, the inception of rape laws dates back to the Middle Ages, specifically to the Statutes of Westminster I and II (1275, 1285), issued during the reign of Edward I. The intricacy stemmed from the legal term *raptus*, which encompassed a spectrum of meanings, including rape, abduction, forced sexual intercourse, and sexual assault, thus proving the prismatic nature of early modern sexual violence highlighted by scholars such as Corinne J. Saunders (2001, 59-62) and B. J. and Mary Sokol (2003, 108-9). Still, the merging of rape and abduction persisted within the legal definition, reinforcing the conception of women’s bodies and virginity as male property. Nevertheless, Nazife Bashar’s influential research on rape law and historical cases from the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries provides evidence that, by the mid-16th century, rape was recognised as a crime against the person, marking a significant shift in legal understanding (1983, 41). Expanding on Bashar’s insights, Amy Greenstadt (2009, 13) contends that past legal documents and manuals used vague or ambiguous language to describe the crime of rape. Yet, as social attitudes and legal understanding progressed, there was a gradual transition towards a clearer, more explicit definition of rape that stressed the lack of consent and violation of a woman’s autonomy over her own body. In legal terminology, this shift implied an improved and victim-centred vision of rape. As a result, this historical backdrop adds depth to our understanding of rape in early modern England, revealing the intertwined nature of the law, culture, and social hierarchies that shaped the legal treatment of sexual offenses during this period².

2 The semantic ambiguity, as noted above, shows a captivating blend of contrasting rape cultures woven into the social fabric of the period. See Aebischer 2004, 25.

Early modern England witnessed significant sociopolitical turns and cultural blossoming, fuelled by a renewed appreciation for classical learning and humanist ideals. This fertile intellectual landscape fostered artistic exploration and literary innovation, with the stage emerging as a powerful platform for playwrights to delve into the complexities of human nature. Within this theatrical world, the performance of rape played a significant role in exploring the social norms and ethical dilemmas mentioned above, as well as the challenges confronted by women in their quest for agency and self-determination amidst stringent social constraints.

Any discourse on rape requires a reference to the story of Lucrece, a narrative that Shakespeare, among other playwrights, masterfully portrayed³. Serving as an iconic representation of female martyrdom, Lucrece's decision to take her own life is a poignant testimony to the extreme ways women may take to gain control of their lives and preserve their dignity. Shakespeare's exploration of rape was a recurring motif throughout his career, featuring prominently in his early works and resurfacing in later plays, such as *Pericles* and *The Tempest*. However, in his earlier compositions (*The Rape of Lucrece* and *Titus Andronicus*), Shakespeare portrayed the atrocity of rape with raw intensity, vividly detailing its brutality. *The Rape of Lucrece* unfolds within the backdrop of ancient Rome; despite the historical uncertainty surrounding the rape narrative, this story depicts a woman as a brutalised victim in patriarchal society. It is acknowledged that Shakespeare's Lucrece drew inspiration from Ovid's *Fasti* (I, 721-852) and Livy's *Ab Urbe condita* (chapters LVII-LX), which had already been disseminated in a number of versions across European countries by Shakespeare's time (Donaldson 1982, 19). In both sources, Lucretia is depicted as a virtuous Roman woman whose tragic fate catalysed the overthrow of the Roman monarchy; both narrating the crime of Lucrece's rape by Sextus Tarquinius, the son of the tyrannical King Tarquin, and her subsequent suicide as an act of atonement for unbearable shame. Her courageous act of self-sacrifice deeply moved the Roman people, leading to a popular uprising and the establishment of the Roman Republic. Following her violation by Tarquin, Lucrece struggles with an overwhelming burden of shame, guilt, and humili-

3 See, among others, Donaldson 1982, Guardamagna 2018, and Pallotti 2013.

ation. In a social framework in which a woman's worth is intimately tied to her chastity, the offence inflicts a lasting stain not only on her personal character, but also on the reputation of her entire family. Her final act, however, constitutes a defiance of the social conventions that have hampered her agency.

2. *An elusive self*

The Queen of Corinth, a tragicomedy co-written by Fletcher, Field, and Massinger⁴ supposedly between 1616 and 1618, presents the convincing argument that rape brings about a loss of integrity, which can be ultimately resolved through marriage to the villain⁵.

The central female character, Merione, calls for significant attention, her theatricality stemming from Fletcher's linguistic prowess and the collective dramatic vision of the three playwrights. In particular, Merione's response to the rape she endures stands out as she proposes a solution that sets her apart from the literary code, challenging the Christological stance of raped women who saw suicide as the only means to preserve their honour. Merione's decision is an attempt to temporarily assert her identity, considering that her unbalanced subjectivity has been shaped by the speeches of male characters throughout the play. In this light, the rape, and especially her response to it, may figure as part of an elaborate plan devised by the victim to assert her own self.

Except for cases such as *Promos and Cassandra* and *The Spanish Gypsy*, or *Measure for Measure*, in which the raped women end up by marrying their assailants, other plays addressing rape, like Shake-

4 The co-authorship is supported by Cyrus Hoy's statement that there are "three distinct patterns of language preferences present" (Hoy 1959, 95).

5 Set in ancient Greece, the play explores the power dynamics of Corinth, a city-state ruled by a virtuous Queen and her villainous son, Theanor. Merione, initially promised to Theanor, is later married off to the Argosian ruler, Agenor, as part of a political negotiation. The deal enrages Theanor, who rapes Merione in revenge against Agenor, and falsely accuses Euphanes, the Queen's favourite ward, of the deed. The plot unfolds through a series of escalating tensions, including conflicts, duels, and hostage-taking incidents. After committing a second rape, Theanor is put on trial for his offences, but surprising revelations come to the forefront. An unforeseen twist ensues, resulting in Theanor's pardon by Merione and union with her.

spere's *Titus Andronicus*, Heywood's *The Rape of Lucrece*, Middleton's *The Revenger's Tragedy* and *Hengist, King of Kent*, Fletcher's *The Tragedy of Valentinian*, to name but a few, are inherently tragic. Despite their unequivocal condemnation of the crime, they sympathise with the victims, allowing the audience to grasp their plight in the face of a devastating fate. Instead, *The Queen of Corinth* marks a significant change from tragedy to tragicomedy in its approach to the subject and in moral perspective. Suzanne Gossett (1984, 305) attributes the shift to the prevailing atmosphere of the late Jacobean court, stained by sexual misconduct, impropriety, decadence. This move toward tragicomedy ushers new elements, including the survival of the violated woman and the lack of punishment for the evil-doer. Such departure from the traditionally moral stance is patent since, in the end, the guilty party will not face death but the obligation to marry his victim.

According to the perspective of New Historicism, the identity of the Jacobean drama characters is intricately woven into the fabric of their social environment; their sense of self does not lie within, for no distinct 'within' allows itself to be defined⁶. Instead, when confronted with the Other, these characters hover on the edge of identity, navigating a liminal space that blurs the boundaries between self and society. Only in the fervent debate on selfhood along the twentieth century, particularly with Freud and Lacan, theories about the ambiguous nature of identity, its potential fragility, and the claim for it will take deeper roots.

Massinger, Fletcher, and Field explore an unfamiliar hypothesis about the self in Merione's experience of, and reaction to, rape. She is represented in embracing the belief that her unique physiological and psychological heritage, particularly her lost chastity, has

6 Hamlet's "I've that within which passeth show", in *Hamlet*, I.ii.88, exemplifies this concept. Consider, for instance, the fifth-century reflections of St. Augustine, who pondered man's innate depravity and his enforced separation from God-given innocence: the nature of humanity being predetermined, each individual is born as a prisoner of inherent sinfulness. Building on Augustine's ideas, Calvin further shaped the notion of the divinely ordained state of the individual, a concept that profoundly influenced the theology of the emerging Church of England. These perspectives, both ancient and modern, share a common belief that the self is, to some extent, shaped by pre-existing theological and socio-political frameworks.

been tarnished by the traumatic experience: in her poignant expression, “been forc’d and broken, lost my lustre” (*The Queen of Corinth*, II.iii.159-60⁷) we feel echoes of despair and self-loathing. The violation has led her to see herself as a contaminating disease within society – “I am nothing now but a maine pestilence / Able to poysen all” (II.iii.103-4), a nameless and unrecognisable thing:

MERIONE

I am now I know not what: praye ye look not on me,
 No nameis left me, nothing to inherit,
 But the detested, base, and branded –
 (II.iii.120-22)

In an effort to escape her wretchedness, Merione contemplates self-sacrifice by marrying her rapist. Interestingly, Agenor, Merione’s intended husband, tries to reassure her that her rape was an involuntary act, insisting that “the stain was forced upon you” (II.iii.151). He further describes her as “more virgin than all her sex” (II.ii.31) in an attempt to console her. Yet, Merione remains unconvinced, believing that only through a marriage to the rapist can the social stigma be removed. Gossett (1984, 327) argues that by treating rape in a tragicomic way, *The Queen of Corinth* portrays it in the same light as other sexual impulses dealt with in comedy, and implies that they are natural and, therefore, can be managed through marriage. This perspective may suggest that rape was used to prove the manliness of Merione’s future husband. Against all odds, she endorses a union with her rapist as a privilege, (“The Rape on me gives me the priviledge / To be his Wife, and that is all I sue for”, V.iv.70-71). Such a supposedly desperate choice underscores her deep internal struggle, wrestling with the loss of her former self and the social pressure to restore her honour through a questionable union (Curran Jr. 2010, 105).

Merione’s conscious experience of loss raises the prospect of a perspicuous self, albeit ironically unrecognised. Her potential for individuality seems to have been eradicated from her psyche, leading

7 All references are taken from vol. VI of *The Works of Beaumont and Fletcher*, edited by A. R. Waller, published in 1908 as part of the Cambridge English Classics series. Unless otherwise indicated, citations from *The Queen of Corinth* will include only the reference to act, scene, and line(s).

to an attempt to relinquish her right to self-possession. Clearly, Merione's sense of self is intertwined with the pattern of social construction; she is a product of societal expectations. Before her assault, she epitomised submission to her brother Leonidas and the Queen, her honour tied to her chastity; after the defilement of her body, however, she becomes dependent on external forces to shield her from the threat of social ostracism. Merione's possibilities for self-fashioning are constrained within a patriarchal framework: she is given the options of isolation as a whore, or nun, or of marriage to her torturer, thus shedding light on her bent to mercy.

Merione's act of rescuing Theanor by means of sacrificing herself in marriage (the obliteration of a woman's selfhood⁸) questions the concept of self-determination and obscures all notions of agency in self-fashioning. However, this act paradoxically asserts her autonomy as she successfully demands marriage, thus losing her will within the confines of the marital union. In this context, Merione's concept of self-fashioning remains an illusion, lacking effective agency within the culturally deterministic constraints of early Stuart England. As a consequence, Merione's final act in the play leads to two irreconcilable conclusions about her sense of self. The stubborn determination to marry Theanor proposes conflicting theories: on the one hand, she is capable of asserting her will; on the other hand, her selfhood, shaped by prevailing social perceptions of women, is dependent on custom, which insists that her only chance of security is to unite with her aggressor. In the latter scenario, freedom takes on an ironic position: while she frees herself from social ostracism, she is trapped within the bond of marriage, thereby forfeiting her self-possession. To regain her honour, Merione has to compromise her identity by submitting to her husband, a sacrifice that is symbolic of her struggle to balance personal autonomy and societal norms.

In line with Greenblatt's suggestions (1980, 9), individuals build their identities, incorporating aspects or contradictions that can lead to the subversion or loss of the identity they have called for. This observa-

8 Marriage seen as a potentially unfavourable experience for women, who may end up in a worse condition than before, is exemplified in Moll's famous quotation from *The Roaring Girl* by Middleton and Dekker: "marriage is but a chopping and changing, where a maiden loses one head and has a worse i'th'place" (II.ii.43-45).

tion resonates with Merione's experience, where her self-fashioning occurs at the intersection of imposed external authority and her realisation of what she has lost. While early modern England may not have consciously embraced a Cartesian philosophy, *The Queen of Corinth* serves as an indication that Jacobean England, at least implicitly, viewed human nature through a subjectivist lens – albeit with limitations.

3. Rape/Ravishment

The Queen of Corinth departs from traditional classical models and contemporary plays in which a violated woman typically resorts to self-slaughter as a means of atonement. In this tragicomic representation of rape, the female character is victimised and dishonoured; however, contrary to the conventional narrative thread, Merione chooses to marry her rapist, who has now redeemed himself from his sinful act of lust. This departure from the expected formula of rape, therefore, carries deeper implications. The swerve from the classical model in this play becomes clear in Act 2, after Merione's rape: acted as though it were "the Fable of *Proserpines Rape*" (IV.iii.83), Crates and Theanor claim that she "must and will conceal it" (II.iii.21), strengthening their vision with the statement "The woman is no *Lucrece*" (II.iii.22). This remark harbours ambiguity: is Merione not akin to Lucrece, embodying both the exemplary and the unideal aspects of chastity, or does she possess a resilience that her Roman predecessor could not command?⁹ Various interpretations are possible, yet it is undeniable that in being "no Lucrece", Merione explores different paths after the wrong she has suffered.

Until the tragic violation, Merione's self-perception was marked by her alleged lack of eloquence. She yielded to her brother Leonidas's decision on her marrying Agenor¹⁰ with a weak argument: "you may lead me / Whither you please" (I.ii.49-50), but her language

9 However, Lucrece's narrative provides Merione with a framework for her possible behaviour: "I have read / Somewhere I am sure, of such an injury / Done to a Lady: and how she durst dye" (II.ii.138-40).

10 Leonidas points out to Merione that Theanor's affections are not under his own control but are subject to the approval of his mother: "the Queene his Mother / Must give allowance, which to you is barr'd up" (I.ii.27-8). This privilege is currently denied to Merione.

changes after the assault. Despite refraining from direct revenge on her rapist, her insistence on marrying him appears as a subtle form of retribution, not explicitly commented upon by the playwrights. Merione's insistence on her tarnished self might not be a result of internalised social beliefs about raped women, but rather a reflection of her desire to chart a positive future for both herself and Theanor, especially if Theanor survives. Could Merione be engaging in a form of dissimulation, a strategy often imposed on female characters in some of the plays of the period? It is a possibility worth considering. Paradoxically, however, her pursuit of revenge may not be aimed at her assailant, Theanor, who is referred to as the "evil Prince" in the *dramatis personæ*, but rather at his mother, the unnamed queen of the play, whose acts marred Merione's happiness. Nonetheless, the brutality she suffered becomes an opportunity for her to challenge her brother's and the Queen's authority.

Following the peaceful resolution of Corinth's war with Argos, the Queen arranged a dynastic marriage between Agenor and Merione. Theanor, previously betrothed to Merione, was furious at losing his intended bride and chose to turn his initial love rhetoric ("A blessing, 'tis not in the Fates to equall [...] what once / I lov'd above my selfe", I.iii.87-91) into rage through a heinous act of abduction and rape (shrouded in darkness and disguised, to make himself unidentifiable). Indeed, the mother plays the part of a queen so deeply committed to the cause of justice that she would be ready to endure even the execution of her own son. Her influence permeates the stage even when she is not on it, inciting rebellious reactions from the characters in the play – especially Theanor and Merione. Such an interpretation could enhance the depth of the play's title and highlight the intricacies of power and agency within the text.

After the rape, Merione enters the stage "*as newly ravished*" (II.i.SD); she then implores her abuser to marry her and delivers a melancholic monologue spanning fifty-one lines, culminating in her dramatic fainting. Rather than simply wallowing in despair, however, Merione confronts the agent of what she considers an "unmanly violence" (II.i.24) and urges him to think upon marriage as a means of cleansing the wrong committed. The reference to her "fair temple" (II.i.27) being sacrilegiously robbed conveys a violation of her dignity and purity. Despite the brutality she experienced, Merione surpris-

ingly shows a willingness to forgive and move forward, appealing to the conscience of the villain. The introduction of a dagger, referred to as “medicine”, adds a dramatic touch; it is a reminder of Lucrece’s motif, indicating Merione’s initial disposition to face extreme consequences – either for the sake of justice or resolution¹¹. Nonetheless, the use of the term ‘ravished’ in the stage direction is ambiguous if compared to the more decisive ‘raped’, which clearly denotes the violent taking of something that belongs to somebody else. Ravishment brings forth implications of “transport”, “rapture”, and “ecstasy”, implying being swept away by intense emotions¹² (Catty 1999, 14). It connotes ravishment as a manifold emotional experience, one that may not be entirely unwelcome or fraught with conflicting feelings. Barbara Baines (2003, 87), much like the ancient philosopher St. Augustine before her, explored the possibility that there were unforeseen emotional moments for Lucrece in the midst of tragedy, which defied the conventional victim archetype. This daring perspective significantly resonates with Merione’s experience, particularly given her complex feelings for Theanor. As a result, the scene becomes intriguingly ambiguous, thickening the tragicomic plot and inviting the reader to untangle the threads of the story.

It is unclear whether Merione adopts “an antic disposition”, similar to Hamlet’s feigned madness, to mask her intent for revenge, or if the villain’s act has drastically changed her personality. Yet, the following stage direction adds an element of surprise: “*Enter sixe disguis’d, singing and dancing to a horrid Musick, and sprinkling water on her face*” (II.i.SD). The sprinkling of water on Merione’s face suggests a somewhat perverted baptismal ritual, granting her a rebirth after metaphorically experiencing death (having lost her virgin identity). This newfound life empowers her with an unforeseen strength, yet again distinguishing her from the classical figure of Lucrece.

As one can expect from a tragicomedy, especially one by Fletcher, *The Queen of Corinth* features complex plot twists and reaches a crescendo with Theanor’s thirst for revenge with performing a new rape, this

11 See footnote 9.

12 Possibly, an allusion to John Donne’s *Holy Sonnet 14*, “Except you enthrall me, never shall be free / Nor ever chaste, except you ravish me”, suggesting a longing for a deep, transformative, and all-encompassing spiritual experience.

time on Beliza, a beautiful heiress of Corinth and Euphanes's beloved. Upon learning of Theanor's intention to violate her, his friend Crates reports the matter to the Queen in a state of indignation. This situation echoes, for instance, the delicate dynamics of Isabella's substitution for Mariana in *Measure for Measure*. Motivated by her love for Theanor, Merione willingly takes the place of Beliza, thus exposing herself to what is vividly described as "a second Ravishment" (V.iv.110).

4. *An ironic happy ending*

Theanor is put on trial by the Queen herself, who reads Lycurgus's law against the rape of virgins, which empowers the victim to select the rapist's fate: either marriage or execution. Both women, Beliza and Merione, have the right to claim retribution: the former, dressed in sombre black, seeks execution, while the latter, dressed in white, commands marriage. Merione criticises Beliza's attempt to execute Theanor, deeming it as "bloody" (V.iv.117); she implores the court to be "the image of Joves throne", to intercede "between [Theanor] and his Justice", and suggests a "mild sentence" that aligns with the Queen's position as a mother and a rightful ruler (V.iv.102-06). In contrast, Beliza emphasises her claim with legal boundaries: Shylock-like, she emphatically "demand[s] but what / The Law allowes me" (V.iv.67-68), claiming that granting clemency to a repeat rapist would be an offence to justice. Both women continuously plead for mercy and justice¹³, mirroring the dynamics in Shakespeare's *Measure for Measure*, while the courtiers praise the Queen for her stern and "masculine constancy" (V.iv.129). While a modern reader may view the courtiers' adulation of the Queen's "masculine constancy" with scepticism, it actually celebrates her as a paragon of justice to the extent of likening her to the Roman Cato (V.iv.136). In the end, the Queen's decision is both fair and wise: she shows intellectual sagacity in recognising the underlying purpose of Lycurgus's law. Acknowledging the severity of Theanor's wrongdoing, she deems marriage an unsuitable course of action for a man guilty of such villainy. On the other hand, Theanor, seeking redemption, submits to his fate yet implores per-

13 Nancy Cotton Pearse notes that the main focus here is not only on chastity, but instead on the clash between mercy and justice (Pearse 1973, 158).

mission to wed Merione prior to his passing, in an effort to restore her honour. In turn, Euphanes reveals that the alleged second rape was a bed trick orchestrated by Merione without Theanor's knowledge. The unfolding drama takes unexpected turns, and Euphanes's revelation makes it clear that Theanor has 'only' committed one rape, leading him to marry Merione, while Beliza finds marital bliss with her lover, Euphanes. The lustful Queen is also content as she proposes to Prince Agenor, who happily accepts ("a blessing which I durst not hope for", V.iv.231). In *The Queen of Corinth*, the law is restorative and provides healing for the wounds of rape; a tragicomic resolution is finally achieved.

In this complex scenario, Merione's substitution for Beliza blurs the distinction between rape and marital intercourse. The original violation of Merione morphs into a twisted form of the bed-trick device, culminating in the consummation of the marriage that was initially intended for Theanor and Merione. Merione's act of self-sacrifice, replacing Beliza, transforms the act of rape into one of seemingly consensual intercourse.

Steeped in melancholy, obliterated by marriage woes, and socially tainted by the stigma of rape, Merione survives the final act, remaining physically alive. "No *Lucrece*", she has willingly handed control over to Theanor, submitting to his ownership and authority without the physical self-destruction of *Lucrece*. This action underscores the recurring stereotype of women as commodities, with marriage imposing further restrictions on the already limited freedom Merione enjoyed in her fatherless status at the beginning of the play – later hindered by her brother and the Queen's influence. Initially positioned as a state commodity – a symbolic gesture of peace to Prince Agenor and a signifier of the end of the war – she later becomes a commodity of the micro-state, the family economic unit. Here, she becomes both literally and symbolically subservient, doomed to the ruling prince, Theanor. Merione's choice stands for an ambiguous form of suicide, as she deliberately obliterates her identity without physically destroying herself. This prompts questions about subjectivity, especially concerning women in the early Stuart period. Interestingly, Merione seems to believe in the existence of a subjective self, which she actually attempts to suppress – an ironic situation where self-fashioning is undermined by social and cultural forces. The rape of Merione is

emblematic of this pervasive patriarchal hegemony, which implies that a woman may resort to self-destruction in response to such a violation – either literally, as seen in the case of Lucrece, or symbolically, with Merione. Her decision to take up an identity forged by her husband is Merione's sole effort at autonomy. For this reason, *The Queen of Corinth* provides a conflation of self and cultural construction, with an ongoing uncertainty regarding the legitimacy of either.

In her final act, Merione embodies a Christ-like role that exhibits pardon and redemption. The act of marrying her oppressor and forgiving him metaphorically kills her, symbolising the end of her former life and the loss of her innocence. Her selflessness and magnanimity breathe life into Theanor, thus showcasing the transformative power of absolution and redemption. The play takes on the form of a tragicomedy that sheds a final irony on the Queen and Leonidas, the architects of the tragic outset. Only if Merione truly and independently wanted to marry Theanor, irrespective of societal expectations, would the ironic victory be theirs alone. If that were the case, then I agree with the Queen's feelings in the play's last lines: "Then on unto the Temple, where the rights / Of marriage ended, we'll finde new delights" (V.iv.234-35).

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