When a victim is unable to seek vengeance against the wrongdoer for the crimes committed against him or her, it drastically alters the process of revenge. Several of Shakespeare’s female characters, notably Ophelia in *Hamlet* and Lucrece in *The Rape of Lucrece*, internalize their constant societal objectification and degradation; these women lack the means to retaliate against the larger wrongdoer, society, or their more particular wrongdoers. Thus, rather than blame others for defining her by her physicality, Ophelia punishers her body for inviting such objectification. Society defines Lucrece by her chastity, but instead of recognizing society as her oppressor, she identifies her body as her prison. Death by suicide provides these characters with the opportunity to avenge their souls against their bodies, by claiming victory over the bodies that have made their abuse possible, bodies that, through displacement, they have come to interpret as their enemies.

Ophelia and Lucrece endure abuse centered on the body. This comes in the form of straightforward objectification by the males in their lives and the more nuanced emotional abuse of a paralyzing mind/body polarity. Ophelia’s and Lucrece’s male relations and acquaintances frequently exploit them as pawns in their own schemes. Polonius uses Ophelia as bait in his attempt to find out more about Hamlet when he “looses” her on him (*Hamlet* 2.2.162). He employs her to lure and trap Hamlet the way a fisherman would place a worm on a hook. Her status as a pawn progresses when Hamlet uses his conversation with her as a pretense for insulting Polonius, who is hidden behind
a nearby tapestry. “Where’s your father?...Let the doors be shut upon him, that he may play the fool nowhere but in’s own house” (3.1.131-134). In all likelihood, Hamlet is not speaking to Ophelia, but speaking to Polonius. By using her as a forum to send a message instead of engaging directly with her, he treats her as an object—a tool for communication, but not a person with whom to communicate.

The men in Ophelia’s life objectify her not only by literally using her as an object, but also by emphasizing her physicality as her defining feature. In Laertes and Polonius’ conversations with Ophelia in Act I Scene Three, they each advise her to reject Hamlet’s advances, and talk to her about nothing else. They focus relentlessly on her sexuality, reducing her merely to her body. Likewise, during her madness-inspired singing, Claudius offers only variations of “Pretty Ophelia” (Hamlet 4.5.56). She is, perhaps, trying to send Claudius a message about the state of her soul, and he responds by commenting on her appearance. He too reduces her to her body, even in her state of emotional turmoil. In contrast, in Titus Andronicus, Lavinia is not dismissed the way Ophelia is, even after she is rendered mute. Titus wants to understand her; he asks her to “give signs” to indicate who raped her (Titus 4.1.61). Marcus also tries to help Lavinia implicate her rapist by thinking of a way she can communicate without the use of her hands or tongue (4.1.67-76). Lavinia’s father and uncle value her inner life, even after the violation of her body and the destruction of her honor. Ophelia’s male relatives and acquaintances, by contrast, consistently fail to recognize that she has an inner life.

Lucrece experiences objectification through the language that characters use to describe her body. Tarquin, for instance, calls her body a “never-conquered fort” (Lucrece 19). By raping her—in his mind conquering a citadel, rather than a person—he
uses her body as a medium for proving his power, particularly as it compares to her husband Collatine’s. The narrator of Lucrece’s tale later refers to her body as Collatine’s “fair temple” (24). Her body is a thing, a place, rather than part of her personhood. Because it is her husband’s temple and not hers, it is not even a place she owns. Describing her body as a work of manmade architecture rather than a living part of her sets up the contingent conflict between mind and body.

The men in Ophelia’s and Lucrece’s lives teach them to view their minds and bodies as inherently at odds. In Eye for an Eye, William I. Miller presents the concept of the oddman, an Old Norse idea of an objective third party who settles conflicts (9). On the same page, Miller mentions the Greek idea of stasis, which is the gridlock that occurs in the absence of a mediating third party. The conflict builds, leading each side to think it must utterly destroy the other. This is the evolution of Ophelia’s and Lucrece’s strife with their own bodies. There is no unbiased third party to settle the dispute. Society started the conflict by setting up a toxic mind/body split, and the men in their lives, far from being unbiased, have a vested interest in keeping Ophelia and Lucrece alienated from their bodies, because it will ostensibly mean they are also alienated from their sexuality—and therefore will not dishonor their families.

Ophelia learns that the respective natures of her mind and body are diametrically opposed. Hamlet teaches her that her beauty and virtue are mutually exclusive. He tells her that if she is “honest and fair,” she “should admit no discourse to her beauty,” because her beauty will transform her honesty into a “bawd,” a madam or prostitute (Hamlet 3.1.111-114). Hamlet suggests that her body is an enemy to her character, looking to trap and corrupt it. Hamlet further encourages this conflict between her
character and her body by sending her mixed messages about her sexuality. He first advises her to abstain from sex when he tells her to go to a nunnery so as not to be a “breeder of sinners” (3.1.121-130). He encourages her to live a holy life, above the pleasures of the temporal world. Yet just one scene later, he bombards her with sexual advances and innuendoes: “Lady, shall I lie in your lap?” he asks (3.2.115), and later, “It would cost you a groaning to take off mine edge” (3.2.255-256). Soon after he encourages her to desexualize herself entirely, he makes plain his sexual desire for her. He fosters the notion that Ophelia has two irreconcilable sides, a chaste and holy one versus a sexual and indecent one.

Society has set the foundation for Lucrece’s war with her body by placing her on an ideological pedestal. The narrator introduces Lucrece as “Lucrece the chaste” (Lucrece 8). Her purity defines her character in the eyes of her society. Before her rape, Lucrece’s physical beauty is both a testament to her virtue and an antagonist to it. Her beauty is of an ethereal sort because of her pallor—the narrator describes her breast as an “ivory wall” (18). Her appearance echoes the unsullied quality of her character. Yet her beauty also invites her annihilation. Tarquin sees in Lucrece a “silent war of lilies and of roses”—virtue versus beauty (9). This makes her rape doubly advantageous to him: he can exercise power by obliterating her honor, and justify his act by blaming her physical attractiveness. He uses her looks to excuse his rape: “Thy beauty hath ensnared thee to this night” (19). Tarquin effectively blames Lucrece’s body for his attack on it; he suggests that had it not been so beautiful, he might not have raped her. Her two defining traits, spiritual purity and physical beauty, work against each other.
Once this polarity between soul and body has been established, these women understand themselves as imprisoned in bodies they have come to behold as alien and vile. During Ophelia’s madness, she sings a song about a maid who loses her virginity to the man she hoped would be her husband. In the last verse, he expresses his unwillingness to marry the maid now that she is no longer a virgin (Hamlet 4.5.48-66). With this song, Ophelia echoes what Hamlet, Laertes, and her father have all suggested to her, that her body can make her unworthy if she gives into its sexual desires, and that it is a separate and untrustworthy entity. Ophelia identifies her sexuality as the source of her unhappiness, rather than the external sources that have emphasized her sexuality to a dehumanizing degree.

Lucrece also suggests that she has come to view her own body as an alien entity. After her rape, she refers to her body as a “blemish’d fort” imprisoning her “troubled soul” (Lucrece 35). She has by now internalized the idea that her body is the place where “she” resides rather than a part of herself. It is no longer the aforementioned temple, but a ruined fort, where her soul is kept hostage. She wants revenge against Tarquin as well, but Tarquin is not the only one who has wronged Lucrece. Revenge against all those who have objectified her and made her chastity her defining feature would mean revenge against virtually her entire society. It is far simpler for her, and far more in keeping with her character, to carry out her revenge against her own body. The inescapable quality of her body, meanwhile, makes revenge against it both appealing and necessary. Hamlet mentions that in his view the world is a “goodly” prison in which Denmark is one of the worst wards (Hamlet 2.2.247-255). Lucrece’s prison is much smaller; for her, embodiment is a prison. In Eye for an Eye, Miller discusses the ideas of bloody tokens
and relics, and the general helpfulness of reminders in committing acts of revenge (92). Because Lucrece’s raped body is a prison, her embodiment is a constant reminder of the abuse she has endured. Her body is not only an enemy; it is an ever-present enemy. With this forceful reminder, revenge against the body becomes almost inevitable.

Suicide provides these characters with a moment of domination over, and lasting freedom from, the treacherous body, thereby avenging the soul. In Hamlet’s “To be or not to be” soliloquy, he lists a number of reasons he considers suicide an attractive option, ranging from the opportunity for endless sleeping and dreaming to freedom from, among other things, “Th’ oppressor’s wrong” (Hamlet 3.1.56-89). Ophelia has come to view her sexuality itself as the source of her misery rather than the men who demonize her sexuality. Society and specific people in her life are her actual oppressors, but because she lacks the agency and means to punish them, she instead punishes the body that has enabled her objectification. It is the natural culmination of an oppressive mind/body duality. She wears a garland of flowers when she kills herself, a symbol of sovereignty (4.7.168). With her suicide, Ophelia literally reduces her body to nothing more than flesh with no inner life, which is what Laertes, Hamlet, Polonius, and Claudius all have already done. She is objectifying her body on her own terms, becoming her own oppressor. This is her revenge, paying her body back in kind. In exchange for all the years it allowed her objectification, she reduces it to a mere object, an object she then destroys.

Like Ophelia, Lucrece’s body has facilitated her objectification, and thus she, too, finds a way to objectify her body on her own terms by using it to send a message. Her suicide is strategic; she names Tarquin as both her rapist and murderer when she stabs
herself in the chest (*Lucrece* 48). She uses her body as a pawn to get revenge on Tarquin
the way Tarquin used her body to fulfill his desire for conquest. She objectifies and
exploits herself, thereby exercising control over the body that throughout her life, but
most acutely after her rape, has exercised extraordinary amounts of control over her. She
thereby gains her vengeance at last.

The triumph of Ophelia’s and Lucrece’s souls is as significant a part of their
revenge, the restoration of evenness, as the downfall of their bodies. When Gertrude
describes Ophelia’s suicide, she says that Ophelia looked “As one incapable [i.e.
unaware] of her own distress” (*Hamlet* 4.7.188). This may be because Ophelia is not
actually distressed as she is dying, but rather that she is experiencing a blissful sensation
of freedom from the physicality which has defined and thereby inhibited her. Lucrece,
too, believes suicide vindicates her soul. Describing her imminent suicide, she says, “My
shame so dead, mine honour is new-born” (*Lucrece* 36). Destroying her body, she feels,
is destroying her disgrace. She can experience rebirth, release from the ills conferred onto
her soul by her desecrated body.

For Ophelia and Lucrece, a perceived irreconcilability between mind and body
makes suicide more rewarding than life, because it constitutes a legitimate form of
revenge, just as the men in Shakespeare’s revenge plays frequently seek vengeance
against other men for the wrongs committed against them. With suicide, Ophelia
degrades the body which has contributed to her soul’s degradation. Lucrece, by killing
herself, exerts a similar counterforce against the body that has imprisoned her soul. By
projecting onto their bodies all the evils they have suffered, these women reduce
themselves to, and construct themselves as, symbols. Because they have no means for
revenge against their actual oppressors as active subjects rather than passive objects, they ally themselves with society and participate in their own degradation.

