

THE RAPE OF LUCRETIA AND ALBERT HERRING:  
An Exploration of Britten's Treatment of  
Dramatic Function Through Antagonists

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*The Rape of Lucretia and Albert Herring*

It can be safely stated that Benjamin Britten gained an international status as a composer after the premiere of his opera, *Peter Grimes*, in 1945. Despite its success as a large operatic work, Britten discovered some fundamental problems with the opera scene in England. Throughout the entire country, there existed only two major opera houses that could potentially produce works at the scale of *Grimes*.<sup>1</sup> With some suggestions from Eric Crozier,<sup>2</sup> producer of the *Grimes* premiere, Britten would develop a new art-form called the chamber opera, “which will stand beside the grand opera as the quartet stands beside the orchestra.”<sup>3</sup> Britten would go on to write many chamber operas that could be performed by the traveling opera company, the English Opera Group. The first two of these were *The Rape of Lucretia* and *Albert Herring*.

The focus of this paper is a comparison between these first two chamber operas by Britten. There are many similarities to consider; such as the size of each work, the reactive nature of each protagonist, the strikingly similar thematic elements regarding virtue and social commentary, and the time frame in which both pieces were written (*Lucretia* in 1946 and *Herring* in 1947).<sup>4</sup> The main contrasting factor between both works is that *Lucretia* is a tragedy and *Herring* is a comedy, and Britten had to execute all of these common ideas much differently in order to create what ultimately resulted as two very different operas. Norman Del Mar describes *Herring* as Britten’s *Die Meistersinger*, which stands to *Lucretia* just as Wagner’s comedy stands to *Tristan und Isolde*.<sup>5</sup> One of the main tools Britten utilizes in driving the narratives of each opera is the use of their respective antagonists. As mentioned previously, both of the protagonists in *Lucretia* and *Herring* are very reactive, meaning that the plots must be both

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<sup>1</sup> Evans *The Music of Benjamin Britten* p. 124

<sup>2</sup> Whittall *The Chamber Operas* p. 95

<sup>3</sup> Carpenter *Benjamin Britten: A Biography* p. 225

<sup>4</sup> *The Rape of Lucretia* was premiered on July 12, 1946 while *Albert Herring* was premiered on June 20, 1947. Both premieres were at Glyndebourne.

<sup>5</sup> Del Mar *The Chamber Operas* p. 146

initiated and progressed by the antagonists, and the drama created is a result of the protagonists' reactions to the threats posed by the villains. By exploring the antagonists of each work, a greater insight into how Britten executes drama in both tragic and comedic operas can be discovered.

The most interesting similarity regarding the villains of *Lucretia* and *Herring* is that both stories have two antagonistic figures: what I call the "active" and "passive" villains. I am defining the active villain as the primary antagonistic force whose actions are directly targeted towards the protagonist. In the case of *Lucretia*, this character is Tarquinius. The mental and emotional state of the protagonist, Lucretia, is entirely dependent on the actions of Tarquinius and the social consequences of his actions. In the first scene of Act I, Lucretia is seen by the Roman officers as the most virtuous among all the generals' wives. Tarquinius the Prince, a Roman General, strives to steal Lucretia's honor and virtue.<sup>6</sup> In Act II, Tarquinius invades Lucretia's quarters while she sleeps and wakes her with a kiss, and then the two engage in a passionate embrace.<sup>7</sup> The shame that invades Lucretia's psyche after the traumatic event ultimately leads to her suicide, despite the forgiveness and consolation from her husband, Collatinus.<sup>8</sup>

Musically, Britten highlights the psychological tension that befalls Lucretia through recurring musical motifs and key structure. Both Lucretia and Tarquinius have their own leitmotifs, both descending in contour. There are also chorale-like themes that occur in the first Act and a "rising phrase" from the passacaglia in Act II that are generally ascending in contour. The contrast here is that the fates of Lucretia and Tarquinius are tragic, but the ascending nature

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<sup>6</sup> *The Chamber Operas* (Del Mar) p. 134

<sup>7</sup> Ibid. 136 - Del Mar adds in a footnote that the brutal nature of Tarquinius's rape featured in the original Obey play is removed by librettist, Ronald Duncan. The scene includes dialogue that shows Tarquinius threatening Lucretia's life and honor by staging a situation where she committed adultery with one of her slaves. Omitting this nature and replacing it with something more consensual ultimately resulted in a different musical and dramatic outcome from Britten.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid. 137

of the Christian themes expressed in the chorale-like sections spark hope for the future.<sup>9</sup>

Dramatically, Britten and his librettist, Ronald Duncan, make use of narrators in the form of Male and Female “Choruses,” though performed by single performers. These narrators serve to react to the story, but also to tie that story into the encompassing drama of the coming of Christ, which contrasts the tragedy of Tarquinius’s actions toward Lucretia. Britten sets the Choruses in front of a closed curtain in the first Scene to highlight their separation from the plot. The Scene begins with the Male Chorus introducing the state of Rome and the rise of the Tarquins followed by the Female Chorus introducing the war with the Greeks and the eventual coming of Christ. The two then sing together in what Del Mar refers to as the “Framing Hymn,” the first of the chorale-like themes, which also appears in the Epilogue in order to encompass the entire work with the Christian theme of redemption.<sup>10</sup> Lucretia’s death, one of the major climaxes of the opera, is musically represented with a funeral march in passacaglia form.<sup>11</sup>

Regarding the global form of the opera, Britten utilizes a specific key scheme in order to separate the sanity of Lucretia in Act I from the psychological turmoil of Act II. Act I centers around the pitch, C. Peter Evans explains that Britten often employs the tonal region of C Major to represent innocence. A striking example occurs during the sleep music in Act II to represent Lucretia’s final moments of innocence before Tarquinius enters her room.<sup>12</sup> Act II focuses on the pitches of C-Sharp and B, pitches that “tug” on C by half-step in both directions.<sup>13</sup> This represents the tension that results from the conflict brought onto Lucretia by Tarquinius. The Act begins in the key of C-Sharp Minor, which is interchangeable with E Major due to the prevalence

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<sup>9</sup> *The Chamber Operas* (Del Mar) p. 138

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.* 134-8

<sup>11</sup> *The Music of Benjamin Britten* p. 139

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.* 138

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.* 136 - Evans describes that *Lucretia* is not as much “in C” as it is “about C.” This implies a separation from the traditional idea of key and more focus on C as a pitch. While Act I starts and ends in the key of C Minor, it wanders extensively in regions that are related to C Minor. The same can be said of Act II’s treatment of C-Sharp and B. A chart of this pitch structure can be found on page 137.

of the pitch C-Sharp. Evans depicts C-Sharp in particular as representing sin. The pitch, B, represents Lucretia's shame and loss of innocence, as depicted in her text, "Oh, if it were all a dream." This B returns in a scherzo that places a "dark frame" around the memories of Bianca, one of Lucretia's attendants. The piece ends with the reiteration of the "Framing Hymn" in the key of C Major, representing the Christian message of redemption.<sup>14</sup>

The active villain in *Albert Herring* is Lady Billows. It is Billows who initiates the committee to nominate the May Queen and actively enforce her own ideals of virtue onto the committee as well as the entire community as a whole. Though the suggestion to nominate Albert Herring as a "May King" is from Superintendent Budd, the subsequent actions to humiliate Albert are directed by Billows. Albert at the beginning of the story is a cowardly man who lives under the boot of his mother, and is not as much "virtuous," like Billows demands of her May Queens (or Kings), as he is harmless. Unlike Tarquinius, Billows is not interested in harming Albert, but rather the opposite. The conflict between Albert and Billows is a result of the neglect of Albert's true character and identity and Billows parading him to the community in order to celebrate her forced ideals rather than the individual being nominated as a May King. Del Mar writes in his summary of the *Albert Herring* libretto in Act II that, at the May Day feast, "each character is given an opportunity to shine (with the possible exception of Albert himself...)" In Act III, Albert is presumed dead after a night of disappearance, and a funeral is held. Albert humorously appears at his own funeral, admits to his whereabouts, and is immediately met with outrage from the community, all of whom have succumbed to Lady Billow's warped idea of virtue. Unlike *Lucretia*, this is not a tragic ending for Albert, as he has a new sense of freedom from the expectations of Billows and the community. This is narratively

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<sup>14</sup> *The Music of Benjamin Britten* p. 138-40

represented through the children, who no longer ridicule Albert for being trapped under the control of his mother.<sup>15</sup>

*Albert Herring* employs many neo-baroque forms that, as Arnold Whittall describes, do not outstay their welcome.<sup>16</sup> Lady Billow's antics throughout the opera can be described as superficial and chaotic. Britten captures this perfectly with the fugal ensemble that occurs during the first Scene.<sup>17</sup> The composer also uses references to Anglican chant and various dances, of which include a tarantella, scherzo, waltz, and even a jig.<sup>18</sup> Lady Billow's songs in Act I are reminiscent of the Anglican anthems, though Britten uses this cleverly to still depict Billows as the "grossest caricature of all."<sup>19</sup> The beginning of Act II consists of "pastoral/nocturnal moods," using a horn call to create an anticipation for the upcoming coronation. This is humorously subverted by Britten when the coronation of Albert finally occurs, with references to comic gestures first heard during the frantic committee scene. Lyrical music returns when Albert finally achieves freedom as a man, contrasting the ironic uses of dance forms designed to reflect the hypocrisies of Billows and her followers.<sup>20</sup>

For comedic and ironic purposes, Britten quotes two operas in *Herring*. Both quotations have significant consequences in the work, though the first is arguably more obvious. The rambunctious couple, Sid and Nancy, represent all of the things that Lady Billows hates. It is these two who serve to tempt (or encourage depending how one looks at it) Albert into maturity throughout the opera. In Act II, Scene 1, the couple spikes Albert's lemonade with rum, which ultimately leads to Albert's downfall in the eyes of the community. Upon drinking the lemonade, Britten quotes the "desire" motif from *Tristan und Isolde*, which is an obvious reference to the

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<sup>15</sup> *The Chamber Operas* (Del Mar) p. 149

<sup>16</sup> *The Chamber Operas* (Whittall) p. 102

<sup>17</sup> *The Chamber Operas* (Del Mar) p. 147

<sup>18</sup> *The Chamber Operas* (Whittall) p. 102

<sup>19</sup> *The Music of Benjamin Britten* p. 148

<sup>20</sup> *The Chamber Operas* (Whittall) p. 102-4

love potion that Tristan and Isolde drink at the end of Act I. A much more subtle and clever quotation occurs in Act III, when Superintendent Budd refers to “a criminal case of rape.” Here, Britten sneaks in Lucretia’s motif.<sup>21</sup> The parallel Del Mar draws between *Die Meistersinger* to *Tristan und Isolde* and *Albert Herring* to *The Rape of Lucretia* is further solidified by Britten’s use of quotations from Wagner as well as his own previous opera.<sup>22</sup>

If the active antagonists drive the plot of both operas, then it is the passive antagonists that serve the encompassing dramas and spark the motivations of the active villains. I am defining the passive villain as the instigator of his narrative, a villain that pulls strings in shadows and is much more influential to the encompassing drama of each work rather than the main characters. In *Lucretia*, the passive antagonist is Junius. It is Junius that convinces Tarquinius to defile Lucretia’s honor due to both his own jealousy of having an unfaithful wife and to spark the conflict of the encompassing drama, in which Junius calls upon the crowd in Act II, Scene 2 to rise against the Tarquins.<sup>23</sup> While Junius did not directly lead to the rape and suicide of Lucretia, he is indirectly responsible for motivating Tarquinius to harm Lucretia for his own personal gain.

Junius is the jealous character of *Lucretia*, and Britten highlights this jealousy musically in a number of ways. First, Evans states that each of the minor male characters gets their own aria-like solo. Collatinus sings a “noble” solo, consisting largely of perfect fourths that eventually become bound with his wife, Lucretia. Junius imitates these “righteous tones,” but the orchestra collapses and Junius’s true nature is exposed. Elaborated further by Evans, Tarquinius’s only extended solo, “Within this frail crucible,” is sung when he watches Lucretia sleep, being

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<sup>21</sup> *The Chamber Operas* (Whittall) p. 103

<sup>22</sup> *The Chamber Operas* (Del Mar) p. 146

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.* 137

the direct result of Junius's temptations.<sup>24</sup> In Act II, Junius's call on the Romans to expose Tarquinius's sin eventually gets swallowed by the rest of the cast in a more general expression of grief over Lucretia's death, ignoring Junius's desire for power.

Though not completely obvious on the surface, the passive antagonist to Albert Herring is someone much closer to him: his mother. While Mrs. Herring has a relatively minor role in the opera, the harmless nature in which Albert suffers from ridicule is the direct result of his upbringing under the tyrannical mother figure that represents Mrs. Herring's character. It is Albert's nature as being harmless that leads to him being easily targeted for being nominated as the newly founded title of May King, which is, as described previously, a fake honor that feeds on Albert's weakness as a man. Every act of liberation and growth for Albert comes as a direct result of opposing Mrs. Herring. His disappearance as a result of his newfound freedom results in his mother grieving, and his return during his funeral enrages Mrs. Herring as much as Billows and the rest of the town. The motivations of Mrs. Herring are opposite to those of Junius. While Junius actively affects the encompassing drama of *Lucretia*, Mrs. Herring is a product of *Herring's* encompassing drama who graciously receives her son's honor without any awareness of how it negatively affects him. Dramatically, this contrast is necessary because Lucretia's death sparks future events while Albert is victorious in his story and has no larger effect on other characters.

Mrs. Herring is the only character in the opera to be consistently represented by a single motive. Like the motive of Tarquinius, Mrs. Herring's motive is four pitches, and though not always descending like the Tarquinius motive, it is descending in contour the majority of the time. This descent reflects her insincerity, as she claims to be virtuous like the rest of the town, but she really aims to profit off of Albert's ridicule. This motive is transformed throughout the

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<sup>24</sup> *The Music of Benjamin Britten* p. 129



opera, having a false sentimentality in “Sleeping the sleep of the just,” and a sense of grief in the seaside music.<sup>25</sup> This motive evolves extensively throughout the work. Evans states that despite her small role in the opera, Mrs. Herring is “able to emerge musically as one of the strongest personalities in the work.”<sup>26</sup> The role of the children in both Act I and Act III reflect Albert’s growth from when he was trapped under his overbearing mother and when he is free of the forced societal restraints. The old mocking song of Act I is transformed into a welcome to the new Albert.<sup>27</sup>

So far, I have been emphasizing the two antagonistic characters in *Lucretia* and *Herring*. The active and passive characters serve as two levels of antagonism: the active being the first and closest to the surface, and the passive being the second. But there is a third level that plays an integral role in both the literal suicide of Lucretia and the metaphorical suicide of Albert: society. Much like the townsfolk of *Peter Grimes* serve to vilify Grimes for his social “violations,” the roles of society and societal norms are fundamental aspects of the encompassing dramas in both chamber operas. In *Lucretia*, the prevalence of “honor” or “shame” culture is the primary reason that Junius’s tempting of Tarquinius and Lucretia’s suicide is ever initiated. The corruption of Lucretia through forced adultery is determined by the cultural practices of the time. Despite being a victim in Tarquinius’s crime, Lucretia cannot overcome her guilt for violating the honor culture she lives in, and ultimately succumbs to it. Britten and Duncan evoke tragedy from an oppressive society on a victim of circumstance.

Meanwhile, Albert Herring as a protagonist has a different relationship with the townsfolk that push their sense of virtue under the direction of Lady Billows. For Albert, the society that seeks to oppress him is one that can and must be conquered. This victory is largely

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<sup>25</sup> *The Music of Benjamin Britten* p.149

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.* 151

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.* 156

the result of Eric Crozier's changes to the original story by Guy Maupassant. In Maupassant's version, Albert's descent ultimately leads to his death by *delirium tremens*, a condition of mental confusion brought about by alcohol withdrawal. Crozier heavily alters the story in Act III in order to give Albert a triumphant ending. This results not only in a happier outcome for our protagonist, but also a direct contradiction to Maupassant's social commentary. Britten and Crozier depict the severe consequences of an overbearing mother and a mocking society, and that the only way to free oneself from that oppression is to actively oppose it.<sup>28</sup> While Lucretia's loved ones express their grief for her, the townsfolk of Albert scorn him for his transgressions. Both protagonists may have been victims of their circumstances, but Albert stands alone in actively tearing down the oppression brought upon him. Of course, the natures of tragedy and comedy must be considered in regards to the endings of each work.

The final point of comparison to be made is that of a common theme that dominates both works. The theme of virtue and what it means in various contexts is a primary theme explored in *Lucretia* and *Herring*. It is by perceived virtue that the honor culture found in *Lucretia* exists, as well as the admiration of Lucretia in which Junius is jealous:

“Lucretia! Lucretia! I am sick of that name. Her virtue is the measure of my shame. Now all of Rome will laugh at me, or what worse will pity me.”<sup>29</sup>

After her virtue is stripped away by Tarquinius, she turns to suicide as her only path to redemption. Britten and Duncan use the Chastain references told by the narrating Choruses in order to show a true redemption to honor culture, as well as redemption to sin in general.

In *Albert Herring*, virtue is a lie perpetrated by both Lady Billows and Mrs. Herring. Lady Billow's idea of virtue involves her own enforcement of ideals such as orderliness, purity

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<sup>28</sup> *The Chamber Operas* (Del Mar) p. 147-9

<sup>29</sup> *The Rape of Lucretia* Libretto

and chastity. The hypocrisy is that Billows fails to see the inherent lack of virtue that constitutes her nature to control and gossip. As mentioned previously, Mrs. Herring's sense of virtue derives from economic prosperity. This is exhibited through the control she has over her son. Albert is expected to follow orders and run the family store. When Albert is offered twenty-five pounds for his coronation as the May King, his mother is very eager to profit off of her son, despite the obvious implications of ridicule and attack on his pride.<sup>30</sup> Ironically, the characters considered by the town as the least virtuous, Sid and Nancy, end up being the most virtuous in the opera due to Britten and Crozier's emphasis on virtue equating to freedom. The ending for Albert is uplifting because he was able to achieve freedom from those who sought to impose their own ideas of virtue forcibly.

*The Rape of Lucretia* and *Albert Herring* intentionally share many qualities in terms of thematic material and character function. Britten is a master of being able to tell many different stories through the same means. It is astonishing that two chamber operas composed within a year of each other, sharing the same orchestra, sharing the same execution of a systematic character structure, and sharing the same primary theme of "virtue" can be executed in wildly contrasting through music and tone. By exploring these similarities, one can gain further insight into Britten's brilliance as a story-teller as well as a deeper understanding into the ideas that the composer wanted to express in his work.

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<sup>30</sup> Evans, p. 129

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