

SHAKESPEARE, THE EKPHRASTIC TRANSLATOR

PIA BRÎNZEU

West University of Timișoara, Romania

“...eyes do learn, do read, do look...”
(*The Rape of Lucrece*, l.616)

Abstract

In *The Rape of Lucrece*, the Shakespearean heroine admires a wall-painting illustrating a scene from the Trojan War. The two hundred lines of the poem in which Lucrece describes the ancient characters involved in the war represent a remarkable piece of ekphrastic transposition. It produces a vivid effect in the poem's narrative, draws attention to the power of ekphrasis in guiding the reader's interpretation, and represents an unrivalled example of embedded ekphrasis, unique in Renaissance poetry.

Keywords: *Shakespeare, Rape of Lucrece, ekphrasis, inter-semiotic transposition, verbal and visual codes, translation process*

The Rape of Lucrece has recently received serious critical attention for the ekphrastic digression undertaken by Lucrece while admiring a wall-painting before committing suicide (Dundas, Bal, Wells, Meek). In this poem, Shakespeare undertakes a complex semiotic operation when translating the visual signs of the painting into verbal ones, a translation known as *ekphrasis* and defined as a partial transposition of a visual source - represented by a real or imagined artistic object (painting, sculpture, tapestry, urn, etc.) – into a verbal literary target text in prose or verse (Brînzeu 114).

There are several other examples of ekphrastic transpositions in Shakespeare's drama: in *Cymbeline* (II.4.82-83), Iachimo describes the tapestry in Imogen's bedroom; in *Antony and Cleopatra* (II.2.200-201), Enobarbus describes Cleopatra's arrival on the barge as overpicturing a beautiful portrait of Venus; in *The Winter's Tale*, Hermione is described as a statue that is in no way different from reality. It was a common procedure in the period, since we can find ekphrastic translations in Samuel Daniel's *Complaint of Rosamond* (1592) and Michael Drayton's *Mortimeriados* (1596), where characters encounter

works of visual art and proceed to describe them in a more or less detailed way. In poetry, Shakespeare resorts to ekphrastic effects only in *The Rape of Lucrece* (1366-1582), where “a piece / Of skilful painting” is described.¹ It is this Shakespearean ekphrasis that I shall focus upon in the present essay, with the intention of demonstrating that it is a remarkable piece of inter-semiotic transposition, more than a simple ornamental detail in a larger poetic structure. It produces a novel and vivid effect in the poem’s narrative, draws the attention to the power of ekphrastic descriptions in guiding the readers’ interpretations, and represents an unrivalled example of embedded ekphrasis.

The story of the poem is known: it deals with the rape of Lucrece by Sextus Tarquinius, son of the king of Rome. Lucrece is so offended by Tarquinius’s crime that she wants to put an end to her life, not before confessing her loss of chastity to her father and husband. Her corpse will be exposed in the streets of Rome, determining the Romans to rebel against the monarch and banish him from the city, thus transforming Rome into a republic. While waiting for her family to arrive, Lucrece admires the wall-painting “made for Priam’s Troy” (1366-67) and identifies herself with the characters involved in the Trojan war, mainly with Hecuba, the legendary queen who lost her husband, King Priam, and her children in the war broken out after Helen’s rape by Paris. Watching the picture and describing it in detail, Lucrece expresses her sense of desolation through invoking the civic purpose destroyed by rape both in Troy and in Rome.

Shakespeare’s version of the story distinguishes itself from its sources, i.e. Livy’s *The History of Rome*, Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* and *Fasti*, and Chaucer’s *Legend of Good Women*, because Shakespeare’s presentation of the rape is not only a personal and social disaster, a crime against Lucrece’s person, family and city, but also a significant ekphrastic interlude. Nothing of the kind is mentioned by Livy in *The Roman History* (1600, as cited in Macdonald 81), where Lucretia’s tragedy is presented in a concise form:

For when as Tarquinius Superbus by his prowde tyrannicall demenure, had incurred the hatred of all men: he at last upon the forcible outrage and villanie done by Sex. Tarquinius (his sonne) in the night season upon the bodie of Lucretia; who sending for her father, Tricipitinus, and her husband, Collatinus, besought them earnestly not to see her death unrevenged, and so with a knife killed herself: he I say, by the meanes of Brutus, especially was driven and expelled out of Rome, when he had raigned five and twentie yeares.

Neither does Ovid’s or Chaucer’s Lucrece comment on a painting or tapestry. Chaucer (509) does indeed describe Lucrece waiting for her family to

¹ Although some critics treat the object described by Lucrece as a tapestry (MacDonald), I agree with Dundas, Wells and Meek that it is a wall-painting, since the physiognomic details noted in Lucrece’s description are too minute to appear in a woven cloth.

arrive, but she sits and weeps silently, unable to speak. It is her silence which resonates throughout the rape and its aftermath, emphasizing a special state of mind:

She sit in halle with a sorweful sighte.
Hyre frendes axen what her eylen mighte,
And who was deed? And she sit ay wepyng;
A word, for shame, forth ne myght she brynge,

Ne upon hem she durste nat beholde.

But atte laste of Tarquiny she hem tolde
This rewful cas and al this thing horrible. (1832-38)

It is only Shakespeare who attempts to detail in a voyeuristic way the difficult moments which anticipate Lucrece's confession and death. Miola and Meek have suggested that Shakespeare might have done it under the influence of Virgil's narrative description of Aeneas observing similar images of the fall of Troy in Book I of the *Aeneid*. E. H. Gombrich (176-177) has also noticed a similarity with Philostratus's description of paintings in *Imagines*, but he believes that there is no real painting or tapestry in *The Rape*, Shakespeare imitating another ekphrastic description.

It is irrelevant whether Shakespeare is original or not in this part of his poem, whether he creates a real or notional ekphrasis, and whether or not the description of the painting is a pastiche of another ekphrastic text. Much more intriguing is the fact that, in spite of its heightened poetic effect, the ekphrastic transposition has only very rarely attracted the attention of twentieth-century criticism. Critics have mainly concentrated on the idea that the rape is experienced as a tragedy capable of irrevocably changing the life of a family and the progress of a state, and that there are important genderized, social, and linguistic issues related to the body. Thus MacDonald (1994) analyzes *The Rape of Lucrece's* obsession with speech; Joel Fineman (1991) offers an in-depth analysis of how *The Rape of Lucrece*, like Shakespeare's sonnets, fundamentally deconstructs the traditional poetics of praise; Jane Newman (1994) argues that the poem actually limits Lucrece's ability to act precisely by valorizing her self-sacrifice as a political act; and Mary Jacobus (1982) sees it as a manifestation of the linguistic resistance of the feminine to incorporation within male master narratives. These authors consider the ekphrastic moment of the poem of no relevance for their approach, and, accordingly, ignore it.

When ekphrasis becomes the central focus of an essay, as is the case with Meek's *Ekphrasis in The Rape of Lucrece* and *The Winter's Tale*, it is used to exemplify the way in which ekphrasis turns into "a vivid narration" (Meek 390), voicing the Renaissance perceptions of rape, body, gender issues, and history. For Wells (97-98), the description of the Troy painting facilitates a transition from the domestic, lyric space to the political, epic one and subserves a broader

critique of the conversion with political ends of the lyric image into an allegorical image. For Dundas (15), Shakespeare's most developed ekphrasis is an explicit account of how art works, while for Bal (97) the visual and linguistic systems are opposed in order to illustrate the paradox of mirroring, the mutual production of vision and experience, and the narratability of history. Neither of these critics insists on what, in my opinion, is the poet's main contribution to ekphrasis as a translation process, since he created the most elaborate Renaissance transposition of this kind, and offered a unique example of ekphrastic *mise en abyme*. No other embedded ekphrastic description, similar to the one offered by the merging voices of Shakespeare's Lucrece watching Hecuba and of the narrator describing her, can be found in any other Renaissance or post-Renaissance work, be it a poem, drama or novel.

There are three consecutive stages in an ekphrastic translation. As I have discussed elsewhere (Brînzeu, 109-111), writers who undertake a description of a picture have to watch and "read" the image first, in order to understand it and, sometimes, identify with its characters; second, they select the visual units and decide which ones they want to describe and/or interpret; and, third, they invest the text with literary value, because, if the end result is not a literary text, we cannot speak about an ekphrastic translation. The second stage is very important, and it depends on what the translators choose: to analyse the object, figuring out what it is about, to describe how the subject is organized and presented by the artist, to discuss the history of the painting, to establish a common background with the reader, to explore the relationship between the artist and the subject of the painting, or to make some metapictorial comments. In all cases, these operations emphasize the visibility of the translator and transform the artistic qualities of the source text, i.e. its pictoriality, into literariness, surprising the reader with ever new interpretations of a painting. The ekphrastic translations of the same picture should always be different, encouraging the reader to revisit the object of art after having discovered something unknown about it.

Shakespeare's use of ekphrasis is quite unusual. While in traditional ekphrastic transpositions watching, reading, and understanding the image is less important than the next stages, those of selecting the visual units to be translated, of describing and interpreting them in order to invest the text with literary value, in *The Rape of Lucrece* it is the seeing, gazing, watching, and perceiving of the visual signs that is repeatedly mentioned. The operations are undertaken by both the heroine and the poet, separately or, at times, simultaneously. In the latter case, they merge into an ekphrastic *mise en abyme*, a technical novelty surprising in its a combination of translation, story-telling, and poetry writing.

It is also worth mentioning that Lucrece's description of the wall-painting is anticipated by Tarquin's pseudo-ekphrastic description of Lucrece. On the verge of rape, Tarquin perceives the sleeping woman as a tomb effigy,

with her head “entombed” between the “hills” of her pillow; lying “like a virtuous monument” to be admired by “lewd unhallowed eyes” (391-92). It is a lusty appreciation of chastity and beauty, Tarquin’s “burning” eyes and “beating” heart commanding his hand to march on “to make his stand/ On her bare breast, the heart of all her land” (438-39). The military vocabulary used by Shakespeare (Tarquin’s heart is “alarum striking” (433), his hand climbs “the round turrets” (441) of Lucrece’s breasts, his speech sounds “like a trumpet” (470) before an attack) as well as the suggestion that Lucrece’s breast is “an ivory wall” and her body “a never conquered fort” (482), “a sweet city” (469) which has to be entered, establish the lyric parallelism between the rape of Lucrece and the fall of Troy. The “fall” of Lucrece’s body prepares the reader to accept the conflation of the Greek and Roman worlds and the heroine’s identification with Hecuba. Moreover, as Judith Dundas (13) has noticed, the rape itself is first enacted through the eyes of Tarquin, as we are shown his ominous progress from the “silent wonder of still gazing eyes” (84) to “burning eye” and “greedy eyeballs” (435), until finally, it is the “cockatrice’s dead-killing eye” (540) which shows him transformed from admiring spectator to rapacious possessor. In a similar way, the lusty eyes of Paris raped Helen and kindled the fire that burned Troy.

Eyes are important for Lucrece as well. When she turns to the wall-painting, her eyes become the instrument for understanding what has happened to her as a victim of male aggression and of a tragic historical context. As a wife and mother wholly consecrated to her duty as steward of her husband’s and her sons’ honour, Lucrece turns to the painting and comments on it so as to make the reader understand the similarity between her tragedy and the work of art she views in distress. The reader’s attention is encouraged to concentrate on the object described scene by scene. It is an invitation to visualize the painting, without forgetting that Lucrece’s fate remains essential for the development of the narrative. However, for almost two hundred lines, the art object is foregrounded and tension is created with the help of the oppositions of movement and stasis, narrative action and descriptive scene, reality and illusionistic representation.

Shakespeare insists on how Lucrece’s eyes decode the painting: “she throws her eyes about the painting round” (1499), “she sees a wretched image bound” (1450), “this picture she advisedly perused” (1527), “on this sad shadow Lucrece spends her eyes” (1508). It is a careful, admiring “reading” of the image. Lucrece notices that “the painter labour’d with his skill” (1506), with “wondrous skill” (1528), that he drew “mild” images (1520), describing and giving life to “a thousand lamentable objects” (1373). It is mainly the eyes of the painted characters that show the artist’s “strife” (1377). Lucrece is impressed by the lifelikeness of the “dying eyes” of the soldiers, which “gleam’d forth their

ashy lights, /Like dying coals burnt out in tedious nights” (1378-79), and by the eyes of the gazing Trojans:

And from the towers of Troy there would appear
 The very eyes of men through loop-holes thrust,
 Gazing upon the Greeks with little lust:
 Such sweet observance in this work was had,
 That one might see those far-off eyes look sad. (1382-1386)

After “reading” the painting, Lucrece interprets its component parts. She notices that the great commanders have “grace and majesty”(1387), while younger soldiers have “quick bearing and dexterity” (1389). The “pale cowards” are “marching on with trembling paces” so that the viewer can see how they “quake and tremble” (1391-93). Lucrece also remarks the painter’s art of physiognomy in drawing Ajax and Ulysses, while Achilles’s image is “conceit deceitful, so compact, so kind” (1423). She perceives Hecuba, Priam, Hector, Troilus, Nistor, and Sinon, notices their eyes and the way they look at each other and at her. It is mainly Hecuba, “staring on Priam’s wounds with her old eyes” (1448), who catches Lucrece’s attention and allows the latter’s identification with the world of Troy. In despair, feeling a victim like Hecuba, Lucrece wants to scratch out the angry eyes of all Greek enemies and give the painted woman a voice to express her woes.

She also weeps when she sees how Priam, looking at Sinon’s crying eyes, burst into tears. She invites the readers to join her and the painted characters in using their own eyes, in looking at all of them in the same way in which she looks at Priam and Priam at Sinon: “Look, look, how listening Priam wets his eyes, / To see those borrow’d tears that Sinon sheds!” (1600). The narrator too repeats the invitation twice, considering that the readers can see the painting and use their own eyes as he himself and Lucrece do (“There might you see the labouring pioneer” -1332, and “In great commanders grace and majesty,/ You might behold”-1387-88). If the readers are emotionally stirred, they will understand better the tragedy that befell Lucrece and, before her, the Trojan characters.

Watching the portrait of Sinon (“And still on him she gazed; and gazing still”-1531), Lucrece has a moment in which Sinon appears to her as perfid as Tarquin. She confesses:

‘For even as subtle Sinon here is painted.
 So sober-sad, so weary, and so mild,
 As if with grief or travail he had fainted,
 To me came Tarquin armed;’ (1592-1595)

The identification with the world of Troy is complete. The illusion is so convincing that Lucrece briefly forgets that she is looking at an imitation; and gazing still, she sees “such signs of truth in his plain face” (1532) that she concludes the picture is belied and “tears the senseless Sinon with her nails” (1564), imagining that he is her assailant. Even though moments later she reminds herself that “his wounds will not be sore” (1568), the painting has already worked its magic by deceiving the heroine and temporarily suspending her ability to differentiate reality from representation. The entire world of Lucrece’s Rome merges with that of ancient Greece, and, indirectly, with that of the author’s Renaissance England, a totalizing vision on human civilization, where women had to suffer outrageous calamities of war and persecution. Voicing Hecuba’s “sad tales” and “colour’d sorrow” (1496-97), understanding the right nature of the traitorous Sinon, interpreting their looks and lending them words, Lucrece unconsciously operates an ekphrastic translation of high emotional intensity.

From time to time, Lucrece’s first person voice is doubled by the voice of the narrator. He sees the painting with his own eyes and comments on it (“For much imaginary work was there;/Conceit deceitful, so compact, so kind”- 1422 - 23; “to this well-painted piece is Lucrece come”-1443), as he also comments on the art of the painter (“the well-skill’d workman”- 1520). The narrator’s statements, formulated in a third person narrative, confirm the correctness of Lucrece’s perceptions in a way that throws once more the supreme beauty of the divine artifice into relief. The readers are encouraged to align their own interpretations with those of both Lucrece and the narrator, accepting that the illusion created by the wall-painting is so strong that they would also be spellbound by the painter’s accomplishment. They are thus guided to recognize the power of art and the effects of emotional absorption that were a sign of successful *enargeia* during the Renaissance.

Apart from the narrator’s and Lucrece’s distinct comments on the painting, there is a moment when the focalizations of the two onlookers overlap. It happens when Lucrece watches Hecuba and when her perceptions are no longer rendered in a first person direct speech, but in the indirect speech of the narrator, who underlines the fact that he sees and feels in a way similar to Lucrece. If we compare this technique with what in narratology is called *free indirect speech* (when the thoughts of a character are rendered in the third person narrative of the implied author or narrator), it appears obvious that these lines are an example of *free indirect ekphrastic focalization*. Lucrece notices the face of Hecuba, but the details are not rendered in her direct speech, but in the third person presentation of the narrator:

In her [Hecuba] the painter had anatomized
Time’s ruin, beauty’s wreck, and grim care’s reign:
Her cheeks with chaps and wrinkles were disguised;

Of what she was no semblance did remain:
 Her blue blood changed to black in every vein,
 Wanting the spring that those shrunk pipes had fed,
 Show'd life imprison'd in a body dead (1550-1556).

By intertwining the two regards and the two voices, Shakespeare turns ekphrasis into a technique that serves not only for the political interpretation of womanhood, instrumental in liberating society from the burden of history, but also for redefining ekphrasis as a complex tool in establishing the alliance between the two arts, painting and poetry. Its high functional versatility is not only conceptualised in a Renaissance manner as *descriptio* in the service of *enargeia*, but it can also be seen as a constitutive metapoetical element of modern semiotic transposition. It functions in a similar way to Homer's description of Achilles's shield in the *Iliad*, which is for Mitchell (179) "an image of the entire Homeric world-order." The *Rape* painting turns into an emblem of the new Renaissance poetics in which the materiality of linguistic and pictorial signs disrupts a rhetorical tradition oriented towards pure idealization. It opposes Sir Philip Sidney's affirmation, formulated in *An Apology for Poetry* (294), that the poet "nothing affirms and therefore never lieth" as well as his invitation to keep the distinction between the invented works of art and reality, because pictures have no independent existence and should never be taken as real representations. The exact opposite situation appears in *The Rape*. Lucrece mistakes the artwork for reality and even attempts to interact with it. She is aware of the illusion, but is even more drawn into the illusion as a result of the fact that watching a painting and translating it into poetry provides the pleasures enjoyed only by real creators.

In conclusion, it is obvious that, as a poet, Shakespeare is a successful mediator between two dissimilar codes, visual and verbal. It is also obvious that, as an ekphrastic translator, Shakespeare is a great inventor, producing disturbing effects on the reader through designing, remobilizing and extending the description of an image and the gaps between the verbal and the visual codes. The integrated and coherent perspective on poetry and painting offered by *The Rape* ekphrasis has earned him a prominent place in the *ut pictura poesis* tradition.

Works cited

- Brînzeu, Pia. "Transposing the Body." *Translating the Body*. Eds. Hortensia Pârlog, Pia Brînzeu, Aba Carina Pârlog. 107-128. München: Lincom Europa, 2007. Print.
- Dundas, Judith. "Mocking the Mind: The Role of Art in Shakespeare's *The Rape of Lucrece*." *The Sixteenth Century Journal*, 14.1 (1983): 13-22. Print.
- Chaucer, Geoffrey. *The Complete Work*. Ed. Fred Norris Robinson. Melbourne, Cape Town: Oxford University Press, 1957. Print.
- Gombrich, E. H. *Art and Illusion*. London: Phaidon, 1972. Print.

- Fineman, Joel. "Shakespeare's Will: The Temporality of Rape." *The Subjectivity Effect in Western Literary Tradition: Essays Toward the Release of Shakespeare's Will*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1991. 170-171. Print.
- Jacobus, Mary. "Is There a Woman in this Text?" *New Literary History* 14 (1982): 117-154. Print.
- MacDonald, Joyce Green. "Speech, Silence, and History in *The Rape of Lucrece*." *Shakespeare Studies* 22(1994): 77-104. Print.
- Meek, Richard. "Ekphrasis in *The Rape of Lucrece* and *The Winter's Tale*." *Studies in English Literature 1500-1900* 46.2 (2006): 389-414. Print.
- Miola, Robert S. *Shakespeare's Rome*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983. Print.
- Mitchell, W.J.T. *Picture Theory. Essays on Verbal and Visual Representation*. Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 1995. Print.
- Newman, Jane O. "'And Let Mild Women to Him Lose Their Mildness': Philomela, Female Violence and Shakespeare's *The Rape of Lucrece*." *Shakespeare Quarterly* 45. 3 (1994): 304-326. Print.
- Sidney, Sir Philip. "An Apology for Poetry." *The English Renaissance*. 289-295. Ed. Kate Aughterson. London, New York: Routledge, 1595/1998. Print.
- Shakespeare, William. *The Complete Works*. Ed. Peter Alexander. London/ Glasgow: Collins, 1968. Print.
- Wells, Marion A. "'To Find a Face Where All Distress Is Stell'd': 'Enlargeia,' 'Ekphrasis,' and Mourning in *The Rape of Lucrece* and the *Aeneid*." *Comparative Literature* 54. 2 (2002): 97-126. Print.