

## *Reclaiming the Canon for Women's Voices*

A talk given by Patricia Herzog  
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In his *Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis*, Freud speaks of the aim of psychoanalysis in terms that have come to be a kind of watchword: *Wo Es war, soll Ich werden*. "Where id was, there ego shall be," or, in a more faithful translation, "Where it was, there I shall be." It is a work of culture, Freud goes on to say, rather like the draining of the Zuider Zee." [(Es ist Kulturarbeit, etwa wie die Trockenlegung der Zuydersee.)]

In James Strachey's translation, the so-called Standard Edition, "a work of culture" (*Kulturarbeit*, literally "culturework,") is translated as "reclamation." While not a literal translation, "reclamation" nevertheless makes sense in the context of Freud's statement as a whole. The draining of a body of water in order to reclaim land is by definition an act of reclamation.

Reclaiming, a way of taking something back, is a work of culture, then. Reclaiming, not claiming, because the taking is of something already there-- latent or suppressed or repressed. In psychoanalysis, what is taken back is psychic material that had become unavailable to the ego through repression. Extending the land use imagery, we might say, with Freud, who elsewhere says as much himself, that what is taken back is territory, a tract of land that unconsciously had been made intractable.

The retelling of stories is also a kind of reclaiming. Existing material is transformed by the creator and made available to the audience in a new way. We are asked to reconsider, to imagine how things might have happened or ended differently, to see characters/situations/relations in a new light. If the retelling succeeds, we will think the story is not just novel but plausible or persuasive. In the hands of a genius, we might elevate it to the status of the canon and not even know that other versions of the story ever existed.

This is surely true of Puccini's *Tosca*, *Madama Butterfly* and *Turandot*, whose stories I have been retelling in my own operas. Such a genius was Puccini that hardly anyone knows the historical, literary or legendary antecedents of these heroines. And yet, in this material there is much to be reclaimed. The *Tosca* of Victorien Sardou's play is a powerfully independent woman who dies defiant and unrepentant, not with pious contrition, as in the opera. *Butterfly*, too, does not kill herself at the end of the opera, but rather disappears at the end of the original story by John Luther Long. And *Turandot*, the 13<sup>th</sup> c. Mongol princess who in Puccini's opera hates men and epitomizes cruelty, was, as we learn from Marco Polo among others, simply too wise a woman and too brave a warrior to be ruled by any man.

In the past few years I have written two opera endings, to *Tosca* and *Madama Butterfly*, and six full-length libretti, one of which, *The Resurrection of Lucretia*, I am now writing the music to. Why opera? you ask. Certainly, I am no Puccini. But I do hear voices, and the gloriously sung voices of Puccini's heroines are what inspired me to take up this project.

Not all my heroines have been known for existing operatically. Hester Prynne, Cordelia and Letty Mason, heroine of Lillian Gish's great silent movie *The Wind*, are chiefly known through other artistic means. Today, however, in keeping with our theme, I want to say a few words about Lucretia, who is best known to many of us as the heroine of Benjamin Britten's opera, *The Rape of Lucretia*.

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 noblewoman, much admired for displaying the virtue of marital chastity, was raped by the youngest son, aptly named Sextus, of King Tarquinius. The tyrannous Tarquins were 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 ended the monarchy and ushered in the Roman Republic.

We cannot be sure that Lucretia ever really existed, as the historical accounts we have were written many centuries later. About her continuing hold on our imagination, however, there can be no doubt. Lucretia's rape/suicide has been the subject of countless depictions and portrayals, some of them very great. In the visual and plastic arts, she is typically shown dead with knife in chest, or poised with knife about to go in, or with Sextus, knife in hand, subduing her. I do not have time to show you slides here, but you might want to visit the Gardner Museum, if you haven't already, and take a look at Botticelli's painting called *The Story of Lucretia*.

The story of Brutus, who founded and led the Roman Republic as its first co-consul, has also been told many times, but the hero's deeds, as artistic material, are no match for Lucretia's violation and self-destruction.

Even more disturbing than Lucretia's rape is her suicide. She knows she is innocent, as do the men she afterwards summons to her side, including her husband Collatinus, whom she calls upon to avenge her. "My heart is guiltless," Livy has her say, "as death shall be my witness." Despite the pleading of Collatinus, Lucretia insists she must be *punished*. She raises the knife, hidden under her gown, and, before anyone can stop her, plunges it into her chest.

Where does the innocent Lucretia get the idea that she must be punished--and with death, no less? 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. Certainly, Lucretia doesn't get the idea from her husband. Collatinus pleads with her not to reason in such a self-destructive way. The mind *only*, he insists, and not the body, sins.

Livy has Lucretia say—as her final words, just before taking her life--that no unchaste woman should live through her example. Let us stop to consider this. No unchaste woman should live through the example of a chaste woman whose body has been violated. A vexing declaration, to be sure. What can Lucretia possibly be saying?

In the morality of ancient Rome, what matters above all else is one's honor and reputation before others. It is not enough, paraphrasing the Church Father Augustine, for Lucretia to "enjoy the glory of chastity" privately, within her own

soul or in the sight of God. Lucretia is, therefore, understandably jealous of her reputation for marital chastity. Indeed, so repugnant to her was the idea of being *thought* to be unchaste that earlier in the story she lets Sextus have his way with her, not when he threatens to kill her, but only after he threatens to kill his slave along with her and place the two in each other's arms, thus making it seem as though Lucretia had been committing adultery.

Now just as Lucretia would not have her own reputation sullied by the *appearance* of adultery, so, too, we might imagine, she would not have an adulterous woman go unpunished by appearing to be a chaste rape victim like herself. The will is hidden, you see. It's her word against his. Who, therefore, is to say that a woman crying rape does not lie?

The general presumption against believing the testimony of women in matters of sexual conduct is what lies at the root of Lucretia's suicide. This is an interpretation, admittedly, but it is not mine alone.

The heroine of *The Resurrection of Lucretia* does not die—none of my heroines dies. Instead, she lives to witness the near-tragic consequences of her misguided example. In the final scene, Lucretia attends Brutus' funeral *incognito*, her death having been faked so it could be used to incite the people to revolt. The mourners have just sworn an oath to Brutus never again to know the will of tyrants. Some moments later, Lucretia's beloved servant Aurelia emerges from a crowd of women worshipping at a nearby shrine dedicated to the memory of Lucretia and the virtue of martial chastity. Aurelia has a knife. She's been raped

and must die. “Who will believe I did not will it?” she says. “Who will believe I do not lie?”

Just before the opera ends, Lucretia stays Aurelia’s hand, drops her disguise—literally, as she’s been covered in veils--and takes it all back. “I was mistaken,” she tells her. “In my virtue was I vain. Who was I to say the women do not speak the truth. Aurelia, swear by me still! Let this be the oath of Lucretia: Believe them! Believe the women!”

It is tempting to imagine what terrible damage could have been avoided over the past two and a half millennia, had Lucretia actually said something like this. I, at least, like to imagine it. Where unbelief was, there belief shall be. Where there was self-doubt, there shall be self-possession. Reclaiming the canon for women’s voices is a work of culture not at all unlike turning back the tide of a ragingly destructive sea.