

## Ritual Work on Human Flesh:

### Livy's Lucretia and the Rape of the Body Politic

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The question may suggest itself to some persons why it is that, in the many changes that carry a state from freedom to tyranny, and from servitude to liberty, some are effected by bloodshed, and others without any. In fact, history shows that in such changes sometimes an infinite number of lives are sacrificed; whilst at other times it has not cost the life of a single person. Such was the revolution in Rome which transferred the government from the kings to the consuls, where only the Tarquins were expelled, and no one else suffered injury . . . , [W]hen such a change is effected by the general consent of the citizens, who have made the state great, then there is no reason why the people should wish to harm any one but the chiefs of the state. Such was the case with the government of the kings in Rome, and the expulsion of the Tarquins . . .

Machiavelli. *Discourses*, III.7

... we see that women have been the cause of great dissensions and much ruin to states, and have caused great damage to those who govern them. We have seen, in the history of Rome, that the outrage committed upon Lucretia deprived the Tarquins of their throne, and the attempt upon Verginia caused the Decemvirs the loss of their authority. Thus, Aristotle mentions as one of the first causes of the ruin of tyrants the outrages committed by them upon the wives and daughters of others, either by violence or seduction; and we have discussed this subject at length when treating of conspiracies.

Machiavelli. *Discourses*, III.26<sup>1</sup>

#### I. The One for the Many

Machiavelli is not famous for his compassion, but even so his momentary erasure of the victim whose destruction marks the founding of the Republic in III.7 is provocative, since he mentions Lucretia explicitly in a later chapter of the *Discourses*. This slip of the pen—

or momentary lapse of memory—signifies no minor omission on the part of one of the Western tradition's most cynical and incisive political theorists. Here Machiavelli provides us with a glimpse of the sacrificial mechanism at work on a textual level: just as Tarquin was expelled from Rome, Lucretia is temporarily expelled from the historical record. Why? Is she the "no one" of the first citation? Or is Lucretia the "one" who is killed in place of the many, the "infinite numbers" who otherwise would have been "sacrificed"—thus the symbolic non-person or "no one" of the surrogate victim?

Memory of the female victim, raped and killed, is hard to sustain. Memory of the tyrant is not; nor will memory of the Tarquin family's many attempts to recapture dominance of Rome fade from historical memory for Machiavelli. How is it that a writer this smart can, in one chapter of his text, claim that "no one" other than the expelled tyrant suffered by the revolution of 510 BCE, while in another he refers to the linked stories of violated women, Lucretia and Verginia, each of whose deaths marks the overthrow of a tyranny and the reaffirmation of the rights of the common people in Rome? In one moment, the victims and the violence used against them are suppressed; in another, they are held up literally as classic political proof-texts. The contradiction is not original to Machiavelli. It is part of the long literary tradition of these stories.

In what follows, I will concentrate on Livy's account of the rape of Lucretia, commemorated by tradition as the event that precipitated the overthrow of the monarchy and the founding of the Republic about 510 B.C. and the attempted rape and actual murder of Verginia, which mark the establishment of the Twelve Tables of Roman Law and the overthrow of the corrupt Decemvirs in 450 B.C. In both instances, the leaders of the revolution are linked by blood and marriage to the female victims; in both

cases, these champions of the popular cause (*libertas*) achieve new political status as a result. From the rape of Lucretia the first consuls are created; from the murder of Verginia the Tribunes are reestablished with new powers. How do the two women figure in all of this?

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