

THE RESURRECTION OF LUCRETIA
An Opera in Three Acts
Adapted from Livy's History of Rome Bks. I & II
Libretto and Music by Patricia Herzog
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Summary and Synopsis

The story of Lucretia is an important one, historically and for our time. From ancient sources, principally Livy's History of Rome, we have it that in 509 BCE a Roman noblewoman, much admired for displaying the virtue of marital chastity, committed suicide after she was raped. The rapist, aptly named Sextus, was the youngest son of King Tarquinius, a tyrant much hated by the Roman people. And so, the story goes, Lucius Junius Brutus, purported ancestor of Caesar's assassin, brandished the bloody knife with which Lucretia killed herself and incited the revolt that overthrew the monarchy and ushered in the Roman Republic.

We cannot be sure that Lucretia existed; the earliest accounts we have, including Livy's, were written many centuries later. About her continuing hold on our imagination, however, there can no doubt. Lucretia's rape/suicide has been the subject of countless depictions and portrayals, some of them very great, in painting, sculpture, plays, poetry and opera. In the visual and plastic arts, she is typically shown dead with the knife still in her chest, or with the knife pressing against her flesh just before it goes in, or with Sextus, knife in hand, forcefully subduing her. The story of Brutus, founder and first leader of the Roman Republic, has also been depicted many times, but the hero's deeds, as artistic material, are no match for Lucretia's violation and self-destruction.

Livy makes it perfectly clear that Lucretia is innocent. The very next day she calls upon her husband Collatinus to avenge her. "My heart is guiltless," she says, "as death shall be my witness." Collatinus pleads with her. The mind only, he insists, and not the body that sins. In no doubt about her innocence, Lucretia nevertheless insists she must be punished. Her last words, just before plunging in the knife she has hidden under her gown, are that no unchaste woman should live through her example.

No known precedent, either in Roman law or custom, decrees a death sentence for being raped. Nor is there record even of an adulterous woman being put to death. What, therefore, can we make of Lucretia's suicide?

The pagan Lucretia of Livy's Rome is, unlike the Christianized Lucretia of Benjamin Britten's opera, concerned with how she appears. Paraphrasing Saint Augustine, it was not enough for Lucretia to "enjoy the glory of chastity" privately,

within her own soul or in the sight of God. Lucretia kills herself in order to safeguard her reputation for marital chastity. So repugnant to her is the prospect of appearing unchaste, so jealous is she of her virtuous reputation, that Lucretia lets Sextus have his way with her, not when he threatens to kill her, but only after he tells her he will kill his slave along with her and place the two in each other's arms, thus making it appear as though she were an adulteress.

If Lucretia would not have her own reputation sullied by the appearance of adultery, neither would she have an adulterous woman get away with it by crying rape in the name of an unpunished Lucretia. Lying at the root of Lucretia's suicide are, relatedly, moral vanity and a general presumption against believing the testimony of women in matters of sexual conduct. Lucretia is innocent. But what of the others? We cannot peer into their souls. Why should we believe them? Who is to say they do not lie?

Today, we are ready to believe the women. What if, two and a half millennia earlier, Lucretia had believed them, too? It is tempting to imagine the terrible damage that could have been avoided had this noble and courageous woman seen the error of her ways. *The Resurrection of Lucretia* invites us to re-imagine a Lucretia who lives to witness the near-tragic consequences of her misguided example, set the record straight, and redirect the course of history.

CHARACTERS_(in order of appearance)

Arruns (baritone), middle son of Lucius Tarquinius Superbus (“Tarquin the Proud”), the last king of Rome
Titus (tenor), eldest son of King Tarquin
Lucius Junius Brutus (baritone), nephew of King Tarquin/cousin of Arruns and Titus, legendary founder and first consul of the Roman Republic and purported ancestor of Caesar’s assassin
Sextus (tenor), youngest son of King Tarquin
Collatinus (bass-baritone), husband of Lucretia, and with Brutus, co-consul of the Roman Republic
Lucretia (soprano), wife of Collatinus
Aurelia (soprano), servant of Lucretia
Sabina (mezzo), servant of Lucretia
Valerius (baritone), friend and fellow revolutionary of Collatinus and Brutus
Crowd at Lucretia’s mock funeral
Two unnamed noblewomen women (soprano and mezzo)
Two unnamed servant women (soprano and mezzo)
Lucretius (bass-baritone), father of Lucretia and successor consul to Brutus
Crowd (male chorus) at Brutus’ funeral
Women worshippers (sopranos, mezzos) at Brutus’ funeral

SETTING

509 BCE

The Oracle at Delphi on Mount Parnassus in Greece

An encampment near Ardea, a town outside Rome

The house of Lucretia and Collatinus in Collatia

Unnamed place of Lucretia’s hiding in the countryside not far from Rome

The Capitoline Hill, Rome

ACT I

Scene 1. Mount Parnassus, Greece. Midday under a sweltering sun. Having received a bad omen, King Tarquin sends his two eldest sons, Arruns and Titus, to consult the oracle of Apollo at Delphi. Cousin Brutus is with them. An enemy of the Tarquins, Brutus conceals his opposition by playing the fool. The oracle foretells that he who kisses his mother first will inherit Rome. The sons are in a hurry to get back to their mother. Brutus, concealing his cunning, stumbles to the ground and kisses mother earth. Taking him to be a bumbling idiot, Arruns and Titus insult Brutus to his face. Unbeknownst to them, the fate of the Tarquins is now sealed.

Scene 2. Some weeks later. Early evening. Crickets are chirping. The King's sons, including now the youngest son Sextus, are with Collatinus, Lucretia's husband, stationed in the countryside overlooking Ardea, a town to which the Romans have laid siege. Having had their supplies cut off, the Ardeans are starving. The men keep watch, waiting for them to surrender. They are bored. They start drinking and thinking about their wives. What are the women doing now, they wonder: something they wouldn't if their husbands were at home? The sons suspect their wives, whereas Collatinus is completely confident that Lucretia is above suspicion. The men agree to settle the matter by spying on their wives.

Scene 3. Later that same night. The house of Lucretia and Collatinus in Collatia, seen from afar. The men are spying on the beautiful and chaste Lucretia, peacefully weaving. The King's sons have already seen their wives, whose unbecoming behavior they make fun of at their own expense. The sight of Lucretia enflames Sextus with passion. Collatinus waxes triumphant. He condescends to reassure Sextus ("Not every wife is faultless in her virtue. Not every wife is like Lucretia."), making matters worse.

ACT II

Scene 1. The following evening. Inside the house in Collatia. Lucretia proudly displays to her servants, Aurelia and Sabina, the exquisite cloth of wool and silk that they've just finished weaving. Lucretia playfully makes the women guess what it will be made into, and for whom. Aurelia, who is about to be married, is astonished to learn that the cloth is to be her wedding gown. Their talk, which then turns to marriage, is interrupted by an unexpected visitor. Who can it be at such a late hour? Enter Prince Sextus. He is on a military expedition, he explains. His horse is exhausted and will go no further. He also has with him a slave. Lucretia greets him as befits a royal guest. It is late and everyone retires.

Scene 2. Later that same night. Sextus is in Lucretia's darkened bedchamber. He tries to rouse her, gently at first and then with force. He would woo her. When that fails, he brandishes a knife and threatens to kill her. Lucretia would die rather than submit. Finally, Sextus threatens to shame her: "Beside you will lie the body of my slave. I'll say I found him in your arms. All Rome will know your shame!"

At this, Lucretia relents and lets Sextus rape her, insisting that her husband will avenge her. Sextus, who would have the last word on revenge, tells Lucretia about the men's spying and Collatinus' boast.

Scene 3. The next morning. Lucretia's bedchamber. Collatinus is at Lucretia's side. With him are Valerius, Brutus, Aurelia and Sabina. The women tell the men how Lucretia cried out for her husband in the middle of the night. They recount Sextus' unexpected visit and sudden departure. Collatinus now understands that Sextus—a kinsman, no less—raped Lucretia. A semi-conscious Lucretia mistakes her husband for Sextus and resists his attempts to console her. Fully aware now, she accuses Collatinus of having betrayed her in boasting of her chastity. Collatinus begs his wife's forgiveness and insists on her innocence: "The will only, and not the body, sins." Knowing she is innocent, Lucretia nevertheless insists she must be punished with death so that she can set the right example for other women. In desperation, Collatinus turns away to look at Valerius for support, whereupon Lucretia raises the knife she has hidden under her gown. Brutus steps out of the shadows and stays her hand. Showing his true colors, the shrewd Brutus convinces everyone that overthrowing the Tarquins and Lucretia's exacting example would be served equally well were Lucretia merely *thought* to be dead. The scene ends with the men planning her fake funeral.

ACT III

Scene 1. The public square in Collatia. The presumed body of Lucretia is in a casket shrouded with the cloth that was to be for Aurelia's wedding. Brutus delivers the funeral oration, extolling Lucretia's chastity and inciting the people to revolt. The men march off to Rome while the women stay behind to tend the tomb. Deranged with grief, Aurelia prays to what she imagines is Lucretia's shrine. Her devotion inspires two noblewomen to build an actual shrine to Lucretia at an abandoned site on the Capitoline Hill.

Scene 2. Later that same year. A hiding place in the country, not far from Rome. Lucretia wanders the fields picking wildflowers. The women who tend her, not knowing who she is, bring terrible news from Rome. Brutus, founder and leader of the Roman Republic, is dead. He and Arruns, son of the deposed King, met on horseback and stabbed each other through. Hiding her grief, Lucretia resolves to disguise herself and go to Rome. Brutus must be honored, and, as he alone knew her whereabouts, Collatinus must learn where she is hiding so they can secretly reunite.

Scene 3. The Capitoline Hill, Rome. The next day. Brutus' body lies in state. The elderly Lucretius, Lucretia's father and successor to Brutus' consulship, eulogizes the fallen hero. A veiled Lucretia looks on. The crowd swears, in an oath to Brutus, never again to know the will of tyrants. Nearby is Lucretia's shrine. Women worshippers, dressed modestly in woolen robes and hoods, go in and out. The men file past Brutus' body. Unnoticed, two women dressed in regular clothing approach the shrine. They are Aurelia and Sabina. Aurelia now

wonders if she, too, has been raped, and would pray to Lucretia for guidance. She enters the shrine despite Sabina's warning: "No voice in there. Just empty air." Moments later, she emerges in a trancelike state with a knife in her hand: "I was raped. Now I must die like Lucretia." Lucretia rushes in and stays Aurelia's hand, just as Brutus had done hers. Aurelia resists the unknown woman and wrests the knife back. Lucretia drops her veils. Aurelia is stunned. Lucretius thinks he has seen a ghost. Lucretia tells Aurelia she was mistaken. She turns to the crowd and recants the testimony of her apparent suicide, declaring: "Let this be the oath of Lucretia. Believe them! Believe the women!" One by one, in a chorus of escalating voices, the women worshippers, and also now Aurelia and Sabina, take up Lucretia's cry: "Believe them! Believe the women!"

End of Opera