This article analyzes two seventeenth-century French versions of the tale of Livy’s Lucretia through the lens of Lacanian psychoanalysis. In each, Lucrèce suffers two deaths and what Lacan calls atê, the space between the two deaths. Lucrèce’s suicide is a performative act in Georges de Scudéry’s Les Femmes illustres: she demonstrates to her masculine audience how to kill the tyrant. In Madeleine de Scudéry’s Clélie, histoire romaine, the heroine’s first death is not her rape at the hands of Sextus Tarquinius, but her marriage to Collatin, and although she does kill herself after she is raped, her second death does not occur until she delivers a message to Clélie.

True ethical action does not simply reproduce the Symbolic law. It introduces something new into the Real. (Miller 84)

According to Philippe Bosquet, “un des personnages féminins les plus connus du XVIIe siècle et emblématique du statut de l’héroïsme féminin” is the Roman matron Lucretia (91). James Gaines echoes this comment:

Of all the Greco-Roman heroines that the French Renaissance placed beside, and often before, the pious female saints of the Middle Ages, none had assumed more prominence by mid-seventeenth century than Lucretia, the celebrated victim of Sextus Tarquinius. (515)
Not only are critics struck with the frequency of texts which feature her (Bosquet claims that there are at least fifty which tell Lucretia’s story in one form or another), but they also comment on the different kinds of works in which she appears: theological treatises, plays, \(^1\) example books, \(^2\) and novels analyze, condemn, justify and stage her actions. \(^3\) Lucretia is ambiguous and controversial: is she innocent or guilty? is she a woman or a man? can her Roman virtue be reconciled to Christian virtue? can her actions be seen as heroic? (Bosquet 95-96; Hepp 15). \(^4\)

This article will address two seventeenth-century French versions of Lucretia’s story: her “harangue” in *Les Femmes illustres* (1642) and a narrative that includes her as a main character in *Clélie, histoire romaine* (1654-60). Why these two? They are possibly by the same writer. For simplicity’s sake, I will refer to the author of the “harangue” in *Les Femmes illustres* as Georges de Scudéry, although the authorship of this text is by no means settled and some critics attribute at least part of the collection to his sister, Madeleine de Scudéry. \(^5\) The authorship of the *Clélie* is generally attributed to Madeleine, but, as Joan DeJean notes, *Clélie* is the product of “salon writing” — Madeleine “orchestrated” the effort as a kind of lead writer, while the members of her coterie brought scholarly and intellectual capital to the collaborative project (DeJean 22, 73). Despite the fact that they are linked historically through their author(s) and social milieux, these two versions of the Lucretia story are quite different (Nunn 245). They retain, however, the basic narrative elements found in Livy’s *Ab Urbe

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1 See Du Ryer’s *Lucrèce, tragédie* and Chevreau’s *La Lucreesse romaine.*

2 See Du Bosc’s *La Femme héroïque* and Le Moyne’s *La Gallerie des femmes fortes.*

3 Manfred Tietz gives a good overview of many of these texts, although he fails to mention Scudéry’s *Femmes illustres.*

4 Philippe Bosquet says Lucretia is a type — the virtuous home-bound wife — by 1707. References to Lucrèce in Mme de Sévigné’s letters indicate that this is true at least by the 1680s (Verdier 80). Melissa Mathes, whose thesis that “each resurgence is linked to intense interest in the founding of a republic,” leaves out the large number of versions of Lucretia’s tale over the course of the seventeenth century in France. Mathes does not mention at all the Scudéry versions or any other versions from the French seventeenth century (5).

5 For a range of opinions regarding the authorship of *Les Femmes illustres,* see Joan DeJean 79; Rosa Galli Pelligrini 144-45; Donna Kuizenga 308; Mary Ann Garnett 244; and Hélène Colombani n.p.