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Appius and Virginia: A Story of Rape and Tyranny — Two Renaissance Versions

Having studied John Webster's play *Appius and Virginia* and found it to be politically radical for its time, I became interested in another play on the same subject dating from about half a century earlier, a hybrid morality printed in 1567 and written by someone whose initials were R.B. At first glance this play seemed not only to lack the aesthetic power of Webster's version, but also to have none of the latter's political edge. But when I examined the play in the light of the history of the early Elizabethan period, an ideological dimension emerged that, while differing drastically from Webster's, seems no less significant for its own time. In this paper, I will consider how each of these writers uses the potential for political statement so manifestly inherent in the story itself, and will attempt to show in what sense each version may be seen as politically progressive within its own context.

The ultimate source of the story of Appius and Virginia is Livy's *History of Rome from its Foundation*. There, the story is inseparable from Livy's account of class conflict in ancient Rome, of which it forms a key episode. Appius Claudius, leader of the anti-popular wing of the Roman aristocracy, seizes power by illegally extending the mandate of the Decemviri, a group of ten that has been given temporary power to clean up the judicial system. Arrogant and autocratic, Appius finds himself obsessed with lust for Virginia, the daughter of the plebeian general Virginius. He contrives a plan in which one of his agents claims that Virginia is not Virginius' daughter, but rather a slave who had been snatched from the agent by Virginius many years before. The case is brought before Appius the judge, and the verdict is duly given, but as the girl is about to be taken into custody, Virginius kills his daughter to prevent her degradation. The event sparks a popular revolt against the Decemviri that results in the abolition of that institution, the execution of Appius, and the restoration of the power of the popularly elected tribunes.

What is immediately striking about R.B.'s version is the absence of the political context that is Livy's main concern. Appius is presented as an everyman (or everyking) figure who falls because of his inability to suppress his sensuality. In the manner of Protestant morality plays, he is contrasted with the virtuous figures of Virginius and his family, idealized types of chastity, obedience and piety. When Appius is brought down at the end, it is not by a general revolt, or even by the agency of Virginius, but rather through the intercession of the abstract figures of Reward and Justice, who seem to represent the direct intervention of Providence. The point seems clear: the virtuous subject must not raise his hand against a tyrant; God will do it for him.

The focus here is on personal morality, and especially on a contrast between chaste familial love and lust. As the play opens, Virginius appears on the stage praising his wife (a character invented by R.B.) and daughter, paragons of womanly virtue. In fact, Virginius is on his way to church to give thanks for these blessings when he spies the objects of his meditation, who are also on their way to church. Concealing himself to overhear their pious conversation, he is duly delighted at the ensuing stilted dialogue and emerges to an elaborate exchange of mutual respect and affection. The nature of the relationship between husband and wife is indicated when Virginia addresses first her mother: "You matron, you spouse, you nurse and you wife, / You comfort, you only the sum of his life," and then her father: "You husband, you sweetheart, you joy, and you pleasure, / You king and you kaiser too, her only treasure" (115). A similar blend of affective and hierarchical values is evident in the parents' appreciation of Virginia, who is praised for her chastity, sobriety and obedience. The episode ends on a song in which the trio proclaim that "the trustiest treasure in earth, as we see / Is man, wife, and children in one to agree" (116).

This idealization of the family is the moral centre against which the action of the play is measured. To strengthen the contrast between Virginius and Appius, the latter too is represented as married, so that his lust is defined as adulterous as well as oppressive. When Appius later refers to himself as "King and . . . Kaiser" (128) of his realm, with infinite power to do good or evil to his subjects, the verbal echo underlines the contrast between the benevolent patriarch Virginius and the patriarch who abuses his power. The family is seen as an image of the state (as it often is in political theory of the period); in both terms of the comparison, power must be accompanied by responsibility and affection.

To a modern reader, the play's emphasis on obedience to authority and on the wonders of the nuclear family may well suggest the ideology

of the so-called moral majority. Only a consideration of the play in relation to its own historical context can restore its ideological value. Three key elements of the play must be further explored: the way in which political change is effected; the idealization of the nuclear family; and the characterization of Virginia. I have said that the characters Justice and Reward seem to be agents of Providence. But they are also characters in a hybrid morality, and as such they "hover unsubstantially between abstraction and human type," as David Bevington puts it. His analysis continues:

They are abstractly named but seem in fact to be ordinary servants of the chief magistrate. Appius is therefore understandably surprised when Justice and Reward turn to him in the name of a higher law . . . Still, he is not actually being arrested by his own lieutenants in a palace revolution. Justice and Reward have taken refuge in their abstract natures. (160-1)

On the question of opposition to a tyrant, R.B. seems deliberately to exploit the potential for ambiguity of the semi-allegorical mode in which he is writing. Strict obedience to the monarch is enjoined, and yet something or someone overthrows him.

It would be incorrect to conclude that the ambiguity here stems from prudence. The value of obedience is fundamental to the structure of the play, providing the theme for a sub-plot about derelict servants as well as informing the value system of the virtuous characters. The ambiguity is due, rather, to an unresolved conflict between absolute moral value on the one hand and political necessity on the other. And the conflict is allowed to remain unresolved because of the specific historical situation in which the play was created and, secondarily, because of the capacity of the hybrid form to do a balancing act between the abstract and the concrete.

To establish the historical context, it will help to look briefly at Calvin's discussion of the subject of political obedience in the *Institutes* (1559). "If we are inhumanly harassed by a cruel prince," Calvin writes, "let us . . . consider that it is not our province to remedy these evils, and that nothing remains for us, but to implore the aid of the Lord, in whose hand are the hearts of kings and the revolutions of kingdoms" (IV.xx.29). Exactly how the Lord works is not clear. "Sometimes he raises up some of his servants as public avengers, and arms them with his commission to punish unrighteous domination," Calvin tells us, and such people are "armed with authority from Heaven" (IV.xx.30). But what is the mark of such authority? How do we know another Moses when we see him? On this point, Calvin is no clearer than R.B. In fact, while the ideologues of the Reformation

generally advocated obedience to the secular authority, the subject was always being reopened as political situations changed. Calvin himself changed his mind three years after the publication of the *Institutes*.¹

R. B.'s *Appius and Virginia* translates the uncertainty of the *Institutes* into theatrical terms. Very clearly, the figures Justice and Reward parallel Calvin's agent "armed with authority from Heaven." In both cases, the figures imply a threat to impious power, but there is no lucid depiction of agency. Calvin's distinction between the ordinary private individual and the person endowed with a special function in the universal battle of good and evil finds its theatrical embodiment in the hybrid morality's distinction between people like Virginius and abstractions like Justice.

All of this falls into place if we see the play as expressing the contradictions of an ardent reformer during the early years of Elizabeth's reign. Although the Elizabethan Settlement left much to be desired from the reformers' point of view, still, in the 1560s, with the threat of Catholic reaction a reality, it would have been madness to do anything but strenuously support the monarchy and fall in behind the propaganda campaign to inculcate obedience. Only a few years before, God had indeed stepped in to save the faithful from the oppressions of Mary Tudor. Wasn't this proof that passive obedience would be rewarded? And wasn't Elizabeth God's agent in this "revolution of kingdoms"?

And yet, as Calvin had enjoined, the faithful must remain prepared to "suffer any thing rather than deviate from piety" (*Institutes*, IV.xx.32), and it is the figure of Virginia that embodies this doctrine. A comparison between R. B.'s character and Chaucer's Virginia in "The Physician's Tale" helps to make this clear. In Chaucer, Virginia is presented as a lovely victim, a juicy little morsel with voice tuned low in becoming modesty, who faints at the sight of her father's knife. R. B.'s Virginia, like Chaucer's, is a paragon of purity, but the stress in R. B. is on her moral rather than her physical perfection; and in addition to being modest and dutiful, she is sober, articulate, opinionated and valorous. It is she who demands to be killed rather than undergo servitude and defilement. In fact, she is a Protestant heroine, in a tradition that would later include Spenser's Britomart and the Lady in Milton's *Comus*. And as the only heroic figure in the play she must serve as a model for the men in the audience as well as for the women, a point that needs to be stressed because female literary characters tend to function as role models (or the reverse) for women only.

The third key element in this network of values I am sketching is the really extraordinary idealization of the nuclear family that forms its moral center. This corresponds to the stress on the family in the

doctrine and even the discipline of zealous reformers in the period between the Reformation and the Restoration. It was not only that the relations between family members were spiritualized by Puritan ideology, so that the sexual double standard was repudiated and patriarchal domination was tempered by love. What was more important politically, at least in the short run, was that the household replaced the parish as the lowest unit of church discipline. The master of the household was expected to provide religious education to all members of his household (sometimes his wife assisted), and if no "sufficient" minister were available, a particularly capable householder might take on the education of his neighbours as well.² "If ever we would have the church of God to continue among us," wrote the Puritan Greenham, "we must bring it into our households, and nourish it in our families" (quoted by Hill, 429). "The essence of Puritanism," writes Lawrence Stone, "was a family church" (141). The political implications of this are spelled out by Christopher Hill: "Given the semi-priestly functions of fathers of protestant families, we can see how easily, once the old ecclesiastical régime had broken down after 1640, householders of the industrious sort stepped into the place of ministers. They had been preparing for it through two and a half centuries." (451)

R.B.'s *Appius and Virginia* thus expresses the ideology of militant Protestantism at a time when its goals were to protect the Elizabethan government against attack from Catholicism and, at the same time, to work on developing its infra-structure of a family church. The message to the faithful is clear: obey the Queen absolutely, but do not trust overmuch in temporal authority; suffer anything rather than commit impiety; pass down the true faith through your progeny and bide the time when Justice and Reward will see fit to manifest themselves in earthly form.

By the time Webster wrote his version, R.B.'s message was outdated. I have left myself very little space to deal with this rich play, so I will focus on what I take to be its central concern, which is a repudiation of the very ideology of passive obedience that informs the earlier version.³ The play is a full-blown Renaissance history play, with an epic structure and a melancholy undertone that would have appealed to Brecht. Webster has returned to Livy and to Livy's concern with political detail. Where he departs from Livy it is usually to make the story more immediately relevant. Thus, for example, Webster's Appius is not Livy's ultrapatrician, but rather an upstart courtier, in the manner of King James' favorite, the Duke of Buckingham, whose sexual transgressions amused his monarch and scandalized the people. It is again the contemporary context that inspires Webster's major addition to Livy, which is the plot material involving Appius' aban-

donment of the army to starvation. The outfitting and then abandonment of armies under both Elizabeth and James was the result of a foreign policy that wavered between placating the popular demand for an aggressive Protestant stance and appeasing Spain. Webster's angry portrayal of the soldiers' suffering, like his portrait of Appius, is a thinly disguised comment on current events.

I mention these particulars to give some sense of the play's concern with the specifics of politics. In contrast to the bare universe that forms the backdrop for the battle of good and evil in the earlier play, we have here a fully realized image of society, acted out by a large cast of characters. It is through the body politic that good and evil are expressed and defined. Personal virtue and duty to God are impotent unless they are accompanied by political virtue and duty to man. Icilius, the betrothed of Virginia, enunciates this clearly:

Better had *Appius* been an upright Judg,
And yet an evil man, then honest man,
And yet a dissolute Judg; for all disgrace
Lights lesse upon the person, then the place. (V.i, 157-60)

In fact, personal and political virtue coincide. Virginius, who subordinates his personal welfare to the common good (to prevent mutiny, he feeds his soldiers out of his own pocket and tells them the food comes from Rome), is also a virtuous and gentle man; whereas Appius is willing to sacrifice Rome to his lust. But Virginius' lack of political sophistication and his habit of obedience to authority exemplify the old-fashioned virtue that in Webster's play costs Virginia her life.

Virginius' fault consists in his failure to hire a lawyer to defend his daughter. "Truth needs no advocate" (IV,i,66) he proclaims, expressing a confidence in Providence that rings hollow here. For he then confesses his reliance upon Appius to act instead of a lawyer for him:

I have no skill i'th' weapon, good my Lord;
I mean, I am not travell'd in your Lawes.
My suit is therefore by your special goodness
They be not wrested against me. (IV. i, 75-8)

The notion that the judge should act as protector of the innocent defendant was a major tenet of Jacobean legal ideology. What is extraordinary here is that Virginius hangs on to this ideology although he has no doubt that Appius' intention is to rape his daughter. He has been raised on the Elizabethan doctrine of obedience to authority; he cannot believe that Appius the judge will be nothing more than Appius the man. At the end of the scene he comments on his own delusion:

Good men too much trusting their innocence
 Do not betake them to that just defence
 Which God and Nature gave them; but even wink
 In the black tempest, and so fondly sink. (310-13)

It is not only Virginius who is deluded by the mystique of authority. His responsibility for Virginia's death is shared by the society as a whole. When Icilius attempts to undermine Appius' credibility as a judge in the case by displaying Appius's lust-letters to Virginia, he finds that no member of the court will read them:

Will no man view these papers? What not one?
Jove thou hast found a Rival upon earth,
 His nod strikes all men dumb. (IV. i, 280-82)

Icilius, who has little reverence for anything, understands perfectly well why no one will read the letters. An earlier comment on Appius expresses Icilius' iconoclastic vision, the vision of the play:

A petty Lawyer t'other day,
 Glad of a fee, but, cal'd to eminent place,
 Even to his betters, now the word's Attend.
 This gowned office, what a breadth it bears!
 How many tempests waite upon his frowne! (II. ii, 26-30)

The mythology surrounding figures of authority and symbolized by their awe-inspiring robes serves no better purpose than to delude people into confusing the ideal with the reality, the dream of paternal responsibility with the mere mortal who, at best, is striving to work towards that ideal. At worst, the myth provides a cover beneath which the unscrupulous man can tyrannize at will.

The really brilliant scene in the play is the one in which Icilius and Virginia try to convince Numitorius (Virginia's uncle) and other friends that Appius intends them harm. Since Virginius is away defending Rome, Numitorius is responsible for Virginia's welfare. Numitorius' responses as the revelation of Appius' intentions proceeds bear the burden of the scene. They go from: "Can I think / Lord *Appius* will do wrong, who is all justice, / The most austere and upright Censurer / That ever sate upon the awful Bench?" (III. i, 33-36), to "Besides, *Icilius*, Know you the danger — what it is to scandal / One of his place and sway?" (42-44), to "It ill becomes my place and gravity, / To lend a face to such reproachful terms / 'Gainst one of his high presence" (52-54), to "Keep fast the door there: Sweet Couz not too loud" (98-99), and then, finally, to "The Gods of *Rome* protect you all, and then / We need not fear the envious rage of men" (136-37). Numitorius is not a bad man: he stands for the body politic through

which value is defined. His reliance on the gods, like Virginius' reliance on his and his daughter's innocence, is defined as bad because it dooms Virginia.

In the end, the suffering of the people—of Icilius, of the soldiers, of Virginia—mounts to the point where the passivity of the virtuous individual gives way to the active resistance of the body politic. I do not have time to go into the details of the revolt. As in Livy, there is a democratization of power. The purging of the Roman state by the joint efforts of the citizens (Icilius) and the army (Virginius) tells of things to come in England in the 1640s and 50s. But a life has been squandered, thanks to virtuous passivity. And the point is made that undue reverence for authority, whether through awe, cowardice, cynicism or political naiveté, is destructive of individuals and of the commonweal.

This reinterpretation and reevaluation of martyrdom occurs at a time when an earlier guarded optimism had given way to a certainty that the monarchy would oppose any of the aspirations of the progressive forces of the time. This could be said of the whole period of Webster's productivity as a writer, which coincided with the reign of James from 1603 to 1625. We do not know when *Appius and Virginia* was written. Scholars place it either very early or very late in Webster's career. This seems right to me, because both were moments of political crisis and change, and it must have been at such a moment that this play was written. It is the only play in which Webster focuses on the body politic and suggests a political solution to tragedy. The Duchess of Malfi is a character who, in a general way, "lights the time to come." *Appius and Virginia* is a play that has something to say about how to get there.

Thus both R.B. and Webster use the Roman story to make a political statement. At the crux of the story there is the attempt to enslave a woman to a tyrant's lust. Notably, the attempt is thwarted, so that the image of the female protagonist is not that of a broken woman—as in the Lucrece stories—but rather, of a fighter. Webster's Virginia is very different from her counterpart in R.B.'s version. But she, too, is singled out for virtues other than sexual attractiveness—for independence, keen intellect, wit.

In fact, both R.B. and Webster use their medium to present these protagonists from a point of view utterly lacking in prurience. The spectator's eye does not see Virginia as a sex object, and, as a result, the tyrant's lust appears perversely, grotesquely onanistic. The fact that these writers conspicuously avoid stimulating sexual response can be best appreciated if we compare, say, Shakespeare's treatment of lust and tyranny in *Measure for Measure*. There, as in the same writer's *Rape of Lucrece*, the audience is made to see the woman through the

eyes of the violator and therefore—to some extent—to share the violator's state of mind.⁴ In the *Appius* plays the political intention to show rape as an aspect of tyranny precludes any such effect.

NOTES

1. See Calvin's *Commentaries on the Book of the Prophet Daniel*, I, 378-84.
2. On this subject, see Christopher Hill, *Society and Puritanism*, chapter 13 ("The Spiritualization of the Household").
3. A fuller discussion of this play will appear in my book *Between Worlds: A Study of the Plays of John Webster*, which is to be published by Wilfrid Laurier University Press later this year.
4. This point is made about *Measure for Measure* by Kathleen McLuskie.

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