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Untimely Breathings in *The Rape of Lucrece*

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ABSTRACT

This article is concerned with the emotional economy of the events that unfold in Lucrece's bedroom overnight as represented by the breath and captured in the text's pneumatic vocabulary. It demonstrates how, at crucial moments in the poem, the protagonists experience unsettling breathlessness registered in sighs, disrupted speech, and loss of voice altogether. The domestic site of the rape itself, the bedroom, conjures a lingering asphyxiating atmosphere that permeates bodies and space in the poem. The first and middle sections of this article centre around the disturbed circulation of breath in the poem, presenting a model of embodiment structured on the specificities (gender, spatial, physiological, and rhetorical) of the inhaled and exhaled air: how does Tarquin's breath differ from Lucrece's? How does Collatine's breath compare to his wife's? How are gender boundaries loosened or affirmed by the breath? The final section of the article draws on recent scholarship on voice and reading aloud in the early modern period to make the case for an alternative, embodied, reading of Lucrece. It proposes a reading in which the reader's breath is affectively involved in the events, and charts, via reference to Levinas, the ethical challenges that this involvement presents them with.

KEYWORDS



Lucrece; breath; breathlessness; Shakespeare

Poetry is perhaps this: an *Atemwende*, a turning of our breath.

Who knows, perhaps poetry goes its way – the way of art –

for the sake of just such a turn?¹

In Shakespeare's narrative poem, *The Rape of Lucrece*, references to disorderly and violent breathing abound, imbedded in the discourse of the passions: breath is both symptomatic of a range of emotions – pain, lust, grief, and despair – and a trigger for impassioned acts. Invading Lucrece's private space and witnessing how 'her hair, like golden threads, played with her breath' (l. 400) during her sleep, Tarquin's – and the narrator's – voyeuristic pleasure

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¹Celan, 'The Meridian', 37–55, esp. 47.

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erupts into the exclamation ‘O modest wantons, wanton modesty!’ (l. 401).² The amorous play of breath sexualises the victim and arouses the culprit. Once the act of rape has been revealed by Lucrece, Collatine’s excessive sighs that ‘push grief on, and back the same grief draw’ (ll. 1673), lead his wife to declare: ‘My woe too sensible thy passion maketh / more feeling-painful’ (ll. 1678–9). Her husband’s hyperventilation intensifies Lucrece’s pain. This article is concerned with the emotional economy of the events that unfold in Lucrece’s bedroom overnight as represented by the breath and captured in the text’s pneumatic vocabulary. As I intend to show, at crucial moments in the poem, the protagonists experience unsettling breathlessness registered in sighs, disrupted speech, and loss of voice altogether. The domestic site of the rape itself, the bedroom, conjures a lingering asphyxiating atmosphere that permeates bodies and space in the poem.

Circulating between Tarquin, Lucrece, Collatine, Lucretius, and the bedroom, breath underpins a narrative of affect, or of ‘the forces of encounter’ as Gregg and Seigworth have defined the mental and physical senses of feeling by which bodies are firmly rooted in their relations.³ Bodies, feelings, and pain have often been examined in *The Rape of Lucrece*, but the breath, while present in all these categories, has not been accounted for.⁴ In a work that is fast becoming canonical in explorations of the breath, Quinlivan has argued that, connecting the internal with the external, bodies with other bodies, and bodies with their environment, ‘breathing is neither completely visible nor invisible – it troubles this opposition’.⁵ Shakespeare’s poem makes breath visible by insisting on difficult, turbulent, inadequate, even immoral breathing moments. These moments form a language that operates on the level Paul Celan has defined as *Atemwende*, ‘a turning of our breath’ or ‘breathturn’, the pause between an inhalation and an exhalation.⁶ The pauses alert the reader to Lucrece’s drama of representation and her struggle to articulate her circumstances. When the breath becomes violently disrupted it raises ethical questions around who has the power to breathe and how is that power afforded and distributed.

The first and middle sections of this article centre around the disturbed circulation of breath in the poem, presenting a model of embodiment structured on the specificities (gender, spatial, physiological, and rhetorical) of the inhaled and exhaled air: how does Tarquin’s breath differ from Lucrece’s? How does Collatine’s breath compare to his wife’s? How are gender boundaries loosened or affirmed by the breath? Extending and complicating Lynn Enterline’s thesis

²Shakespeare, ‘The Rape of Lucrece’, 238–338. Unless indicated otherwise, all references to the poem are to this edition and will be cited parenthetically in the text by line number.

³Gregg and Seigworth, *The Affect Theory Reader*, esp. 2.

⁴For readings of affect in *The Rape of Lucrece*, see, for instance, Schoenfeldt, ‘Shakespearean Pain’, and ‘Give Sorrow Words’; Scodel, ‘Shame, Love, Fear, and Pride in The Rape of Lucrece’; and Belling, ‘Infectious Rape, Therapeutic Revenge’.

⁵Quinlivan, *The Place of Breath in Cinema*, 3.

⁶Salminen, ‘On Breathroutes: Paul Celan’s Poetics of Breathing’, 107–26, esp. 108.

about ‘ventriloquism’ and the Ovidian myth, I seek to refocus the attention from Lucrece’s borrowed voice to Lucrece’s – at times voluntary and at times forced – substitution of language with exasperated air.⁷ Enterline has persuasively argued that the ‘poem’s inaugural gesture’ is ‘that of “lending” or “borrowing” a tongue’, an argument that dislocates Lucrece from centre-stage, ‘provoking questions about whose “Will” exactly, is singing or playing Lucrece’s restless tune’.⁸ It also opens up space for identification between Lucrece and the narrator, who is, according to Enterline, seeking to ventriloquize her voice as much as Shakespeare seeks to ventriloquize Ovid. If the rhetoric of rape and the rhetoric of gender difference between narrator and protagonist become blurred in Enterline’s account, the ‘breathturns’ in the poem can be shown to collapse boundaries not only between male and female, and protagonist and narrator, but also between protagonist and reader.

The final section of the article draws on recent scholarship on voice and reading aloud in the early modern period to make the case for an alternative, embodied, reading of *Lucrece*. It proposes a reading in which the reader’s breath is affectively involved in the events, and charts, via reference to Levinas, the ethical challenges that this involvement presents them with. The ethics of watching in the poem have been discussed at length, but what about the ethics of breathing *in* and *through* the poem? Although impossible to determine exactly how readers breathe while reading the text or to argue that reading out loud is part of the intention of the poem, its preoccupation with breath, voice, and the loss of voice cannot sit comfortably within an assumed tradition of silent reading either. Moreover, revisiting the poem in an era in which the breath of marginalised and oppressed groups matters more than ever, makes considerations of the breath patterns on display as imperative and as political as ever.

The text articulates a pneumatic consciousness from the very start, as it begins with Tarquin in flight. In the opening stanza, Shakespeare introduces us to a ‘lust-breathed Tarquin’ (l. 3). The epithet is a neologism: similar to the adjectives ‘lust-wearied’ and ‘lust-dieted’ found in *Antony and Cleopatra* and *King Lear* respectively, ‘lust-breathed’ only appears once in Shakespeare’s oeuvre and accentuates here the corporal materiality of the (self-)destructive passion of lust. The coinages convey the notion that lust manifests itself on the body and has palpable symptoms. Glossing ‘lust-breathed’ as ‘animated by lust’ the Oxford edition opts for a near synonym which is supported by the two meanings that the Latin *anima* had come to acquire in the renaissance: ‘breath’ and ‘soul’. An ‘animated by lust’ Tarquin is one possessed and driven by lust, inspired to action by his base instincts. While fittingly in line with the rest of Tarquin’s characterisation and with the events that unfold in Rome and

⁷Lynn Enterline, *The Rhetoric of the Body from Ovid to Shakespeare*, Chapter 5, esp. 159.

⁸Enterline, *Shakespeare’s Schoolroom*, 196.

Lucrece's bedroom, pre-empting the meaning of 'lust-breathed' and appropriating to it invisible, interior motivations, only tells part of the story. It cannot exclude the possibility that Shakespeare coined the term 'lust-breathed' to introduce a Tarquin not only as 'animated by lust' but as 'breathing lust', inhaling and exhaling the lust that surrounds him, or else consuming an external emotion that has filled the air. The respired air seems to be stemming from and adding to the degradation of his passion.

The stanza continues to foreground the airspace that will define the rest of the poem. As distorted images of erotic passion and instruments of erotic flight, the 'trustless wings of false desire' (l. 2) and the 'lightless fire' (l. 4) create a corrupt and unhealthy aeronautical experience. 'Borne by the trustless wings' (l. 2), breathing lust or being breathed by lust, and carrying a fire that 'lurks to aspire' (i.e. to breathe forth, to rise up, or to seek longingly), Tarquin is transported via the pernicious air and he is its constituent at the same time.⁹ The subject and his desire blend into the air to such an extent that it is impossible to distinguish cause and effect. The contaminated matter of Tarquin's breath might be attributed to the poem's geography, too. Originating in Ardea, the wind that carries Tarquin to Rome and Colatium is a south wind, the type widely understood to be dangerous for one's health. According to Francis Bacon's *History of the Winds* (1622), 'when the south wind blows, people's breath stinks more, animals' appetites are worse, pestilent diseases run riot, catarrhs take hold, and men become sluggish and feeble'.¹⁰ In this respect, Tarquin's breath anticipates the unwholesome air that Lucrece entreats of Night: 'with rotten damps ravish the morning air; / let their exhaled unwholesome breaths make sick / the life of purity, the supreme fair' (ll. 778–80).¹¹ The contagious vapours that Lucrece imagines will arise from the ground and suffocate all ethical living have already begun spreading with Tarquin's first breath in the poem, and will continue to corrupt the air until Tarquin the name, and Tarquin's air, are expelled from her body at the very end.

The opening stanza, offering a Tarquin *in* the air as much as *of* the air, deliberately constructs an unhealthy atmosphere which the reader is invited to experience. That the reader might not pronounce these lines out loud and engage in the play of breath cannot be excluded but the phenomenological analysis which follows here takes its cue from the very nature of a poem that has been examined as an exercise in the art of classical *imitatio* with Lucrece 'behaving much as any early modern schoolboy would', employing Latin rhetorical training to affect empathy and imitation.¹² The poem's emphasis throughout on voice, delivery, and gesture licenses the reader to

⁹aspire, v'.

¹⁰Bacon, 'History of the Winds', 19–139, esp. 51.

¹¹On the topic of air and disease as communicated by breath, see Elam, 'I'll Plague Thee for that Word'.

¹²Enterline, *Shakespeare's Schoolroom*, 124.

become involved in the exercise. In ‘lust-breathed’ Shakespeare not only invents a new term to introduce Tarquin, but through the spondee he emphasises how the epithet is to be read and understood, forming early in the poem an intimate link between characters and readers. The coined compound word invites the reader to hold their breath to get through it. The opening two lines (‘from the besieged Ardea all in post, / Borne by the trustless wings of false desire’), describe Tarquin, according to Joel Fineman as ‘geographically and thematically, as well as diegetically, *in medias res*’, spatially suspended, yet in a state of intense motion.¹³ Not naming their subject matter, the two lines, each ending in a pause, prolong the suspension of Tarquin in air until the spondee and its double exhalation are followed by the name. A reader might take an inhalation before ‘Tarquin’ or they might add a third quick exhalation in one long breath that releases the full phrase ‘lust-breathed Tarquin’ stressing three syllables with three puffs of air. There is a subtle reflective play of breath here as Tarquin is breathing lust and our inhalations and exhalations linger on his epithet and name. Modern editions, observing the rules of syntax, have no punctuation after Tarquin, but the First Quarto (Q1) of 1594 has a comma after the name, dictating a specific kind of delivery. This comma seems to be marking a ‘physiological’ pause, where, according to Bruce Smith, ‘a speaker would breathe’.¹⁴ The early modern reader would be expected to pause after ‘lust-breathed Tarquin’, becoming aware of their breathing the moment they exhale the words, and as Tarquin’s breath coincides with the reader’s. The text’s self-conscious play with the breath continues with ‘aspire’ (l. 5), which in the Q1 is also followed by a comma. Instead of mirroring the fire’s swift move from ‘aspire’ to ‘girdle’ (l. 6), the pause after ‘aspire’ necessitates an added breath, the air expelled in the pronunciation of ‘aspire’ rising both from Tarquin and the reader. Tarquin’s aeronautical experience becomes possible with the reader’s imaginative *and* physical engagement with the air.

The affective force of punctuated breath is present in Lucrece’s first attempt to dissuade Tarquin. About to speak her first lines since Tarquin invaded her bedroom, Lucrece delivers a plea styled by interjecting sighs:

¹³Fineman ‘Shakespeare’s Will’, 25–76, esp. 32.

¹⁴ Smith, ‘Prickly Characters’, 25–44, esp. 27. Smith suggests that:

not one system of punctuation obtained in early modern English but two: the older one based on the sound-producing capabilities of the human body existed side by side with – or perhaps beneath – a newer one based on the abstract logic of syntax ... ‘Physiological’ punctuation marks the places where a speaker would breathe; ‘syntactical’ punctuation marks the separation of sentence elements according to the logic of Latin grammar. (27)

Smith here follows and summarises Walter Ong’s distinction in Walter Ong, ‘The Historical Backgrounds of Elizabethan and Jacobean Punctuation Theory’, 349–60. See also Neil Rhodes’s article, Rhodes, ‘Punctuation as Rhetorical Notation?’, which argues for the 1590s as ‘the decade of transition’ between the two systems, the rhetorical and the syntactical (89).

Her modest eloquence with sighs is mixed,
 Which to her oratory adds more grace.
 She puts the period often from his place,
 And midst the sentence so her accent breaks
 That twice she doth begin ere once she speaks. (ll. 563–7)

Her difficulty in breathing, a physiological reaction to the shock of her imminent assault, is represented by the narrator as an ornamental supplement to her speech, as her composed eloquence is accompanied by breathless stretches of language and misplaced pauses. The double inhalation that is a sigh and that here leads to a false start grants Lucrece's performance an air of authenticity that is simultaneously undercut by her studied agency. As she actively 'puts the period often from his place' and 'breaks her accent'¹⁵ Lucrece is presented as expertly mastering her hyperventilation to deploy breath as a rhetorical tool in the spirit of a classical orator.¹⁶ She confesses so herself when she addresses Tarquin in the following terms:

My sighs like whirlwinds labour hence to heave thee:
 If ever man were moved with woman's moans,
 Be moved with my tears, my sighs, my groans. (ll. 586–8)

The affective power of sighs, tears, and groans is a commonplace in the early modern period, and the three symptoms listed in the lines above are no exception: they become, according to the Arden editors, the 'conventional attributes of unrequited and unhappy erotic love', and in this respect they fit the symptoms of love melancholy Carla Mazzio has identified with *Love's Labour's Lost* where Biron speaks: 'well, I will love, write, sigh, pray, sue and groan: / Some men must love my lady and some Joan' (3.1.199–200).¹⁷ The paradox here of course is that Lucrece is not suffering from love melancholy in the poem, but her enlisting these embodied reactions to persuade where her speech cannot demonstrates she resorts to them as part of a rhetorical strategy. Contrary to the melancholic lover's abject state which seeks to move the beloved towards them, Lucrece's sighs are called upon to defend the body against its potential intruder. The air expelled in quick and disorderly fashion is solicited as the means to stave off Tarquin by 'moving' him, not only metaphorically, appealing to his emotional intelligence, but by trying to dislocate him, to move him out of the bedroom, to expel him from Lucrece's space and body; a violent childbirth imagery in the clustering of 'labour', 'heave', 'moans', and 'groans'. This, as shown next, only becomes possible in her final moments, when the expulsion of Tarquin materialises with Lucrece's final breath.

¹⁵It is hard to determine the subject of the verb 'breaks' here. It is most likely 'her accent', but a reading where 'her accent' is the object of Lucrece's breaking is also possible.

¹⁶For an introduction to the importance of voice, breath, and gestures in Cicero and Quintilian, see Hall, 'Oratorical Delivery and the Emotions'.

¹⁷Duncan-Jones and Woudhuysen, eds., *Shakespeare's Poems*. See Mazzio, 'The Melancholy of Print'.

Moreover, in claiming her sighs to be ‘like whirlwinds’, that combined with tears and groans ‘together like a troubled ocean / beat at thy rocky and wreck-threatening heart, / to soften it with their continual motion’ (ll. 589–91), Lucrece states the affective work her suspiration is called upon to execute in the usual micro-macrocosmic terms that permeate early modern Galenic thinking and humoral physiology.¹⁸ Following Shigehisa Kuriyama’s analysis of *pneuma* (both ‘breath’ and ‘wind’ in classical Greek), Paster’s work has built on this ‘understanding of the relation of macrocosm to microcosm, of world to body, of the movements of wind or water to the movement of the passions’ to define a ‘premodern ecology of passions’ according to which, for early modern thinkers, the internal psychological constitution of human and animal beings is mapped on the external composition of the world and vice versa.¹⁹ Breathing has always been a central component in this mirroring, the notion of conspiracy linking worlds since at least early Pythagorean writings.²⁰ In renaissance England, the writings of Francis Bacon follow suit:

The breath in mans Microcosmos, and in other Animals, doe very well agree with the windes in the greater world: For they are engendred by humours, and alter with moisture as winde and rain doth, and are dispersed and blow freer by a greater heat. And from them that observation is to be transferred to the winds, namely, that breaths are engendred of matter and that yeelds a tenacious vapour, not easie to be dissolved; as Beanes, Pulse, and fruits; which is so likewise in greater windes.²¹

The similarities between breath and wind’s consistencies and motion, and the malleability of their nature made the terms rhetorically equivalent for Shakespeare and his contemporaries. The poem, however, by having Lucrece directly speak about her breath and lose her breath, puts the Baconian model of analogical thinking that connects sighs with whirlwinds under the microscope. Lucrece employs the hypothetical universal ecology of passions, which I propose is a specifically masculine account of how breath operates, in response to her rapist and her husband.

In the aftermath of the rape, Lucrece reverts to the power of sighs, groans, and tears as she prepares to face Collatine. In that moment of stillness

¹⁸See, for instance, Paster, *Humoring the Body*, Floyd-Wilson and Sullivan, eds., *Environment and Embodiment in Early Modern England*, esp. Introduction, and Totaro, *The Plague Epic in Early Modern England and Meteorology and Physiology in Early Modern Culture*.

¹⁹Paster, *Humoring the Body*, 9.

²⁰Horky, ‘Cosmic Spiritualism among the Pythagoreans, Stoics, Jews and Early Christians’. Horky writes:

For the early Pythagoreans, the universe is understood to function, to *live*, as an animal – once it has been constituted and its parts set into motion, it inhales and exhales ‘breath’ from the infinity that surrounds it (perhaps explaining, by analogy, the expansion and contraction of the ordered universe), and from which it differentiates itself and its individual natures [...] The sign that the universe and its constituents are properly differentiated from what is chaotic and disorderly is the persistent motion indicated by regular respiration. (273)

²¹Quoted in Bloom, *Voice in Motion*, esp. Chapter 2 (66–110). The quotation is on p. 89. Bloom quotes Bacon here as one of the natural philosophers who were keen to differentiate between breath, wind, and voice in the early modern period, but, as the quote above suggests and Bloom maintains, the distinction was often clearly difficult to uphold.

between writing the message to Collatine urging him to come to Rome and posting it via the maid, Lucrece reflects on what would be the appropriate manner of performing her grief and disgrace in the presence of Collatine:

Besides the life and feeling of her passion,
 She hoards to spend, when he is by to hear her,
 When sighs, and groans, and tears may grace the fashion
 Of her disgrace, the better so to clear her
 From that suspicion which the world might bear her. (ll. 1317–21)

Sighs, groans, and tears, although unsuccessful rhetoricians in the case of Tarquin, feature again heavily in Lucrece's imagined performance of her passion in front of 'the world'. The 'world' in this instance consists of her husband and in extension Rome's patriarchal rule and prejudice that could perceive the rape as 'her own gross abuse' (l. 1315) if she does not 'grace the fashion / of her disgrace' (ll. 1319–20). Trained in gender expectations, Lucrece once again wishes to enlist sighs, groans, and tears as the body vocabulary that could exonerate her in the eyes of Collatine. The affective model Tarquin and Collatine can understand and possibly be persuaded by is, in both cases, the same. Yet, while potentially effective tools for a male audience, the body's symptoms of authentic suffering are only a 'stale' language for how Lucrece experiences her pain:

The weary time she cannot entertain,
 For now 'tis stale to sigh, to weep, and groan:
 So woe hath wearied woe, moan tired moan,
 That she her plaints a little while doth stay,
 Pausing for means to mourn some newer way. (ll. 1361–65)

'Stale' represents 'an 'objective' measurement of time, but the grafting of time on Lucrece's body undermines the possibility of such objectivity.²² Instead, Lucrece, according to Alison Chapman, experiences a deeply personal sense of time, an example of how 'temporality is connected to and influenced by human experience', and in the case of the traumatic event at the centre of the poem this means that 'the experience of rape and the experience of time are mutually constitutive'.²³ It is not only time that is rendered subjective here, but the expressive means of suffering, as Lucrece searches for an alternative language of pain, one that departs from her 'stale' performance in front of Tarquin and Collatine.

If breathlessness and tears designate a specifically masculine expectation in the poem, it is because writing about breath in macrocosmic terms can be considered a gendered convention. The examples scholars of early modern literature rely on to make the case for the ecology of passions are overwhelmingly taken from a rich male canon of scientific, theological, and literary texts

²²Chapman, 'Lucrece's Time', esp. 165.

²³Chapman, 'Lucrece's Time', 166.

raising the question to what extent we can access an experience of passions and disordered breathing that is inclusive of early modern women. The rich intellectual history of conspiracy and of cosmic breathing is at Shakespeare's and narrator's disposal, but it cannot fully account for the female body's breathlessness.²⁴ If anything, analogical thinking, by drawing on the abstract and the cosmic, obscures the painfully embodied reality of events and can lead to problematic ethical considerations.

The text itself acknowledges the limitations of cosmic theories to describe the suffocating consequences of the rape by presenting us with cases of gendered breathing. Tarquin's contaminated air has already been examined, but the example of Collatine foregrounds further the difference between male performative respiration and the female struggle to breathe.

Lo, here the hopeless merchant of this loss,
 With head declined and voice dammed up with woe,
 With sad set eyes and wreathed arms across,
 From lips new waxen pale, begins to blow
 The grief away, that stops his answer so.
 But, wretched as he is, he strives in vain:
 What he breathes out, his breath drinks up again.

As through an arch, the violent roaring tide
 Outruns the eye that doth behold his haste,
 Yet in the eddy boundeth in his pride
 Back to the strait that forced him on so fast,
 In rage sent out, recalled in rage being past:
 Even so his sighs. His sorrows make a saw,
 To push grief on, and back the same grief draw. (ll. 1660–73)

The predominant effect the hearing of the rape has on Collatine is breathlessness. Lucrece's brief but eloquent description of the events (ll. 1613–59) is followed by two stanzas that concentrate on her husband's physiological response. Collatine appears to be having a deeply physical and violent reaction to the news that is at the same time self-threatening as it entraps him into a circle of inhaling his own exhalations. The air released becomes the air inhaled, with the emotional intensity of grief and rage infecting the atmosphere and making venting with words impossible. Early modern treatises on the passions often centred on the antagonistic relationship between words and anger, whereby anger 'stops the throate leaving no passage for words, and it vexeth and tormenteth both the body and the minde'.²⁵ The Puritan theologian

²⁴For a recent example of an excellent study on respiration and the ecosystem that places a canonical text (Milton's *Paradise Lost*) amidst male seventeenth-century thinkers, see Taylor 'Breathing Space', who argues that Adam and Eve 'take part in a universal breathing with the rest of Creation' (626). What I seek to do here, using another canonical text and author, is to offer new ways of thinking about breath in texts; ways that depart from universalising trends and are careful to differentiate between individuals and their experiences (male and female on this occasion).

²⁵Downname, *Four Treatises tending to Dissuade all Christians from Foure no Lesse Hainous then Common Sinnes; ... Whereunto is annexed a Treatise of Anger*, esp. 4.

Downname advises against ‘imagin[ing] with some, that we can disgorge our stomacks of anger by vomitting our spleene in bitter words; for they do not onely in their owne nature whet and sharpen our owne affections, but also prouoke the other’;²⁶ Collatine seems to be striving to speak, to vent his emotions, but his tumultuous breathing redirects his energies back to his body. The speedy forward motion of the tide in the simile only accentuates the force of the clash when the water turns back upon itself, marking Collatine’s respiration at the mercy of the pendulum movement of his emotions whose force is self-generated, self-sustained, and self-harming.

The structural balance of these lines plays on an ebb and flow effect. ‘What he breathes out his breath drinks up again’ is qualified in the next stanza by the fact that his sighs make a ‘saw’ that pushes grief in both directions. The horizontal axis on which Collatine’s breath operates depicts him at the mercy of his suspiration, passively suffering as a victim to his emotions. There is no progress or progression, but a constant recycling of exhaled carbon dioxide. The intensity of the scene, however, is undercut by the formal order of its tone. The short, mostly monosyllabic words and the repetition create a chiasmic impression that sways the reader, mirroring the breath’s rhythmic, repetitious circulation.²⁷ Collatine’s passionate breathing is neatly stylised, the disordered and suffocating experience turning into a product the narrator and author have packaged in the detached, cliché image of sighs as tides, and in the regulated symmetry of the verse.

The aestheticisation of Collatine’s breathing continues after Lucrece has revealed the name of the offender and has taken her own life. Amidst his and Lucretius’s melodramatic paroxysms following the death of wife and daughter respectively, Collatine eventually regains control of his breath: ‘till manly shame bids him possess his breath, / and live to be revenged on her death’ (1777–8). The implication that disordered breathing is unmanly is consistent with Lucrece’s appeal to her sighs and groans as a behaviour characteristically employed by women to move men, as well as with a wealth of early modern scholarship that associates lack of emotional discipline and exaggerated emotion (like the one Collatine exhibits here) with women. Yet early modern gendered breathing, in which men and women are expected to exercise different degrees of control over their respiration, has been shown by Gina Bloom to be more complex than that. Writing about women on stage in Shakespeare’s histories, Bloom asserts that ‘the chaotic constitution of breath facilitates, instead of compromises, communicative agency’.²⁸ The breath’s ‘uncontrollable, ephemeral, and transient’ nature allows female characters to

²⁶Downname, *Four Treatises tending to Dissuade all Christians from Foure no Lesse Hainous then Common Sinnes*, 73.

²⁷On chiasmus as a powerful literary device in the poem, see Fineman, ‘Shakespeare’s Will: The Temporality of Rape’.

²⁸Bloom, *Voice in Motion*, 95.

develop a discourse outside patriarchal parameters by sighing, groaning, grieving incoherently, breathing heavily.²⁹ While, as I intend to show next, this holds true for Lucrece in the poem it is worth noting that Collatine's effeminate mode of breathing in these lines is histrionic rather than empowering. His newly found command of his breath is short-lived and as he pronounces Tarquin's name the scene escalates into the mundane drama of father and son expressed in familiar tropes:

... but through his lips do throng
Weak words, so thick come in his poor heart's aid
That no man could distinguish what he said.

Yet sometime 'Tarquin' was pronounced plain,
But through his teeth, as if the name he tore.
This windy tempest, till it blow up rain,
Held back his sorrow's tide to make it more.
At last it rains, and busy winds give o'er.

Then son and father weep with equal strife
Who should weep most, for daughter or for wife. (ll. 1783-92)

As admonished by Downname, Collatine tries to vent his emotions by speaking, but the result is inarticulate speech that folds on itself as the words stumble upon his teeth and lips. Collatine's lips and teeth bar what they are meant to facilitate (speech), releasing breath but withholding naming, as if Tarquin pushes the boundaries of Collatine's physical integrity holding his tongue and refusing to be let out. The repetition of fricatives in 'through', 'throng', and 'through' replicates the experience for the reader as it stalls the narrative by obstructing the air inviting constant release of air through a narrower tract. Collatine's suspiration is once again portrayed in universal, ecological terms, the 'windy tempest' fighting to erupt and be released, and troublesome respiration gives way to troublesome weeping as the simile moves from winds to rain. The stock image of breath as wind and disturbed breath as violent wind that follows Collatine has expanded from the rhythmical ebb and flow upon hearing the news to capture what is going on in the micro site of his mouth and the violent mechanics of the voice.

The emphasis on the narrow passage of the breath looks back to Lucrece's own experience of breathlessness in the aftermath of her rape.

This said, from her betumbled couch she starteth,
To find some desp'rate instrument of death
But this, no slaughterhouse, no tool imparteth
To make more vent for passage of her breath,

²⁹Bloom, *Voice in Motion*, 96.

Which, thronging through her lips so vanisheth
 As smoke from Etna, that in air consumes,
 Or that which from discharged cannon fumes. (ll. 1037–43)

The tragic transformation that she has undergone after her violation signals an excess of fiery passion captured in the containment metaphors of Etna and cannon. Her breath forces itself vehemently out of her body as if it has been compressed, looking for more space, more exit points. The comparisons with Etna and the cannon transform her mouth from a bodily orifice into a threshold of violence whose eruptions cannot be contained, while the female body is reduced to a narrow tube, restrictive, rigid, and inescapably solid. Lucrece ‘discharges’ breath not just this once but when she is about to reveal the crime committed on her: ‘three times with sighs she gives her sorrow fire, / Ere once she can discharge one word of woe’ (1604–5). ‘Discharged’ breath is as characteristic of Lucrece as ‘windy’ breath is of Collatine. The fricative nature of ‘thronging through’ highlights the turbulent clustering of the breath in the mouth as it fights to be unleashed into the world, mirroring Lucrece’s own desire to be no more body but air. Contrary to Collatine’s horizontal pattern of tumultuous breathing, Lucrece’s is non-directional, or better, all-directional, exploding in the unpredictable trajectories that volcanic or cannon smoke circulates. Her breath does not cut her in half, does not fold in itself in a rhythmical wave, but seeks to disperse, while the macroscopic dimensions of the simile add not grandeur but chaos to the release of her emotions.

There is no doubt that early in the poem Lucrece’s breathing is also aestheticised: intruding in her bedroom Tarquin observes how ‘her hair, like golden threads, played with her breath’ (l.400). But the poem seems to reserve the macro-analogies for men or as conscious rhetorical flourishes Lucrece resorts to. Collatine’s respiratory response to the tragedy is a textbook pathological experience of pain and grief that is built on preconceived models. It is not his body’s situatedness that impacts on his breathing; his performative masculinity assumes breathlessness as one of its constituents.

Lucrece’s breath, on the other hand, does not follow the predictable and monotonous movement of the tidal imagery. Her breath, and lack of, are experienced and written differently, escaping the page, and creating an entangled web with the reader’s exhalations. Her final words are spoken in a stanza that describes and performatively enacts her gasping for breath.

Here, with a sigh as if her heart would break,
 She throws forth Tarquin’s name: ‘He, he,’ she says,
 But more than ‘he’ her poor tongue could not speak,
 Till, after many accents and delays,
 Untimely breathings, sick and short assays,
 She utters this: ‘He, he, fair lords, ‘tis he
 That guides this hand to give this wound to me.’ (ll. 1716–22)

Lucrece's revelation of Tarquin as her rapist is surprisingly not a revelation at all; naming the culprit, the most critical and fraught act in the judicial context Lucrece has created by inviting witnesses to her confession, is indirectly suggested, and the name being spoken out loud is deferred until Collatine violently breathes it out in the section examined above. In Collatine's case, the description moves from the rhythmical ebb and flow to the enclosed specificities of the mouth (through his lips, through his teeth) and the violent mechanics of the voice. Collatine's lips and teeth bar what they are meant to facilitate (speech), releasing breath but resisting naming, as if Tarquin pushes the boundaries of Collatine's physical integrity holding his tongue and refusing to be let out. The only appropriate way the name can exit the body is by being vent, not spoken. Tarquin returns to the air over and over as he inhabits bodies and is released by them.

In the case of Lucrece, the 'lust-breathed Tarquin' has morphed into a 'Tarquin-breathed' Lucrece who breathes him out with a self-destructive sigh.³⁰ Her 'untimely breathings, sick and short assays' are not only imagined but transcribed on the page six times in the repetition of 'he'. Glossed as a figure of aposiopesis, Lucrece's breathlessness, manifest in the successive 'he, he', turns into another example of her rhetorical prowess, similar to how she 'She puts the period often from his place, And midst the sentence so her accent breaks' (ll. 565–6). The expectation that Lucrece struggles to name Tarquin and that this struggle is one more trope to be observed is there in Shakespeare's poetic sources. Ovid's Lucretia in *Fasti* makes three failed attempts before she finds the words: 'three times she tried to speak, three times she stopped. She summoned her courage a fourth time, but even so she did not raise her eyes' (2.822–3).³¹ Gower and Chaucer's versions emphatically attribute her hesitation to her shame. In Gower's *Confessio Amantis* 'Bot tendre schame hire word delaieth, / That sondri times as sche minte / To speke, upon the point sche stinte' (5042–4), until eventually 'Hire tale between schame and drede / Sche tolde, noght withoute peine' (5048–9).³² Chaucer's Lucretia cannot bear to speak or look at those present: 'And she sit ay wepinge, / A word for shame ne may she forth out-bringe, / Ne upon hem she dorste nat beholde.'³³ While the sources attest to the victim's intense emotionality and her effort to speak, Shakespeare's stanza, by replacing the name with the pronoun, creates a uniquely asphyxiating experience for Lucrece, one that exceeds easy pronouncements on her state as shameful.

That the text breaks down to untimely breathings itself can be observed in the original punctuation of the stanza. Modern editors interrupt with commas and with capitalisation the repetition of 'he', designating it in the

³⁰On sighs as self-destructive, see Tsentourou, 'Wasting Breath in *Hamlet*'.

³¹Ovid, *Fasti*.

³²Gower, 'Tale of the Rape of Lucrece'.

³³Chaucer, 'The Legend of Lucretia'.

process as a pronoun. If the comma is removed, however, and both ‘he’ forms given in lower case as they appear in Q1, then the text points to the breath than to the culprit. The Arden editors, while retaining the comma, suggest that ‘the repetition of he may be taken to represent laughter (*OED* int2) at a climactic moment comparable to Titus’ in Tit 3.1.264’, for whom editor Jonathan Bate argues that he ‘resorts to laughter, ritual or self-conscious performance when his ability to express emotion in language is stretched to breaking point.’³⁴ Lucrece’s challenge to articulate the name of Tarquin also stretches language to its limits, stripping it down to its basics, i.e. the breath. With regard to aposiopesis visually inscribed on the pages of early modern books (via blanks and ‘&c’ for instance), Maguire has argued that it is ‘a textual moment which gestures beyond the text ... a textual embodiment of absence ... which exists only in incompleteness and interruption and breaking off.’³⁵ The aposiopesis in the six instances of ‘he’ is part of the visual rhetoric of the page (or the stanza) that according to Maguire ‘is not about suspension but about extension, the co-production of meaning between text and reader’.³⁶ One way the reader might extend meaning on this occasion is via their own breathing: the quick exhalations of ‘he, he,’ render the stanza a reader’s exercise in disordered breathing. ‘He’ is a pronoun but it is also a sound, the letter of the alphabet most embodied in the breath. The special nature of the /h/ sound, which does not sit comfortably under consonants or vowels, is its proximity to the most basic function of the human body, defined by the *OED*: ‘Its power is that of a simple aspiration or breathing, with just sufficient narrowing of the glottis to be audible before a vowel.’³⁷ In his *English Grammar*, Ben Jonson, holds the letter in great esteem: ‘and though I dare not say she is (as I have heard one call her) the queen mother of consonants, yet she is the life and quickening of them.’³⁸ The ‘quickening’ nature of the letter, its life-giving qualities, are due to its breathy type: ‘H is indeed κατ’εξοχήν called an aspirate, for of all the letters it is the most breathy, or rather it is the breath itself.’³⁹ The untimely breathings of Lucrece could on the one hand be referring to her respiration but on the other hand they could be pointing to the excessive presence of /h/ in these lines. In other words we might not be hearing the pronoun, but Lucrece trying to catch her breath, at least in the first four instances. Breathing the verse for oneself in the act of reading it out involves the reader in the suspension of time Chapman has associated with instances of ‘untimely’ in the poem: ‘The recurrence of “untimely” as a modifier in these contexts suggests that struggling against the fact of rape is synonymous with struggling against

³⁴See the gloss in l.1717 in Duncan-Jones and Woudhuysen, eds., *Shakespeare’s Poems*. For Bate’s comment, see the gloss in 3.1.264 in Shakespeare, *Titus Andronicus*.

³⁵Maguire, *The Rhetoric of the Page*, 167.

³⁶*Ibid.*, 9.

³⁷H, n.’

³⁸Jonson, *The English Grammar* (1641).

³⁹Jonson, ‘Grammatica Anglicana [Epigraphs]’ in *The English Grammar*.

the cursive time ... that the rape has initiated.⁴⁰ The multiple pauses in the stanza and the recurrence of /h/ re-enact for the reader the ‘sick and short assays’ Lucrece is experiencing, transporting both to a sense of time outside time; an ‘untimely’ breathing that is indeed ‘anti-timely’ in its phenomenological disruption of the perceived boundary between events on the page and real life.⁴¹ Rape has disrupted breath and time but has also initiated a reading where the breath circulates self-referentially between text and reader designating not only lust, shame, or pain, but the inescapable embodiment of these emotions.

From Tarquin’s invasive breath to Collatine’s histrionic respirations and Lucrece’s violent exhalations, the trajectory of breath is not linear in the poem; the air in Lucrece’s bedroom is never fresh but continuously recycled as the characters breathe their passions in and out with increasing difficulty. The airspace turns asphyxiating for those in the narrative and immerses the reader into the circulation of breath, the vehemence of sighing, and the constraints of the voice.

The toxic air that Lucrece has been breathing since her rape necessitates a purgative release, which comes with her suicide in the next stanza: ‘That blow did bail it [her soul] from the deep unrest / of that polluted prison where it breathed’ (ll. 1725–6). Yet, once Lucrece, with ‘contrite sighs’, exhales in platonic fashion her soul’s essence (‘winged sprite’) to the clouds, the air far from lightens as it is superseded by Lucretius and Collatine’s attempts to appropriate the Roman daughter and wife’s now lifeless body and to make their mark on the aerial environment of the scene. Collatine’s excessive physicality in breathing out Tarquin’s name, examined earlier in this article, and his dramatic performance are accentuated when placed next to Lucretius’s laments⁴²:

The one doth call her his, the other his,
 Yet neither may possess the claim they lay.
 The father says ‘She’s mine.’ ‘O mine she is’,
 Replies her husband, ‘Do not take away
 My sorrow’s interest; let no mourner say
 He weeps for her, for she was only mine,
 And only must be wailed by Collatine.’ (ll. 1793–9)

With regard to the recurrent use of the character O in the poem, Miriam Jacobson has argued that ‘what makes zero conceptually unique is the way

⁴⁰Chapman, ‘Lucrece’s Time’, 178.

⁴¹Chapman, ‘Lucrece’s Time’, 168. For an example of delivering these lines on stage in a way that disrupts time, see Camille O’Sullivan’s 2014 RSC performance. O’Sullivan chooses to deliver the first ‘he’ in a long exhalation, with her voice trembling as in tears or fear, producing a reverberating effect that for a moment makes the listener linger between the two words and two breaths. See *The Rape of Lucrece: Performed by Camille O’Sullivan and Feargal Murray*, Adapted by Elizabeth Freestone, Feargal Murray and Camille O’Sullivan. Recorded Live at the Swan Theatre, RSC 2014 (the stanza is delivered at minutes 05:39-06:02 during Song 18, ‘Lucrece Summons’).

⁴²See Vickers, ‘The Blazon of Sweet Beauty’s Best’, who has pointed to the circular movement enacted by Shakespeare’s narrative, observing that the ‘poem closes as it opened, as men rhetorically compete with each other over Lucrece’s body’ (108).

its graphic, material textuality communicates its conceptual lack: the ability to make a mark on a page, a circle that circumscribes emptiness, offers zero a material presence from which we can infer absence'.⁴³ As Jakobson persuasively demonstrates, while in the case of Lucrece's extensive lamentations the materiality of the cipher can be redeeming, 'giving to her rape a graphic habitation and a sign', the Os exclaimed by her father and husband are part of an exchange that makes the speakers interchangeable and their points anchored to nothing but air.⁴⁴ The near identical claims they make on the body, purely on the patriarchal grounds of it being their property, reduce the Os to vacant, haunted containers of the passion Lucrece had instilled in them. 'O mine she is', printed in Q1 without speech marks and preceded by a comma, remains a declaration floating between the two men: it can be either Lucretius' augmented, inverted, and unnecessary repetition of 'she's mine' (framed by commas in Q1), or Collatine's preamble to his statement on the exclusivity of grief to the husband ('she was only mine / and only must be wayled by Collatine'). The O, 'material presence' of emptiness, when detached from a speaker becomes a spectral presence, a graphic remnant not of what cannot be captured in words but of itself.⁴⁵ In the 1616 quarto, Lucretius' 'she's mine' is only followed by a comma, not preceded by one, presumably giving the line 'O mine she is' to Collatine as Lucretius' claim is given in one breath up to this comma-induced pause.⁴⁶ The breath signifiers on the page, the Os and commas, turn into a masculine play of breath that obscures any connection to the physical body.

The gendered play of breath continues in the next stanza, opening again with Lucretius' O internally rhyming with Collatine's 'woe, woe' two lines later, rendering their woe interchangeable and thus meaningless:

'O', quoth Lucretius, 'I did give that life
Which she too early and too late hath spilled.'
'Woe, woe', quoth Collatine, 'She was my wife:
I owed her, and 'tis mine that she hath killed.'
'My daughter' and 'My wife' with clamours filled

The dispersed air, who, holding Lucrece' life,

Answered their cries, 'My daughter and my wife.' (ll. 1800–6)

Modern editions pre-empt interpretation by clearly demarcating voices and what is being voiced in these lines. The speech marks around 'my daughter'

⁴³Jacobson, *Barbarous Antiquity*, Chapter 3 (87–113), esp. 91.

⁴⁴Jacobson, *Barbarous Antiquity*, 89.

⁴⁵For a Lacanian reading of the use of 'O' in Shakespeare, that anticipates and expands Jacobson's reading of the cipher in *Lucrece*, see also Fineman, 'The Sound of O in *Othello*'. For Fineman, the O in *Othello* anchors in the tragedy the split subject, materially and acoustically, pointing to the impossibility of representation: 'I understand the sound of O in *Othello* both to occasion and to objectify in language Othello's hollow self' (86).

⁴⁶For further discussion of textual variants between quartos, especially in relation to their headings, although not focusing on punctuation and these extracts, see Roberts, *Reading Shakespeare's Poems in Early Modern England*, Chapter 3 (102–42).

and ‘my wife’, the commas before and after ‘who’, and the speech marks in ‘my daughter and my wife’, serve to separate what is said by Lucretius, what by Collatine, and what by the dispersed air who answered their cries. In the early editions of the poem, however, the absence of speech marks can be seen to eliminate the male speakers in favour of the air. Reading the last line without speech marks suggests that ‘my daughter and my wife’ is not a qualification on the cries, or an echo of the two men’s lamentation, but a pronouncement on the part of the air. In this reading it is the air that refers to Lucrece as my daughter and my wife, one of the many examples of *prosopopeia* (an imagined person or thing represented as speaking) in the poem.

Enterline has examined how in the early modern classroom frequent exercises in *prosopoeia* involved the boys dramatically impersonating the voices of men, often their masters’, experiencing thus familiar settings in unfamiliar ways: ‘Learning what it means to *become* a ‘boy’ means not only learning Latin, but also assuming a well-defined role within a social relation of hierarchy and address.’⁴⁷ In practice, such institutionalised role play reveals how, according to Enterline, ‘humanist language training installed a decentering imaginary practice in its schoolboy subjects’.⁴⁸ In competition with Lucretius and Collatine, the ‘dispersed air’ imitates their cries dramatically, and in the process emerges superior to them, decentering their authority over voice and Lucrece.

Air’s proprietary right has been established with Lucrece’s death and the release of her breath in air; the element, ‘holding Lucrece life’ can be seen as transformed into the third (or fourth if we count Tarquin’s temporal ‘occupation’) and final possessor of the female body. Yet, the ‘dispersed air’, in its diffused and vulnerable materiality, has always been the air that most closely approximates Lucrece’s existence. Whether through the metaphors of volcanic or artilleried force or through her vehement sighs before she gave up the ghost, Lucrece’s relationship with air has been one of unpredictable and disoriented or pan-oriented dispersal. Lucrece then is contained within the ‘dispersed air’. When the titles my daughter my wife populate the air, these versions of her identity float alongside her own version of a selfhood, and when the stanza ends with combining the cries into one, ‘my daughter and my wife’, this is Lucrece’s voice we hear, her response an echo of the patriarchal roles that are in contest with her pneumatic subjectivity. The ephemerality of the echo renders the titles devoid of meaning, as if Lucrece is mocking them by bouncing the empty words back. Modern editions might be clarifying male speakers, but in the process they can be said to silence Lucrece’s voice.

This reading does not of course preclude the one established by modern editions or the attribution of the line purely to air. In fact, it has not accounted for an extra-textual voice that comes to also bear on this passage. The possessive

⁴⁷Enterline, *Shakespeare’s Schoolroom*, 82.

⁴⁸*Ibid.*, 82.

adjective, 'my', introduces one more contestant for the final line: the reader, who may animate the text via their own breath. Such immersive, embodied experience would concur with Jennifer Richards's recent study on voices and books in the early modern period. Richards argues that 'script and print *depend* on the physical voice for their meaning, including when they are not sounded' and urges for Renaissance books to be seen as 'events':

We have often misheard Renaissance printed books. Our preoccupation with their materiality has inhibited our experience of them as events. Indeed, Renaissance printed books are alive with possibilities, I argue in *Voices and Books*, but we will not understand this while we focus on them as objects, or foreground the experience of the solitary reader, pen in hand, marking the text.⁴⁹

The model of the solitary and silent reader is even further challenged by Shakespeare's poem if we take into account the historical, material realities of the sixteenth-century humanist classroom. Enterline has shown how training in Latin rhetoric relied on immersive strategies to affect an interlocutor or audience and how Shakespeare uses such formal technical exercises to explore empathy in his tragic protagonists. She writes that Lucrece structures her lament 'along institutionally predictable lines' (124), her effort to find words for her grief an 'experiment in forensic oratory'.⁵⁰ In light of studies such as Enterline's and Richards's, Lucrece's voice and the text inscribing it are redefined as a public performance; events of verbal art animated by readers in the early modern classroom and potentially by any reader sensitive to the oral and aural cues of the poem.

While this article only focuses on an aspect of the voice, the breath, and its scope is much narrower, it has also sought to redefine what counts as reading *The Rape of Lucrece*. To read through *Lucrece* is, as I argue, to breathe through *Lucrece*, throwing into relief the pneumatic subjectivities the poem engages and cultivates. Inhabiting the pneumatic selves of Tarquin, Lucrece, Collatine, and Lucretius, the reader adopts an embodied style of engagement in which the breath does not belong to one person but to many while at the same time being specific to their physicality. Following scholars who have stressed the significance of aural reading and its effects on the readers, the *Rape of Lucrece* can be seen an example of poetry that in the words of Catherine Craik 'has perhaps always striven to enable readers to experience themselves more meaningfully as embodied subjects, its cadences capturing the subtle movements and stirrings of living utterance. Line lengths indicate how a poem is to be breathed, and the meter of a poem beats regularly, skips, or halts in order to capture the fury, blissful calm, terror, desire or

⁴⁹Richards, *Voices and Books in the English Renaissance*, 19 and 32. On the orality of early modern reading practices, see also Coleman, *Public Reading and the Reading Public in Late Medieval England and France* and Hackel, *Reading Material in Early Modern England*. For the acoustic dimensions of non-dramatic poetry, see Trudell, 'The Mediation of Poesie'.

⁵⁰Enterline, *Shakespeare's Schoolroom*, 124–5.

ecstasy we experience when we live life most intensely.⁵¹ Shakespeare's poem is a text that can be experienced more meaningfully in an embodied form. It expects and establishes a pneumatic consciousness from its recipients, suggesting breathing patterns not only for Tarquin, Lucrece, and Collatine, but for the reader who has to negotiate their own place in the suffocating environment. The seemingly private process of conspiracy the reader is immersed in cannot be disentangled from the synchronically public and domestic environment of Lucrece's bedroom. The reader witnesses the breath and breathes at the same time, mapping their ethical responsibility onto that of the characters.

But how can we speak of an ethics of the breath? Gina Bloom has argued that:

because it is so difficult to establish the intentions behind the flow of breath and because breath is inherently disjoined from the bodies that produce it, breath problematizes the speaker's body as a site of agency, dispersing accountability for an utterance.⁵²

Is this dispersal to be welcomed as holding all, victims and witnesses, responsible, or is it to be lamented as minimising one's stake in the infliction or suffering of pain? How might a text like *The Rape of Lucrece* make a case for the significance of the embodied politics of breathing? Levinas' pneumatic thought and current work on feminist politics of breathing might offer some initial answers. Calling it a 'process of ethical circulation of air', Lenart Škof describes Levinas's pneumatology as a pattern of alterity:

while breathing liberates me into the passivity of all passivities – vigilance towards the other –, I am being aspired by the other, exposed to his winds, I subject myself in breathing – so Levinas – to everything in the other that is (still) invisible (to me).⁵³

To breathe is to invite the/an other, to enter into an ethical reciprocity initiated by a pre-conscious exposure to one's air. 'This ethical (co)breathing', Škof continues, 'is a break with being, a mode of sleeplessness as an extreme, even pre-subjective exposure to the other'.⁵⁴ *The Rape of Lucrece*, in its careful management of pneumatic subjectivities and the conspiracy it enacts between Lucrece, Tarquin, Lucretius, Collatine, and the reader, partakes in Levinas's understanding of the breath as a break with being. Victims and witnesses of 'untimely breathings' occupy simultaneously positions of the self and the other that are not fixed, but float in the aerography of the poem. To think of the poem's terrain as aerography is to resist the tendency to limit discussions of rape and violence in *Lucrece* on the solid flesh, the solid bedroom, the solid textuality of the verse. It is, conversely, to examine rape and violence by 'thinking through air' as 'the medium of

⁵¹Craik, *Reading Sensations in Early Modern England*, esp. 4.

⁵²Bloom, *Voice in Motion*, 108.

⁵³Škof, *Breath of Proximity*, Chapter 7 (127–56): 137–8.

⁵⁴Škof, *Breath of Proximity*, 144.

relation; the very substance of life and thought'.⁵⁵ This article has suggested some of the ways that attending to the air, and specifically the breath, might recalibrate not only our interpretations of events and characters in the poem, but our very own interpretative strategies and our ethical considerations as readers and witnesses. This is very much part of the project of aerography: 'attentiveness to air is not founded on the gesture of destructive critique, but on modulation, variation, on tempering and toning down attachment to solidity. Air's apprenticeship is the modulation of attention to new imaginative structures for thought or politics.'⁵⁶

The project of 'toning down solidity' and imagining new structures by attending to the breath in the embodied violence of rape is in essence a critical feminist project. Lucrece's disordered respiration does not exist in a literary, aesthetic vacuum but presents us with a politicised image that resonates with bodies across time and space struggling to breathe, constrained by the material and systemic discriminations that dictate who can breathe and who cannot. The 'I Can't Breathe' slogan that captures the suffocating horror of police brutality against Eric Garner in 2014 and George Floyd in 2020 is a powerful vocal reminder that 'having space to breathe, or being able to breathe freely is ... an aspiration' not a certainty.⁵⁷ The toxic environment in Lucrece's bedroom that encapsulates the protagonists and the reader in excessive and disorderly sighs in the aftermath of rape becomes a space that raises similar questions. Shakespeare's poem conditions an affective atmosphere that is materially bound in the literary and reading practices of late sixteenth-century poetry yet exceeds the boundaries of these traditions to include the material conditions of each reader's embodied response. If, as Magdalena Górska has put it, 'it matters if and how one can breathe and if and how one's life is breathable', then it also matters if and how one can read and how one maps their own reading onto that of others.⁵⁸ To return to Celan's notion of 'breathturn' that opened this article, Gadamer has argued that 'for poets like Celan the corporeality of language – the idea that poetry is the flesh and breath of language – is not a metaphor'.⁵⁹ Shakespeare's poem, as I have tried to show, shares with Celan an experimentation with the breath that transcends metaphorical meanings; breath, while ethereal and ephemeral, remains grounded in the verse and in the air, simultaneously undoing and re-orientating power relations, ethical dilemmas, and individual freedoms from Rome's republic to Shakespeare's England to twenty-first century struggles to breathe.

⁵⁵Jackson and Fannin, 'Guest Editorial', 435–44 (439).

⁵⁶Jackson and Fannin, 'Guest Editorial', 438.

⁵⁷Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness*, 120, qtd. in Górska, 'Feminist Politics of Breathing', 247–59 (253). See also Górska, *Breathing Matters*.

⁵⁸Górska, 'Feminist Politics of Breathing', 247–59 (252). See also Perera and Pugliese, 'Introduction.

⁵⁹Gadamer, *Gadamer on Celan*, 44, qtd. in Salminen, 'On Breathroutes', 107–26 (110).

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