

ANCIENT RAPE CULTURES: SEXUAL VIOLENCE IN THE GREEK, ROMAN, JEWISH, AND EARLY CHRISTIAN WORLD

edited by
ELINA PYY



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Introduction

ELINA PYY

In the past thirty years, the study of gender-based violence has established itself as a legitimate course of inquiry in the field of Classics and Ancient History. While pioneering studies touching upon the theme were already written in the 1970s and the 1980s,¹ a particularly crucial period for “ancient rape studies” was the 1990s – an important decade for the development of ancient gender studies as a whole. In the aftermath of second-wave feminism and in the grip of the “postfeminist” cultural shift, numerous scholars, in particular in the Anglo-American research sphere, started asking questions about the intimate connection between sexuality, power, and violence in the ancient sources and societies. Particularly influential publications from this time include Amy Richlin’s (ed.) *Pornography and Representation in Greece and Rome* (1992), Susan Deacy and Karen Pierce’s (eds.) *Rape in Antiquity* (1997), as well as Angeliki Laiou’s (ed.) *Consent and Coercion to Sex and Marriage in Ancient and Medieval Societies* (1993).² As is clear from the reference sections of the articles in this volume, these works continue to inspire new generations of scholars as we explore fresh avenues towards understanding gender violence in the ancient world.

In the new millennium, academic interest in the intersections of the body, violence, and social power has not in the least diminished. On the contrary, the prominence of these themes in the public discussion and media has ensured that the subject of gender-based violence remains topical and relevant. The worldwide gender movements of the 2010s, such as #MeToo and #TimesUp, drew attention to the cultural and societal structures that uphold systemic violence and harassment.³ In their wake, journalists, media critics, and scholars across the Western world have started calling attention to the ways in which both news media and entertainment industry portray sexual violence, and asking what the conventions of representing victims and perpetrators say about the culturally predominant ideas regarding rape.⁴ Simultaneously, the legal definition of rape has been opened up for discussion in numerous liberal democracies, resulting in new laws regarding consent and coercion.⁵

Classics and Ancient History have been quick to respond to these public debates, discovering new research angles and adopting new terminology inspired by fourth-wave, intersectional, feminism. The criticism directed at the conventions of representation in Western media and screen fiction has inspired classicists to re-examine the ancient narratives of sexual violence from the viewpoint of the victims/survi-

¹ See, especially, CURRAN 1978; ZEITLIN 1986; COLE 1989; EVANS GRUBBS 1989.

² See also PACKMAN 1993; PARADISO 1995; COHEN 1996; JAMES 1997; JAMES 1998; DOUGHERTY 1998; ROSIVACH 1998; SOMMERSTEIN 1998; ZISSOS 1999.

³ NICHOLLS 2021.

⁴ See, e.g., DOCKTERMAN 2014; HUGHES 2014; VALBY 2014; WEINMAN 2014; LINTON 2015; VANSTONE 2016; WILLIAMS 2017; TAYLOR 2020; MUSSO 2021; BYRNE – TADDEO 2022.

⁵ European countries that have recently adjusted the law regarding sexual violence and adopted a consent-based legal definition of rape include Denmark (2020), Slovenia (2021), Spain (2022), Finland (2023) and Switzerland (2024).

vors. “Reading against the grain” of the ancient sources, scholars have sought to reconstruct the victims as characters important in their own right – not just as political metaphors or narrative instruments.⁶ At the same time, ancient social and legal historians have focused on the intersections of gender and other social categories – not just legal status or socio-economical standing, but also ethnicity, age, and physical ability – and examined how these played into the degree of bodily autonomy that an individual in the ancient world enjoyed.⁷ Furthermore, ancient historians have paid attention to the diversity of gender experiences in antiquity, and to the cultures of “toxic masculinity” that put at risk not only women but also men – and, especially, those who did not conform to the binary gender system or the socio-sexual categories of “penetrators” and “penetrated”.⁸ Thus, the development of the field, in tandem with the changing world, has served as a powerful demonstration of the role of Classics and Ancient History not so much as an academic ivory tower, but rather as an active, vocal part of society.

Despite the topicality and relevance of ancient rape studies, one thing that the previous decades have made perfectly clear is that scholars must be constantly prepared to anticipate and address the inevitable accusations of anachronism. As has been noted time and again, ancient societies did not view sexual violence in same terms as we do:⁹ while the understandings of what constituted a rape varied greatly according to time, place, and cultural context, it is safe to state that none of the ancient cultures or communities shared the contemporary ideas regarding gender equality and bodily autonomy that hail from twentieth-century human rights principles. This has led some to question the applicability in principle of modern terminology to research into ancient sexualities and power dynamics, asking whether we can even speak of “rape” in the context of the ancient world.¹⁰ Our take on this question is clear: we can and we should. The culturally ingrained beliefs, norms, and customs that enable and facilitate gender-based violence in the contemporary world stem from a long historical continuum that reaches back to Classical antiquity. Although the ancient definitions of sexual violence differed from ours, that does not mean that the phenomenon did not exist in antiquity; that individuals’ bodily boundaries were not violated, or that sex was not used as an instrument of control and domination. On the contrary, looking into the ways in which the ancient societies legitimized and normalized some of those violations can provide valuable insights into the ways in which the mechanisms of enabling violence function in the world of today. Understanding contemporary rape cultures requires understanding the legacy of the Greek, Roman, Jewish, and Christian patriarchies that continue to inform modern discourses around gender, power, and violence.

While the need to talk about rape in antiquity is therefore urgent, we do not wish to limit ourselves to talking about the act itself. In fact, many of the articles in this volume do not discuss rape *per se*, but rather the many intricate ways in which gender inequality and gender violence were intertwined and woven into the mental landscape of the ancient cultures. While the articles in the volume span a chronological range of two millennia and engage with a great variety of socio-cultural contexts, they are connected by their shared focus on the societal structures, cultural customs, and belief systems that sustained gender violence and created spaces – both physical and metaphorical – for it. In other words: ancient rape cultures. By scrutinising

⁶ See, e.g., SHARROCK 2020; MORALES 2020; RANGER 2023; PYY 2023; RUFO 2016; see also the discussion by MARTORANA in this volume.

⁷ See, e.g., GLAZEBROOK 2015; HUOMOELLER 2016; DMITRIEV 2016; LEVIN-RICHARDSON 2019; KAMEN – MARSHALL 2021; ROTH 2021; STRONG 2021; TAYLOR 2022; KAMEN – LEVIN-RICHARDSON 2022; BELL 2023; JOHNSON 2023; ÁLVAREZ PÉREZ-SOSTOA 2024.

⁸ E.g., RACETTE-CAMPBELL & MCMASTER 2023. For earlier research, see SOMMERSTEIN 1998; WALTERS 1997; WILLIAMS 1999.

⁹ For this discussion, see e.g., in COHEN 1995, 142–62; see also my own previous take on the subject in PYY 2023, 2–3.

¹⁰ STEWART 1995; LEFKOWITZ 1993; for further discussion, see also HARRISON 1997; DEACY – MALHEIRO MAGALHÃES – MENZIES 2023, 2–3.

what these were and how they operated, we wish to increase our own and the reader's understanding of the contemporary cultures of violence as well.

In view of the centrality of the concept of "rape culture" to this volume, it is necessary to briefly discuss what we understand by it. The term was coined in the mid-1970s and emerged as an analytical tool in feminist discourse in the following decade;¹¹ but only in the past ten years or so has it gained footing outside academia and become a recurrent topic in media and public discussion.¹² The Oxford Learners Dictionary defines rape culture as "a society or environment whose prevailing social attitudes have the effect of normalizing or trivializing sexual assault and abuse".¹³ Recent research in sociology and gender studies has pointed out that rape cultures are characterised by asymmetrical power relations between genders, and by patriarchal beliefs and norms regarding sexuality that facilitate violence.¹⁴ Another commonly used marker is a low rate of reporting sexual crimes; this is because rape cultures tend to have a wide array of social mechanisms in place for silencing the survivors, such as victim-blaming, slut-shaming, and discrediting of victim testimonials.¹⁵

It is relatively easy to see how many of the defining characteristics of rape culture apply to the ancient world.¹⁶ While the ancient cultures and societies differed from one another in many crucial aspects, most of them shared certain elements that arguably put certain individuals and groups at a heightened risk of sexual violence: patriarchy, slavery, active engagement in warfare, and clearly defined group identities ("us" vs. "others"). In patriarchal societies, citizen (or ingroup) women's bodies were considered as reproductive instruments that belonged to their male guardians. Under these circumstances, some forms of ingroup rape (most importantly, marriage) were "institutionalised", while at the same time women's social freedom was severely restricted in order to protect them from outgroup violations that could jeopardise family lines.¹⁷ As for the outgroup women (and men) – slaves, prostitutes, war captives – their bodies were instruments for gratifying sexual desires and demonstrating social power. Furthermore, in practically all ancient societies, normative sexual practices were to some degree constructed upon the model of hegemonic masculinity; accordingly, sexual violence was recurrently used as an instrument for constructing male identities, not only in relations between men and women, but also as part of male-male social competition and aggression.

In this volume, a few defining features of rape cultures emerge as crucial to different ancient contexts. Among these is the intimate connection between humor, aggression, and power. Scholars have pointed out how, in the contemporary world, rape jokes are among the seemingly innocent everyday practices that uphold the culture of violence and facilitate coercive sex.¹⁸ In the field of Classics and Ancient History, the

¹¹ BROWNMILLER 1975; CAMBRIDGE DOCUMENTARY FILMS (1975) (see Lynch in this volume).

¹² BURT 1980; the early development of the concept is discussed further in DONAT – D'EMILIO 1992, 9–22.

¹³ <https://www.oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com/definition/english/rape-culture>

¹⁴ POSADAS 2017; GAVEY 2019, 228–29; SHUKLA 2022, 311; HAYES 2023, 1, 8; see also LONSWAY AND FITZGERALD 1995, 704–11.

¹⁵ See ALLEN 2007; FRASER 2015.

¹⁶ Although it can be argued that many of the recent publications discussing rape in antiquity from a socio-cultural perspective deal with "ancient rape cultures", the term has so far been only infrequently applied to the study of the ancient world. See, e.g., RABINOWITZ 2011; KOUTSOPETROU-MØLLER 2021.

¹⁷ Note also the possibility of so-called "settling mechanisms", whereby the perpetrator of sexual violence could, under certain circumstances, avoid legal consequences by marrying the victim (see SCAFURO 2017); this is a common plot in Greek New Comedy (ROBSON 2013, 109–10). It is worth noting that similar practices were in place in many Western countries until the second half of the twentieth century; it was only in 1981 that Italy repealed the "*matrimonio riparatore*". Furthermore, marital rape was criminalised relatively late in many European countries, including Switzerland (1992), Finland (1994), France (1994), Germany (1997), and Hungary (1997).

¹⁸ MEIER – MEDJESKY 2018; PÉREZ – GREENE 2016.

multiple functions of violent humor have been acknowledged for decades: scholars such as Amy Richlin, Ian Ruffell, and Michael Clarke have demonstrated how, in Greek and Roman literary, visual, and dramatic arts, “humorous” references to assault or harassment could be used as simple comic relief, as apotropaic elements, as a form of social critique, or to consolidate existing power relations.¹⁹ In this volume, violent humour is explored, in particular, by Sarah Brucia Breitenfeld in the context of Aristophanic comedy, and by Ash Finn in his discussion of the narratives of revenge-rape in Roman literature. The phenomenon is accounted for in material culture, too: Eleanor Newman examines the violent humour implicit in the portrayals of African males in Roman material evidence; and Briana King discusses examples from Greek and Roman erotic art that were either intended as “funny” or perceived as such by ancient or modern viewers.

Another phenomenon that is addressed in many of the articles in this volume is the so-called “rape myths”: stereotypical beliefs about rape and rape-victims that facilitate sexual violence and contribute to the culture of silence around it. These have been viewed as one of the defining aspects of modern rape cultures:²⁰ they include, for instance, the persistent idea that “no” does not really mean “no”, that the victims of violence are somehow “asking for it”, or that women tend to spread false rape allegations out of vindictiveness. As classical scholars have demonstrated, the origin of these sorts of persistent beliefs can be traced back to the undeniably misogynistic narratives of Greek mythology that have been culturally influential for centuries.²¹ In this volume, the theme is discussed, among others, by Simona Martorana in her discussion of victim-blaming and punishing in the *Metamorphoses*. Furthermore, in their articles, both Chris Greenough and Louis Zweig point out the conventions of similar myth-making in the ancient Hebrew narrative tradition, and its profound impact on the later stages of Western culture.

Finally, a question that is discussed on some level in every article in this volume is the fluid and ambiguous definition of “gender violence”. Despite the catchy name of this book, we acknowledge that not all sexual violence is rape, and not all forms of gender violence are necessarily “sexual”. As a general rule, we define gender violence as any kind of violence the cause, form, or target of which is determined by gender or sexuality.²² In addition to sexual abuse or harassment, this includes domestic violence, some forms of physical aggression between men, “honor killings” of women, and suicides linked to socio-sexual shame. In the ancient contexts, forced public nudity, for instance, can be considered as a form of gender violence (as demonstrated by Judith Evans-Grubbs and Chris Greenough in this volume). Furthermore, the use of physical force is not in any way a necessary factor in gender violence. As the articles by Brian McPhee, Suzanne Lynch show, the lines that draw distinctions between “seduction”, “coercion” and “rape” are often remarkably (and deliberately) blurry in the ancient evidence – but this does not mean that violence did not take place. The definition of gender violence can furthermore be determined by its purpose: often, these types of acts are about “forcing gender” upon the victim and putting “the Other” in their place. In many ancient societies, this phenomenon can be seen in the ways in which violence was used to shape gender identities and to forcibly define the roles of “penetrators” and “penetrated”. Furthermore, the phenomenon was intrinsically connected to the construction of ethnic and cultural identities, as is demonstrated by Simona Martorana, Sarah Brucia Breitenfeld, Ben Jerue, Antti Lampinen, Eleanor Newman, and Francesca Bellei.

This volume is structured into six thematic sections that follow each other in a loosely chronological order. The first section, **“Rape in Greek Culture and Thought”**, examines the cultural and social attitudes

¹⁹ RICHLIN 1992b; CLARKE 2002; CLARKE 2007; RUFFELL 2013; see also LLEWELLYN-JONES 2017.

²⁰ BURT 1980, 217.

²¹ HALL 2015; COLLI 2019; MORALES 2020 (esp. 66–74); ZAJKO – LEONARD 2006; see also HARRIS 2015; HARRISON 1997, 190–93.

²² BURT 1980; LONSWAY – FITZGERALD 1995.

attached to gender violence in the Greek context and problematises what was understood by the concept. In the first article, “Rape Culture in Classical Athens”, Suzanne Lynch examines the legal, social, and cultural aspects of rape in classical Athens, reading Athenian oratory and drama against the theoretical framework of sociology and modern rape studies. Employing the ecological model of violence, she demonstrates how the Athenian rape culture functioned on the level of individuals, interpersonal relationships, communities, and society. Sarah Brucia Breitenfeld’s article “Taking Thratta’s Cherry: The Rape of Enslaved Domestic Laborers in Aristophanes” focuses on three Aristophanic episodes of slave-rape, all involving “a Thracian girl”. Arguing that these episodes were grounded in reality and actual practices, Breitenfeld examines the themes of violent fantasy and social accountability in them. They further seek to reconstruct from the ancient evidence the experiences of foreign household slaves, typical victims of these types of assaults. The third article in this section, “Rape Normalization and Menandrian Apologetics in Callimachus’ *Acontius and Cydippe*” by Brian McPhee, problematizes the nature of coercion and consent in the Greek cultural imagination and literary tradition. McPhee examines Callimachus’ narrative about Acontius’ “tricking” of Cydippe not so much as a humorous love story, but rather as a rape fantasy and a tale about forced marriage; he places the phenomenon in the larger cultural context by discussing it in tandem with the rape apologetics in New Comedy.

Section 2, “**Rape Narratives in Roman Literature**”, examines the narrative traditions around sexual violence in Roman poetry and prose, and how the literary portrayals of violence both reflected and constructed Roman rape culture. The first paper in this section focuses on Ovid – the Roman poet who, perhaps more so than any other ancient author, is (in)famous for the ubiquitous themes of sex and violence in his works. Simona Martorana’s article “Medusa in Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*: Refracted Rapes” discusses Ovid’s Medusa as an othered and marginalized character who is victimized multiple times over; Martorana goes on to demonstrate how Ovid’s version of the myth articulates various aspects of Roman imperial rape culture. The second article in this section, Ben Jerue’s “An Ancient Greek Custom? Reading the Rape of the Sabine Women in Dionysius of Halicarnassus, *Antiquitates Romanae* 2, 30”, offers a re-examination of the famous Roman tale in which sexual violence is seamlessly entwined with Roman history and identity. Jerue interprets Dionysius’ work as “migrant literature” and demonstrates how readers from different cultural backgrounds might have had dramatically different interpretations of the story – especially regarding its justification of rape. The section closes with Ash Finn’s examination of sexual violence as a form of revenge in Roman culture. In his article, “Sexual Violence and the So-called ‘Gains of Vengeance’ in Ancient Rome”, Finn applies modern psychological theories about retributive emotions to examine how the Roman writers – especially Apuleius, Catullus, and Martial – used the topos of revenge-rape to capture intertwined attitudes towards aggression, honour, social competition, and masculinity.

Section 3, “**Imperial Ideology and Colonial Discourses**”, examines the intersections of ethnicity, gender, and violence in the context of Roman imperial conquest. Drawing from postcolonial and race theories, the articles in this section examine how gender violence was used as an instrument for identity-construction, both for the perpetrators and (forcibly) for the victims. The first article by Eleanor Newman, “The Sexual Exploitation of African Males in Roman Material Culture”, studies voyeurism and fetishization in Roman bronze statuettes, oil lamps, and Pompeian floor mosaics. Newman demonstrates how African males, whether they were represented in a “passive” or an “active” sexual role, and whether they were construed as objects of fantasy or ridicule, had no control over their own sexual narrative in the Roman imagination. The next paper, by Antti Lampinen, focuses on sexual violence in the Roman narratives of imperial conquest. In his article, “Boudica’s Daughters: Conquest and Rape in the Ancient Roman Discourse”,

Lampinen combines Roman historiographic writing with triumphalist imperial art to study how sexual violence was ethnically framed in the Roman “pornography of conquest” – and how these outgroup perceptions participated in sustaining and shaping Roman imperial rape culture. The section closes with Francesca Bellei’s article “*Donna or domina? Manipulating Italia’s gender from ancient Rome to 19th-century Italian colonialism*”, which looks into the persistent cultural influence of the ancient custom of representing cities, peoples and provinces as female personifications – either as victimised and conquered or as glorious and conquering. Bellei focuses on the construction of the Italian identity in literature from Dante to the Risorgimento and beyond; she particularly denotes how, during colonialism, the feminised image of Italy was used to sanitize and glorify colonial violence through the myth of the Roman Empire.

Section 4, “**Revolutions of Rape Culture in Late Antiquity**”, examines the development of the ideas regarding gender and violence in late antiquity, in the context of new religious practices and political cultures. In her article “Rape and the Christian Virgin: St. Thekla’s Power against Sexual Assault”, Judith Evans-Grubbs scrutinises the story of the virgin martyr Thekla, one of the most popular Christian saints of the later Roman Empire. Evans-Grubbs demonstrates how Thekla’s fame and fascination were largely due to her success in resisting rape and punishing the would-be rapists; she then explores the meaning that these episodes had for Christian women who rejected marriage, travelled alone, and were at risk of sexual assault. The second article in this section, “For the Good of the Empire: A Wedding in Milan, Imperial Succession, and the Creation of Ritualised Rape Culture in the Late Antique Court”, by Alexander Thies, conducts a case study of the wedding of the child emperor Honorius and his bride Maria in 398 CE. Thies examines the court panegyrist Claudian’s wedding poems, where the poet urges the groom to rape his bride on their wedding night. Examining Claudian’s literary models and placing this episode in the larger cultural and political context of late antiquity, Thies analyses the imperial rhetorics of sexual violence and their connection to the theme of dynastic continuity in a fundamentally unstable political situation.

Although this volume’s emphasis lies quite strongly on the ancient Graeco-Roman (and especially Roman) cultures of violence, the legacy of antiquity is of course much more versatile than that. Contemporary Western culture, along with its ideas about gender, sexuality, and violence, has been powerfully influenced not only by the classical culture, but also by the ancient Hebrew tradition – both through Judaism and through Christianity. Section 5, “**Biblical Receptions**”, turns the gaze from the Graeco-Roman cultural sphere to the Hebrew Bible, and examines the later reception of its narratives of gender violence. The article by Louis Zweig, “Listening for Dinah in Abelard’s *Planctus* and Other Latin Poems”, examines the aftermath of one of the most famous Biblical tales of sexual violence: Sichem’s rape of Dinah in *Genesis* 34. Analysing the Latin retellings of the story from late antiquity to the twelfth century, Zweig is able to show how the victim’s experience was consistently sidelined, and Dinah was simplified into a moral or philosophical sign – until Abelard’s version, where the emotional toll of the rape and its aftermath on the victim are finally explored in depth. The second article in this section, “Sexual Violence Against Men in the Bible” by Christopher Greenough, presents a sociological reading of the ways in which narratives of male rape in the Biblical texts continue to inform modern rape cultures. By examining select examples from the Hebrew Bible, as well as the story of Jesus’ crucifixion in the New Testament, Greenough discusses how these narratives can be read to understand and dismantle the contemporary stigma and the cultural myths around sexual violence against men.

The final section, “**Ancient Rape Cultures on the Contemporary Screen**”, examines the ways in which Greek and Roman representations of sexuality and violence have left their mark on the modern narrative traditions in the field of screen fiction. In her article, “From Antiquity to Screen: Sexual Violence in

Greco-Roman Art and its Modern Representations in *Caligula* (1979) and *Spartacus* (2010-2013)”, Briana King demonstrates how the disproportionate attention given to certain examples of Greek and Roman erotic art has led to a one-dimensional idea of ancient Graeco-Roman sexualities – and how the consequences of this can be observed in the abundance of sexual violence in screen fiction about ancient Rome. My own article, “Ovid’s Pygmalion and Daphne Myths in 21st-Century Body Horror Film: Pedro Almodóvar’s *The Skin I Live In* and Lim Woo-Seong’s *Vegetarian*”, utilises the Mulveyan gaze theory to examine the reception of the *Metamorphoses* in modern screen narratives about bodily transformations. Paying attention to the experience and self-positioning of the reader/viewer, I explore how the Ovidian episodes of abuse and fragmentation of the female body can be employed to unlock and process questions related to trauma and bodily autonomy. As a closing section, this part of the volume is also intended to inspire the reader in thinking about the future: where are the ancient rape cultures going, and where will they emerge next? How can we best employ our knowledge and understanding of them to minimise their harmful impact on the world of today and to dismantle the millennia-long legacy of gender inequality and violence?

This volume is based on the proceedings of the conference “Ancient Rape Cultures: Greek, Roman, Jewish, and Christian” that took place at the Finnish Institute in Rome on 27-28 October in 2022. The conference was a part of my research project as the Vice Director of the Institute, “Rewriting Rape: Gender Violence in Classical Mythology and in 21st-Century Popular Culture” (2019-2023). It was an opportunity to expand the themes and contexts of my research, and to engage in discussions with scholars specialised in other historical periods and in different cultural environments. The experience was incredibly enriching – not only in terms of my research, but in terms of my understanding of the ancient mindsets around gender, sexuality, and violence more comprehensively. I believe that this experience was shared by many participants; the topics in the conference ranged from classical Greece and Roman Empire to the Biblical tradition and the receptions of antiquity in Medieval, Early Modern, and contemporary societies. While the papers illuminated the points of connection between the different ancient societies in their ways of thinking, narrating, and representing gender violence, they also demonstrated the great variety in practices, definitions, and cultural beliefs about rape. At this point it should be obvious that there was no single “ancient rape culture” – instead, we are talking about a range of interconnected expressions of rape culture that continuously reflected and informed one another.

I wish to extend my heartfelt thanks to all the participants of the conference, both for their inspiring papers and for the stimulating discussions during the sessions and afterwards. I am grateful to the *Institutum Romanum Finlandiae* for making this event possible and for providing us with the most inspiring venue for interdisciplinary discussions that any scholar could dream of. I also wish to thank the Director of the Institute, Dr Ria Berg, for her warm support of my idea and for the guidance that she provided in the planning of the event. Likewise, I am grateful to the Institute’s administrative staff for their practical assistance in the organising of the conference. Finally, I thank *Acta Instituti Romani Finlandiae* for accepting this volume for publication in the series; the editors, Mika Kajava, Kalle Korhonen, and Tuomo Nuorluoto, for their editorial work on the volume; and the anonymous referees who allowed us to benefit from their expertise and helped us make this volume stronger.

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Elina Pyy

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RAPE IN GREEK CULTURE AND THOUGHT

Rape Culture in Classical Athens

SUZANNE LYNCH

Introduction: a brief note on terminology

This article examines the concept of “rape culture” and its applicability to Classical Athens: what is rape culture? Can the term be applied to Athens in the Classical period? And how can we determine if Classical Athens was a “rape culture”?

Given the centrality of language (both ancient and modern) to scholarly debates on the issue of sexual violence in antiquity, it is worth clarifying how I define the terms “rape” and “sexual violence” from the outset of this paper. I follow Hunter Gardner in understanding rape *not* as a verbally denoted and legally evaluated event, but as an embodied experience lived through by a victim.¹ The issue at stake is not how the laws of any one society criminalize and label a particular sexual act, but rather how the various parties involved experience that act. I thus use the term “rape” in its broadest, non-legalistic sense of non-consensual sex, and often use it interchangeably with the term “sexual violence”. I define “sexual violence” broadly as any non-consensual act of a sexual nature. If the circumstances of an act are coercive – that is, if they limit the ability of one party to grant or withhold their consent, to exercise autonomy over their own body – then the act in question is considered an act of sexual violence. For example, relation(ship)s between war-captives and their enslavers, which we see frequently in Greek literature, are inherently coercive and thus constitute sexual violence. This is true regardless of whether they were recognized as such under the law.

What is rape culture?

The term “rape culture” first appeared in the US in the 1970s, in the midst of the second-wave feminist movement. The first recorded use of the term appeared in 1975 in a documentary film titled *Rape Culture*, produced by Margaret Lazarus and Renner Wunderlich for Cambridge Documentary Films. This film established a link between sexual violence and “normal” patterns of behaviour under patriarchy, and examined the role media and popular culture played in perpetuating attitudes towards rape.² In the same year, Susan Brownmiller furthered the link between rape and culture in her landmark publication *Against Our Will: Men, Women, and Rape*, which sought to explain the prevalence of rape in society. The term gained popularity and entered common parlance in the 2010s, particularly with the emergence of the #MeToo movement. The term is used by feminist activists and scholars to denote a culture in which rape is widespread and normalized.

Beyond simply describing a culture in which sexual violence is prevalent, the term “rape culture” specifically refers to the ways in which the socio-cultural environment can facilitate and enable sexual

¹ GARDNER 2012, 134.

² CAMBRIDGE DOCUMENTARY FILMS, <https://www.cambridgedocumentaryfilms.org/filmsPages/rapeculture.html>.

violence.³ Gavey describes this as a “cultural scaffolding of rape” – that is, the cultural conditions – “the everyday norms, actions, and values” – that make sexual violence possible and that normalize coercive sex.⁴ Key amongst these cultural conditions are beliefs and norms regarding gender and sexuality. Gender and sex norms are key to the concept of rape culture because sexual violence is a gendered crime, most often perpetrated by men, and disproportionately affecting girls and women.⁵ In fact, it is the most common form of gender-based violence in the world.⁶ Moreover, the gendered nature of sexual violence is pervasive and cross-cultural; it is a phenomenon which “shows no cultural boundaries”⁷ and which affects “a substantial portion of girls and women ... in virtually every setting of the world”.⁸ The global pervasiveness of sexual violence is directly linked to the pervasiveness of patriarchal social structures around the world – in fact, Hayes argues that the terms “patriarchy” and “rape culture” are almost synonymous, since it is patriarchal ideas of gender that underpin rape culture.⁹ And indeed, decades of feminist, sociological, and transnational public health research – such as that carried out by the United Nations (UN), the World Health Organization (WHO), the Centre for Disease Control (CDC), and the European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE), amongst others – have repeatedly identified gender inequality as the single biggest risk factor for sexual violence across all cultures.¹⁰

Gender inequality is the result of a society’s conception of and adherence to culturally constructed gender roles – the set of assumptions and beliefs about the nature, characteristics, and abilities of men and women, which determine the behaviours and roles considered appropriate to each. In patriarchal societies, the concepts of male and female are defined by mutual opposition - women tend to be portrayed as what men, ideally, are not.¹¹ As a result, women are usually assigned lower positions and less status in society than men.¹² As gender roles determine one’s status and position in society, gender is thus a critical element of power and inequality.¹³ Gender inequality facilitates violence, because if women do not have the same legal, political, and economic rights as men, they do not have the same resources to protect their interests, or to challenge, prevent, and seek justice for violence committed against them. Moreover, the exclusion of women and their perspectives from politics, law, and public discourse leads to women’s experiences of sexual violence being silenced and minimized.

This in turn leads to widespread misunderstandings about sexual violence, including how it arises and operates and the impact it has on the victim. Victim-blaming narratives and “rape myths” – that is, “prejudicial, stereotypical, or false beliefs about rape, rape-victims, and rapists”¹⁴ – are most likely to emerge in

³ GAVEY 2019, 228–29; HAYES 2023, 8; JORDAN 2022, 14–17; PHIPPS et al. 2017, 1; RENTSCHLER 2014, 67; SHUKLA 2022, 311; SILLS et al. 2016, 936.

⁴ GAVEY 2019, 228–29.

⁵ WHO 2019, 2.

⁶ WHO 2005, xii–xiii, 4.

⁷ GRUBB – TURNER 2012, 443.

⁸ BOTT – MORRISON – ELLSBERG 2004, 3.

⁹ HAYES 2023, 1, 8. This is not to deny that men also experience sexual violence, nor does the fact that they do so disprove the concept of “rape culture” – many of the challenges male victims face in seeking care and justice after an assault are directly linked to patriarchal attitudes about sex and gender.

¹⁰ BOTT – MORRISON – ELLSBERG 2004, 8; CDC 2016, 12; EIGE 2016, 1; EIGE 2017, 4; WHO 2019, 1–3; UN 1993.

¹¹ JUST 1989, 117, 154.

¹² AMNESTY 2004, 29.

¹³ Ibid.; GAVEY 2019, 31–32

¹⁴ BURT 1980, 217.

societies where there are no outlets for the voices of victims.¹⁵ Rape-myths have long been considered a defining feature of rape culture, and research has found a correlation between adherence to traditional gender roles and rape myth acceptance – the more a person accepts traditional gender roles, the more likely they are to hold unfavourable attitudes towards rape victims.¹⁶ Rape culture is thus “fueled by persistent gender inequalities and attitudes about gender and sexuality”.¹⁷

Despite the abundance of interdisciplinary and transnational research confirming gender inequality as the root cause of sexual violence, the term “rape culture” has not gone without criticism, even amongst the feminist movement itself. Most notable amongst the critics is the Rape, Abuse, and Incest National Network (RAINN), the United States’ largest organization supporting victims of sexual violence. In a report for a White House task force, RAINN has written about the “unfortunate trend towards blaming “rape culture” for the extensive problem of sexual violence” on university campuses. The report goes on to urge the task force to remember that “rape is caused not by cultural factors but by the conscious decisions, of a small percentage of the community, to commit a violent crime”.¹⁸ RAINN thus stresses the responsibility of the individual who chooses to commit an act of rape and rejects the idea that socio-cultural factors can facilitate or enable sexual violence.

This creates a false dichotomy between agency and structure. It is not an either/or scenario between individual agency and social structure – both elements come into play. Acknowledging the potential of socio-cultural factors to facilitate sexual violence is not the same as claiming that culture causes rape. Socio-cultural factors influence individual behaviour, but they are not deterministic - they do not *cause* individuals to rape; rather, they *facilitate* an individual’s choice to commit an act of sexual violence by creating an enabling environment. As Clark puts it, they provide a “script” which individual actors can interpret and perform.¹⁹ In 1998, the sociologist Lori Heise proposed an ecological model of violence that takes into account both the role of individual agency and the role of socio-cultural factors. This model envisions violence (all types of violence, including sexual violence) as arising from risk factors operating at four different levels, all of which are interconnected: the individual level, the relationship level, the community level, and the societal level. Here is a brief overview of the different levels:²⁰

The individual level focuses on individual characteristics which increase the likelihood of being a perpetrator or victim of violence and considers the role of biology and personal history.

The relationship level considers how one’s relationships with others - intimate partners, family, friends (“proximal social relationships”) - influences one’s risk of victimization and perpetration of violence. Krug et al. explains that “peers, intimate partners and family members all have the potential to shape an individual’s behaviour and range of experience”, and notes that individuals are much more likely to engage in violent behaviour if that behaviour seems to be condoned and/or encouraged by their friends and peers.²¹

¹⁵ BURT 1980; GAVEY 2019; GRUBB – TURNER 2012; LONSWAY – FITZGERALD 1994.

¹⁶ GRUBB – TURNER 2012, 447, citing BURT 1980 and LONSWAY – FITZGERALD 1995, amongst others.

¹⁷ SHUKLA 2022, 311.

¹⁸ SANYAL 2019, 102.

¹⁹ CLARK 2014, 461.

²⁰ BOTT – MORRISON – ELLSBERG 2004, 15; KRUG et al. 2002, 13; WHO 2010, 18–19; WHO 2005, 4–7.

²¹ KRUG et al. 2002, 13.

The community level examines the community contexts in which social relationships are embedded and particularly the characteristics of community settings that are associated with victimization and perpetration of violence.

The societal level examines the larger, macro-level factors that influence violence, such as gender inequality, religious or cultural belief systems, societal norms and economic or social policies that create or sustain gaps and tensions between groups of people. Social and cultural factors can facilitate violence by “creating an acceptable climate for violence” and “reducing inhibitions against violence”.²²

The diagram below (**Fig. 1**) shows how the various levels are embedded:

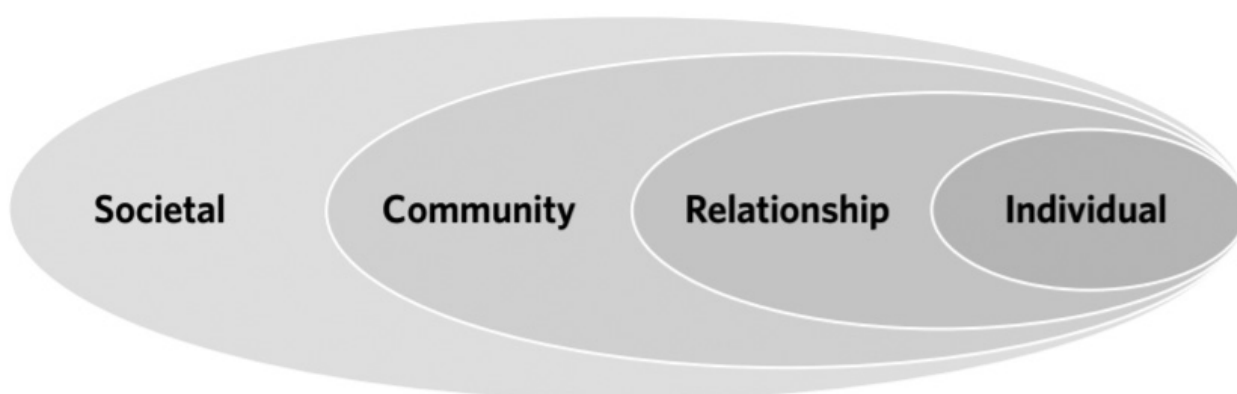


Fig. 1. The Ecological Model. Image from WHO (2010, 18) *Preventing intimate partner and sexual violence against women: taking action and generating evidence*.

A major benefit of the ecological model is that it accommodates both the role of individual agency and the role of social structure and demonstrates how these interact with each other and play out in relationships and communities. Heise explains that “an ecological approach to abuse conceptualizes violence as a multifaceted phenomenon grounded in an interplay among personal, situational, and sociocultural factors”.²³ The model has been widely adopted by transnational bodies such as the UN, WHO, and CDC. While all levels have a role to play, researchers agree that factors at the societal level are the most significant, since macro-level factors such as society and culture have a strong influence on shaping individuals’ beliefs and behaviours.²⁴ Moreover, scholars note that while gender inequality - the single biggest risk factor for sexual violence - primarily operates on the societal level, it manifests itself at all other levels also.²⁵ Thus sociological and public health research supports the feminist conception of rape culture, confirming the power of socio-cultural factors to facilitate sexual violence.

The second major benefit of the ecological model is that it is flexible and adaptable. It can be applied – and has been applied – cross culturally.²⁶ The specific risk factors in operation at each level may differ from

²² BOTT – MORRISON – ELLSBERG 2004, 15; KRUG et al. 2002, 13.

²³ HEISE 1998, 262.

²⁴ BOTT – MORRISON – ELLSBERG 2004, 15; CLARK 2014, 461–4, 467–8, 473, 475–6; GAVEY 2019, 4–6; HEISE 1998, 263; WHO 2012, 6.

²⁵ WHO 2012, 6.

²⁶ HEISE 1998, 262.

culture to culture, but the basic multi-level structure will remain the same. It is thus a potentially powerful model for understanding the dynamics of sexual violence in the ancient world.

Sexual offences and the law in Classical Athens

At this point in our discussion a brief explanation of the categorization and criminalization of sexual offences under Athenian law would be useful. The paradigmatic sexual offence in Classical Athens was that of *moicheia*,²⁷ often translated as “adultery”, but perhaps better thought of as a law on “seduction”, since it referred not only to the violation of a marital bond, but to sex with any woman incorporated into the household of a male citizen, without that citizen’s permission. *Moicheia* thus covered illicit sex with a man’s daughter, sister, mother, and *pallake* (a concubine kept for producing free children), as well as his wife.²⁸ While extra-marital sex was entirely forbidden for citizen women, the same restrictions did not apply to men, who were under no obligation to be faithful to their wives, and who were free to engage in sexual relation(ship)s with sex-workers and slaves. Sex-workers and other “unrespectable” women were explicitly excluded from the laws concerning *moicheia*.²⁹ The usual punishment for *moicheia* in Classical Athens appears to have been the payment of monetary compensation to the wronged *kurios* (a woman’s male guardian),³⁰ but sometimes punishment could be more severe: Draco’s law on unintentional or justifiable homicide provided a legal loophole by which an enraged *kurios* could kill the man he finds “with” or “on” (*epi*) his female relative or *pallake* and not be exiled as a murderer.³¹ This appears to be the law Euphiletus cites in *Lysias* 1 when he argues that the law proscribes death as the punishment for the adulterer. However, Euphiletus’ claim is not quite true: while Draco’s law provides a legal loophole by which an enraged *kurios* can escape punishment for murder, it does not demand death as the punishment for adultery.³² According to Aristotle, *moicheia* was prosecutable under the *graphe moicheias*, a public indictment for *moicheia*.³³ Since *graphai* were *agones timetoi*, the successful prosecutor could propose any punishment he saw fit, including, some think, the death penalty.³⁴ The accused could then propose an alternative – and presumably less severe – punishment, and a jury would decide between them. Several comedic accounts suggest the convicted *moichos* could suffer physical assault and humiliation, but not death.³⁵ *Graphai* were public indictments, meaning that any male individual could bring a charge of *moicheia* against another man – prosecution was not restricted to the wronged *kurios* himself. This indicates how seriously the Athenian state regarded *moicheia* – it was considered a matter of public as well as private concern. This was because only sons born in legitimate wedlock to an Athenian father and (after the introduction of Perikles’ citizenship law in 451/0 BCE) to an

²⁷ COHEN 1990, 148; ROBSON 2013, 114.

²⁸ Dem. 23, 53.

²⁹ [Dem.] 59,67.

³⁰ In Apollodorus’ *Against Neaira*, Stephanos seizes Epaenetus as a *moichos* and demands monetary compensation. Epaenetus in turn charges him with false imprisonment as a *moichos*, claiming that Phano was a sex-worker excluded from the laws on *moicheia* ([Dem.] 59,64–67). The existence of the law on false imprisonment as a *moichos* suggests that the seizure of *moichoi* and the extraction of monetary compensation was fairly standard procedure in Athens. In *Lysias* 1, upon being caught with Euphiletus’ wife, Eratosthenes offers to pay monetary compensation, which Euphiletus rejects (a rejection which he must explain to the court).

³¹ Dem. 23,53.

³² See HARRIS 1990, for a detailed discussion of Euphiletus’ arguments.

³³ Arist. *Ath. Pol.* 59,3.

³⁴ ROBSON 2013, 98; HARRIS 1990, 374.

³⁵ E.g., Ar. *nub.* 1079–84, *Plut.* 168, *Ach.* 849; Plato Com. F189 K–A; *Palatine Anthology* 9,520; Diog. Laert. 2,128; cf. [Dem.] 59,66. See OGDEN 1997, 37 n. 23 for further references, and ROBSON 2013, 95.

Athenian mother could go on to become full citizens with a share in the governance of the *polis*. The state sought to protect the integrity of the *polis* by ensuring that illegitimate children were not introduced into the citizen body. A man was legally compelled to divorce an adulterous wife, on pain of *atimia*, loss of his citizen rights.³⁶ This was because his wife's sexual corruption cast doubt on the paternity of any children she bore.³⁷ The purpose of the *graphe moicheias* may have been to prevent a husband from covering up his wife's adulterous affair.

The adulterous woman was also punished: she was forbidden from adorning herself and from participating in religious festivals; if she did so, she could be stripped and beaten, but not killed.³⁸ As participation in the religious and ritual life of the *polis* was a major part of the Athenian woman's life, the law effectively strips the adulterous woman of her civic status and the rights and privileges that go along with that status. Aeschines comments that the aim of the law was to make the life of the adulterous woman unlivable (*ἀβιώτοτος*). He further explains that part of the reasoning behind the adulteress' punishment was to keep her separated from other women, lest she spread her corruption to them.³⁹ A law attributed to Solon allowed a man to sell his female relative into slavery if he discovered that she had engaged in extra-marital sex,⁴⁰ but there is no record that this law was in use in the Classical period. Although there is no equivalent feminine term for *moichos* in the Greek language,⁴¹ it is generally assumed that the woman caught with the *moichos* was a consenting participant in their sexual activities. This is evidenced by the fact that Athenian law did not seek to punish the rape victim in the same way it did the adulteress.

No rape case survives from Classical Athens, but scholars think it likely that rape was prosecutable under the *dike biaion* (a private suit for *bia*, "violence") and the *graphe hubreos* (a public indictment for *hubris*, "outrage"). As Harris points out, both the *dike biaion* and the *graphe hubreos* were much broader than modern laws on rape, covering physical assault and hubristic behaviour in general, and were not specific to sexual attacks.⁴² They differ from modern rape laws too in that the consent – or rather lack of consent – of the victim was not their primary concern. Instead – as with the laws on *moicheia* – the issue at stake was the honour of the *kurios* and the integrity of the *oikos* and the *polis*.⁴³ A woman could not bring a case of *bia* or *hubris* herself – her *kurios* had to prosecute the case on her behalf. This means that a woman had no recourse to justice except via her *kurios*. Punishment for rape under the *dike biaion* was the payment of a fine to the victim's *kurios*, rather than to the victim herself. MacDowell notes that under the *dike biaion* rape was thus treated as a property crime against the woman's male guardian,⁴⁴ and indeed this is how rape historically tends to be viewed across cultures.⁴⁵ The *graphe hubreos* was a public indictment, and so any male individual could bring a case before the courts. As with the *graphe moicheias*, the purpose of this may have been to prevent a *kurios* from covering up the rape of one of his female relatives, which would be in the state's interests only if they were concerned with preventing the introduction of illegitimate children into the

³⁶ [Dem.] 59,87.

³⁷ In *Lysias* 1, Euphiletus is careful to emphasize that his wife's adulterous behaviour did not begin until *after* the birth of their son – he doesn't want the legitimacy of his child called into question.

³⁸ Aesch. in *Tim.* 1,182–84; [Dem.] 59,87.

³⁹ Aesch. in *Tim.* 1,183.

⁴⁰ Plut. *Sol.* 23,1–2.

⁴¹ ROBSON 2013, 98.

⁴² HARRIS 1997, 483; HARRIS 2004, 63.

⁴³ See OGDEN 1997; OMITOWOJU 1997, 2002; HARRIS 2004; ROBSON 2013.

⁴⁴ MACDOWELL 1978, 124.

⁴⁵ MERRY 2009, 174.

citizen body.⁴⁶ As *graphai* were *agones timetoi* the successful prosecutor could propose any punishment he saw fit, potentially including the death penalty. Draco's law on justifiable homicide was available in cases of rape as well as seduction, since the wording of the law (*epi*) makes no distinction as to the consent or lack of consent of the woman involved. Thus, the penalties for rape could potentially be severe.

Unlike the adulterous woman, the law did not seek to punish the rape victim. However, some evidence suggests that, like the adulterous woman, the rape victim was also viewed as sexually corrupted. In Menander's *Epitrepontes*, Charisius abandons his wife upon learning of her rape; however, there is no evidence that he was legally compelled to do so. Rather, Charisius seems to regard his wife as "damaged goods" and thinks staying with her will hurt his own honour. The idea that rape victims were sexually corrupted helps to explain the logic behind another potential "solution" to rape – the marriage of rapist and victim. Marriage was potentially an outcome of a *graphe hubreos*, but it could also be the result of an out-of-court settlement. This is the usual "solution" to rape in new comedy, and it is supported by plenty of comparative evidence from other cultures.⁴⁷ Cole explains that marriage was desirable because "the victim of rape is superior to a woman who has been seduced only in this respect: the sexual activity was not her fault. Consequently, she is still marriageable, but only to her attacker."⁴⁸ By offering to marry his victim, a man demonstrates that he did not intend to commit an act of *hubris* against her family, by leaving them with an unmarriageable daughter whom they would have to support for the rest of her life.⁴⁹ Marriage also ensures the legitimacy of any children born from the rape.

Thus the laws governing sexual offences in Classical Athens were primarily concerned with protecting the integrity of the *polis* and the honour of the male *kurios*.

Can the term "rape culture" be applied to Classical Athens?

Given the debates in the 1990s and 2000s over whether or not we could use the term "rape" in relation to Classical Athens, it is no surprise that the much more controversial term "rape culture" has been met with caution by classical scholars. To date, I am aware of only two scholars who have discussed the notion of rape culture in relation to Classical Athens at any length - Nancy Sorkin Rabinowitz⁵⁰ and Sotiria Rita Koutsopetrou-Moller,⁵¹ both of whom argue that the prevalence of sexual violence in Athenian literature leads to the normalization of sexual violence and the creation of a rape culture. Edward Harris was quick to warn classicists away from using the term, stating that it is both an inaccurate and unfair descriptor of ancient Greece:

"It would be both inaccurate and unfair to call ancient Greece a "rape culture". Greek men did condone some forms of sexual violence which are now outlawed, but other forms were condemned and subject to harsh penalties. Men in ancient Greece often held misogynistic views and placed restrictions on women's conduct. But they did pay attention to when a woman said no and preferred it when she said yes. And their own sexual pleasure might be enhanced when they knew it was mutual".⁵²

⁴⁶ ROBSON 2013, 111.

⁴⁷ See HARRIS 2004, 75 and ROBSON 2013, 109.

⁴⁸ COLE 1984, 107.

⁴⁹ ROBSON 2013, 109–10.

⁵⁰ RABINOWITZ 2011.

⁵¹ KOUTSOPETROU-MOLLER 2021.

⁵² HARRIS 2014, 310.

Harris claims that ancient Greece was not a rape culture because some forms of sexual violence were criminalized under Athenian law, and because there is evidence that men enjoyed having consensual sex. This line of argument rests on a fundamental misunderstanding of the term “rape culture” and what it denotes. First, the fact that some forms of sexual violence were “condemned and subject to harsh penalties” while others were not is actually a hallmark of rape culture. Ancient Greek rape laws protected the right of the male *kurios* to control the sexuality of the women in his *oikos*, rather than protecting or supporting the victims themselves - thus a man’s rape of another citizen’s female relative was criminalized, while a man’s rape of his own wife and slaves was not. In such a society, as McKinnon⁵³ and Gavey⁵⁴ put it, rape is not prohibited, but *regulated*.

Second, the fact that men like having consensual sex has no bearing on whether or not Athens was a rape culture. The term “rape culture” does not mean that a culture actively celebrates and encourages rape, or that it views non-consensual sex as preferable to and more pleasurable than consensual sex, as Harris implies. Rather, it refers to the myriad subtle ways in which a society’s cultural beliefs and norms, particularly those regarding gender and sexuality, contribute to the facilitation and normalization of sexual violence, even unintentionally.⁵⁵ Moreover, it is perfectly possible for consensual sex to occur even while socio-cultural factors facilitate sexual violence more broadly. As discussed above, socio-cultural factors may influence individual behaviour, but they are not deterministic. Socio-cultural factors do not *cause* individuals to rape; rather they *facilitate* an individual’s decision to commit an act of sexual violence by creating an enabling environment. Many individuals who live in a society that facilitates sexual violence will never commit an act of rape – this does not change the fact that they live in a rape culture.

Third, even if men prefer it when a woman says yes, as Harris states, it does not therefore follow that they respect her wishes when she says no. This is demonstrated by the passage in Aristophanes where Lysistrata dismisses marital rape as an obstacle to the women’s sex strike, stating that men do not enjoy it when they force their wives.⁵⁶ Calonice and Lysistrata do not envision a situation in which the men respect their wives’ refusal, but a situation in which they force themselves on their wives *despite* that refusal. When Calonice asks what they should do when their husbands beat them and drag them into the bedroom, Lysistrata responds by advising the women to “submit coldly” to the act of rape and “not move [their] hips”, κακῶς παρέξω κοῦχλὶ προσκινήσομαι.⁵⁷ It is clear from this line that the men attempt sexual intercourse with their wives. This forced sexual encounter is still an act of rape, no matter how short the duration, and even if the men do not derive sexual gratification from it.

Fourth, Harris seems to dismiss the idea that there is a link between gender inequality and sexual violence when he denies that “misogynistic views” and the “restrictions” placed on women’s conduct have any bearing on attitudes towards sexual violence. As we have seen, decades of feminist, sociological, and public health research has confirmed that gender inequality is inextricably linked to sexual violence.

Therefore I do not share Harris’ concern that it is “inaccurate and unfair” to call Classical Athens a rape culture. The term “rape culture” refers to the ways in which elements of the socio-cultural environment facilitate and enable sexual violence. Aspects of ancient societies may very well have functioned in this way. We should leave the question open to exploration.

⁵³ McKINNON 1983, 651.

⁵⁴ GAVEY 2019, 36.

⁵⁵ SILLS et al. 2016, 963; see also GAVEY 2019, 228–29 and PHIPPS et al. 2017, 1.

⁵⁶ Ar. *Lys.* 160–64.

⁵⁷ *Lys.* 225–28, cf. 163; Trans. HENDERSON (2010).

How do we determine if Classical Athens was a rape culture?

Classical Athens can be considered a rape culture if aspects of its socio-cultural environment facilitate and enable sexual violence. We can determine whether aspects of the socio-cultural environment have the potential to function in this way by examining the political, legal, economic, and social position of women in Athens to determine if any aspect of these operate as risk factors for sexual violence. In the analysis below, I organize these risk factors according to the levels of the ecological model of violence outlined above. As discussed previously, this is an adaptable model which can be applied to different cultures, and which highlights the influence of socio-cultural factors in shaping attitudes and beliefs about sexual violence.

My aim here is slightly different to that of the previous two classicists who have written at length about rape culture in Athens. Both Rabinowitz and Koutsopetrou-Moller argue that it is the prevalence of rape in Greek literature that leads to the normalization of sexual violence and the creation of a rape culture. While I agree that the portrayal of sexual violence in myth and literature has the potential to reinforce and perpetuate cultural beliefs and norms regarding sexual violence, I would also point out that this portrayal is not only a cause of rape culture, as Koutsopetrou-Moller and Rabinowitz argue, but also a consequence of it. Here I examine the broader socio-cultural context of the society which produced these works of literature, considering how Athenian attitudes and beliefs about gender and sexuality feed into a broader rape culture. My aim is to understand the socio-cultural factors that create rape culture in the first place.

The individual level:

The individual level focuses on individual characteristics which increase the likelihood of being a perpetrator or victim of violence, and considers the role of biology and personal history.⁵⁸ Since the vast majority of sexual violence is committed by intimate partners, the biggest individual level risk factor for victimization for women is marriage or cohabitation.⁵⁹ In Classical Athens, a woman's marital status functions as a risk factor for violence (discussed in more detail below), and so does status as a slave. Beyond this, it is impossible to determine the personal history factors for the individuals who made up the population of Classical Athens, and I will not attempt to do so here. Significant work has been done into biological factors, particularly on male sexual desire.⁶⁰ An individual's decision to commit an act of sexual violence, for whatever personal reasons (including sexual desire) is facilitated and enabled by factors on the relationship, community, and societal levels of the model.

The relationship level:

The relationship level considers how one's relationships with others influences one's risk of victimization and perpetration of violence. For women, the biggest risk factor for victimization is marriage or cohabitation. Key risk factors for sexual violence at this level include young age at marriage, male dominance within the family, and a focus on family honour and female sexual purity.⁶¹ We know that all these factors were in operation in Classical Athens.

⁵⁸ BOTT – MORRISON – ELLSBERG 2004, 15; KRUG et al. 2002, 12–13; WHO 2005, 5.

⁵⁹ KRUG et al. 2002, 157.

⁶⁰ See DEACY 2019, DEACY – MCHARDY 2015, and GOTTSCHALL 2008.

⁶¹ BOTT – MORRISON – ELLSBERG 2004, 15; KRUG et al. 2002, 13.

(i) Male dominance within the family:

Family structure in Classical Athens was undeniably male dominated. The head of the household was always an adult male, and he held authority over everyone else within his *oikos*, including his wife, children, and slaves. Since women were treated as permanent legal minors, and deemed incapable of determining their own interests, they remained under the *kuria* of a male guardian (usually a father or husband) for their whole lives.⁶² The main purpose of the *kurios* was “protection”; he was responsible for her economic maintenance and her overall welfare, and he also represented her in matters of legal consequence, since she was deemed incapable of doing so herself.⁶³

This type of guardianship is a risk factor for violence because it leaves a woman with no legal recourse except via her guardian, and thus curtails her ability to seek justice for any wrongs committed against her. A woman abused by her *kurios* would have no way of seeking justice, since her *kurios* had to represent her in court. While it was possible for a married woman to appeal to her natal family for aid against an abusive husband (her father or brother could act as her *kurios* in such an instance), this still leaves her wholly dependent on men – there was not much she could do if her male kin denied her aid. Moreover, her male kin would have to (a) believe her claims, and (b) agree that her husband’s treatment of her was unacceptable before they would intervene. Since the purpose of marriage was the begetting of legitimate children,⁶⁴ marital rape was not criminalized – sex was viewed as a wifely duty that a husband could choose to compel.⁶⁵

Both Fisher⁶⁶ and Llewellyn-Jones⁶⁷ have argued that a certain degree of physical violence against women and children was probably widespread and condoned in Classical Athens, and so the behaviour experienced by the wife would have to be deemed excessive or transgressive in some other way before her natal family could step in. For example, in Herodotus’ *Histories* Megacles’ daughter can complain about her husband Peisistratos’ rape of her because it is οὐ κατὰ νόμον - “not according to custom” (1.61.1). That is, he rapes her anally, rather than vaginally. Peisistratos’ transgression here is not that he has intercourse with his wife against her will, but that he deliberately undermines the institution of marriage – the purpose of which was the begetting of free, legitimate children – by engaging in anal intercourse.⁶⁸ Had the rape been vaginal, it is unlikely his wife’s complaints would have been taken seriously, as such intercourse is necessary for begetting the children whom it is her duty to bear. In her appeal to the women of Corinth, Euripides’ Medea comments that it is not possible for a woman to refuse her husband: οὐδ’ οἶόν τ’ ἀνήνασθαι πόσιν (237), that is, it is not possible to refuse him his “marital rights” to sexual intercourse.⁶⁹ This of course does

⁶² BLUNDELL 1995, 114; GOULD 1980, 43; JUST 1989, 18; POMEROY 1975, 62.

⁶³ BLUNDELL 1995, 114; JUST 1989, 18–20.

⁶⁴ Men. *pk.* 1013–15; [Dem]. 59,122.

⁶⁵ HENDERSON 2010, 217 n. 55. Indeed, in some instances marital sex was a legal compulsion. According to Plutarch (*Sol.* 20.3), Solon introduced a law requiring the husband of an *epikleros* to have sex with her at least three times a month, in order to ensure the production of an heir for the *oikos*. This law may have had a protective function, in that it was designed to deter a man from marrying an *epikleros* purely for financial gain. However, it could also function to coerce an *epikleros* – who already had little to no say in who she married – into unwanted sex with her new husband.

⁶⁶ FISHER 1998.

⁶⁷ LLEWELLYN-JONES 2011.

⁶⁸ DEWALD – VIGNOLO MUNSON 2022, 267.

⁶⁹ MASTRONARDE 2002, 211 explains that “refuse sexually” is the most likely meaning of ἀνήνασθαι here. If Medea meant to say that it is impossible for a woman to “refuse wedlock” (as Kovacs translates) then we might expect “marriage” (γάμος) or “suitor” (μνηστήρ) as the object of ἀναίνομαι rather than “husband” (πόσις). She does not mean divorce, as she has already just mentioned that in the previous line (ἀπαλλαγῆναι, 236). Moreover, “refuse sexually” fits in with and elaborates upon her earlier comment about taking a δεσπότης σώματος (233). Moreover, even if we take ἀνήνασθαι to mean “refuse wedlock”, the implication is more or less the same, as sexual intercourse and the production of children were an inherent part of marriage – thus if a woman is unable to

not mean that all marital sex is rape, or that a husband would never respect his wife's refusal; what it means is that for those husbands who do decide to rape their wives, their decision is enabled by the legal and social norms of Athenian society.

Marriages were arranged and dissolved by men. A woman could not enter into or leave a marriage of her own accord, and her consent to the arrangement or dissolution of her marriage was not a legal necessity.⁷⁰ This, of course, is not to say that men never took their female relatives' wishes into consideration when arranging such matters: the brothers in *Isaeus* 2 (3–9) say they will not dissolve their sister's marriage without her blessing; nevertheless, the key point is that they are not legally obliged to obtain her consent. Even in the case of an *apoleipsis* – in which the wife initiates the divorce by leaving the house of her husband – it appears she still needs the support of a *kurios*, who would go with her to register the divorce with the archon.⁷¹ In the most famous case of *apoleipsis* in Athens, Hipparete left Alcibiades and returned to the *oikos* of her brother Callias, whose *kuria* she was presumably under; however, his failure to accompany her to the archon led to Alcibiades seizing her before the divorce could be registered, and forcibly returning her to his home, where she remained his wife until she died.⁷²

Divorce – especially divorce initiated by the wife – does not appear to have been common in Athens: only two cases of *apoleipsis* are documented in our ancient sources, including that of Hipparete.⁷³ It was more difficult for a wife to obtain a divorce than it was for a husband – while a wife had to register the divorce with the archon, a husband simply had to expel his wife from his house, sending her back to her original family.⁷⁴ Euripides' *Medea* suggests that divorce was not respectable for women: οὐ γὰρ εὐκλεεῖς ἀπαλλαγὰς γυναιξίν (*Med.* 236–7). Mastronarde notes that “the divorcing wife might not be welcomed by her old family (for economic or social/political reasons) and would be subject to defaming rumour abetted by the sexual double standard prevalent in Greek as in other societies.”⁷⁵ In a fragment of Anaxandrides, a father warns his daughter that “the return-leg (i.e. from husband to father) is one that carries shame”.⁷⁶ The difficulty for women in obtaining a divorce, and the potential shame it might incur, is a risk factor for violence because it deters a woman from leaving an unwanted or abusive relationship.

Another potential deterrent to women seeking divorce was the fact that divorce entailed separation from their children. Since their role was to perpetuate his *oikos*, any children a woman bore were considered the property of their father, and they remained in his house when marriages were dissolved.⁷⁷ This is a strong relationship level risk factor for violence: Amnesty notes that fear of losing their children frequently deters women from leaving violent situations.⁷⁸ When a woman married, her *kurios* provided a dowry (*proix*) for her financial maintenance, but this was controlled and managed by her husband, rather than the woman

refuse marriage, then she is also unable to refuse sex within that marriage. Of course, *Medea* was an active and willing participant in her union with Jason, and her speech here is manipulative, designed to win the sympathy of the chorus. But this does not make her claims about marriage and marital sex untrue – in fact, since *Medea* is attempting to appeal to the chorus through their shared womanhood, it rather indicates that this was the normal female experience within marriage.

⁷⁰ BLUNDELL 1995, 120; GOULD 1980, 44; POMEROY 1975, 64.

⁷¹ BLUNDELL 1995, 127; POMEROY 1975, 64–65; ROBSON 2013, 18.

⁷² Plut. *Alc.* 8,2–5.

⁷³ ROBSON 2013, 19 citing COX 1998, 72 and COHN-HAFT 1995, 14.

⁷⁴ COHN-HAFT 1995, 4.

⁷⁵ MASTRONARDE 2002, 210–11.

⁷⁶ MASTRONARDE 2002, 210–11 citing fragment 57 K–A of Anaxandrides.

⁷⁷ POMEROY 1975, 65.

⁷⁸ AMNESTY 2004, 40.

herself. In the event of divorce, a husband had to return the dowry intact to her original *kurios*.⁷⁹ While this could offer some status and protection for the wife within the marriage (repayment of a large sum deters unfair dismissal and thus prevents any potential dishonour to her and her family), it could also make it more difficult for her to leave an abusive situation, since her husband would be reluctant to repay the dowry. Indeed, it was likely Hipparete's large dowry that led to Alcibiades' seizure of her when she went to lodge the divorce with the archon.⁸⁰ This male dominance within the family – and particularly the assigning of a woman to a *kurios* with authority over her, and who controls all her legal and financial matters – is a strong risk factor for violence due to the degree of power and control it grants men over the women in their care. The situation of enslaved women in the *oikos* was even more powerless than the situation of free women, since enslaved women had no kin to whom they could turn for aid.

(ii) Young age at marriage:

According to our ancient sources, the average age of the Athenian bride was about fourteen years old, while the groom was typically about 30 years old.⁸¹ The groom is thus usually twice the age of his bride. A young bride was desirable for several reasons: first, it limited the opportunity for extra-marital encounters and ensured her virginity – Hesiod advises marriage to a young virginal girl, lest the marriage turn out to be a joke to the neighbours.⁸² The age of the bride is thus in part the result of concerns over female sexual purity. Second, a young bride was regarded as compliant and easy to “train” (παιδεύω) in the ways her husband desires, as portrayed in Xenophon's *Oeconomicus*. This age gap results in a steep power imbalance between husband and wife, reinforces an infantilized view of women, and contributes to a patriarchal family environment.

Our ancient sources frequently portray the consummation of the marriage and the sexual initiation of the young bride as non-consensual and deeply traumatic. The most well-known portrayal of this is the *Homeric Hymn to Demeter*, which recounts the story of Hades' abduction of Persephone. Zeus, acting as Persephone's *kurios*, gives his daughter in marriage to Hades, without the knowledge of either Persephone herself or her mother.⁸³ From the male perspective – and from the perspective of Athenian law – Zeus has done nothing wrong, and the marriage is viewed as legitimate and socially sanctioned by the male gods in the poem.⁸⁴ From the female perspective, however, the marriage constitutes violent abduction and rape, emphasized by the constant repetition of the words ἀρπάζω (“abduct”, 3, 19, 56, 81, 414), ἄεκων (“unwillingly”, 19, 30, 73, 344, 413, 432), βία (“force, violence”, 68, 413), and ἀνάγκη (“compulsion”, 72, 413). Persephone's non-consent is thus clear and emphatic. It is widely accepted that the abduction of Persephone functions as a paradigm for human marriage as an “initiation” of the bride into her adult role of sexually active and childbearing wife.⁸⁵ In this reading, Persephone's fear of her union with Hades represents the fear felt by every young Athenian bride as she makes the journey from her father's house to that of her husband.

In the opening lines of Sophocles' *Trachiniae*, another young bride, Deianira, recounts the fear she felt at her betrothal to the river god Achelous: she explicitly states that she feared marriage with him,⁸⁶ and

⁷⁹ Thus Isae. 3,78 and Dem. 30, 31; see also BLUNDELL 1995, 115–16; GOULD 1980, 44; POMEROY 1975, 63

⁸⁰ Plut. *Alc.* 8,2.

⁸¹ Hes. *Op.* 695–706, Xen. *Oec.* 7,6, Dem. 27,4 and 29,43; ROBSON 2013, 16.

⁸² Hes. *Op.* 695–706.

⁸³ *Hom. Hymn Dem.* 3.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.* 75–87.

⁸⁵ JEANMAIRE 1939; LINCOLN 1979; FOLEY 1993; DEBLOOIS 1997.

⁸⁶ Soph. *Trach.* 7–8.

that she prayed to die before she had to approach his bed.⁸⁷ So great was her fear at the prospect of this marriage, that she could not watch the battle between Achelous and Herakles, but instead sat apart shuddering with fear at the thought of the pain her beauty might win.⁸⁸ Like Persephone, it has been suggested that Deianira's fear represents the fear felt by every young Athenian bride at the prospect of her marriage:

We must recognize that Achelous stands for any potent male, and his multiple form is simply a fearful young girl's fantasy of adult sex. In a sense, Deianira is any sheltered, ignorant, Athenian girl-child faced at much too young an age with the prospect of leaving her parents' home forever, to be ruled by a shaggy stranger, an adult male.⁸⁹

If Persephone's and Deianira's experiences are a paradigm for human marriage, then their non-consent highlights the potential non-consent of every Athenian bride entering into an arranged marriage. The myths thus reveal the potential for violence inherent in normative modes of sexuality, including in socially sanctioned, legitimate marriage. In acknowledging the bride's non-consent, the myths problematize this violence. However, they perhaps also contribute to its normalization, by portraying women's non-consent as an obstacle that must be overcome if they are to successfully transition into adulthood.

Elements of the wedding ritual further indicate the potential violence of the consummation. On the wedding night, a male door-keeper stood guard outside the bridal chamber, and a group of the bride's female friends sang songs while the marriage was consummated. According to the scholiast on Theocritus 18, the purpose of the songs was to conceal the sounds of the bride's cries as she was violated. According to Pollux (3.42) the purpose of the male door-keeper was to prevent the women coming to the aid of the screaming bride.⁹⁰ Thus the rape of the bride by her husband on their wedding night was regarded as socially acceptable and even to be expected. Of course, this does not mean that every wedding consummation amounted to rape – what it means is that any individual groom's decision to force himself on a reluctant bride is enabled by traditional marital customs and social norms that viewed the bride's unwillingness as natural, normal, and dismissible.

(iii) A focus on family honour and female sexual purity:

There was a deep concern with female sexual purity and family honour – indeed, the two were inextricably linked. This is due in large part to two factors: first, inheritance in Classical Athens was patrilineal, and the continuation of the *oikos* depended on the birth of legitimate children, especially sons. Second, only sons born in legitimate wedlock to an Athenian father and (after Perikles' citizenship law of 451/450 BCE) to an Athenian mother could qualify as full Athenian citizens. The survival of both the *oikos* and the *polis* thus depended on the proper disposal of female sexuality.

The desire to protect bloodlines and the integrity of the citizen body lead to the strict control of female sexual behaviour. It was the right and duty of the *kurios* to control the sexuality of the women in his *oikos*, both free and enslaved. In the case of free women, this involved the arrangement of her marriage. Girls were raised to be chaste and to carefully guard their sexual purity – Ischomachos' wife in Xenophon's *Oeconomicus* says that the only thing she was trained to do by her parents was to be *sophron*.⁹¹ A key aspect

⁸⁷ Ibid. 16–17.

⁸⁸ Ibid. 24–25.

⁸⁹ WENDER 1974, 5; cf. PATTERSON 2012, 389.

⁹⁰ ROBSON 2013, 14–15.

⁹¹ Xen. *oec.* 7.14; cf. 7.6.

of *sophrosune* for women is chastity – it involved exercising self-control and appropriate restraint over their sexual behaviour. Helen North argues that this conception of *sophrosune* was the ideal virtue of women in antiquity.⁹² In order to properly protect her chastity, a woman was expected to spend most of her time in the private sphere of the home where she could avoid engaging with men outside of the family. When she did go out in public, she was expected to do so appropriately veiled and chaperoned.⁹³ By behaving in accordance with the code of proper feminine conduct, a woman protected and maintained her family's honour. On the other hand, a woman who failed to abide by the strictures of appropriate female behaviour brought dishonour upon herself and her family, and could be punished for doing so.⁹⁴ Aeschines cites the example of an Athenian citizen who walls his daughter up alive with a horse when he learns that she has failed to preserve her chastity, and according to Plutarch, Solon introduced a law allowing a man to sell his female relatives into slavery if he discovered that they had lost their virginity while still unmarried.⁹⁵

Because a woman's sexual purity was so closely tied to the honour of her male kin, both *moicheia* ("adultery" or "seduction") and rape were perceived as crimes against the *kurios*. In *Lysias* 1, Euphiletus describes Eratosthenes' seduction of his wife as a dishonour (ἡσχυνε) and outrage (ὑβρίσεν) done to him and his children.⁹⁶ The sexual assault of Telestagoras' daughters constitutes an act of *hubris* against Telestagoras himself.⁹⁷ In the *Iliad*, Agamemnon's seizure of the unwilling (ἀέκουσ', 1,348) Briseis is an outrage (ὑβρίν, 1,203; 1,214) and dishonour (ἡτίμησεν, 1,355) done to Achilles, as is Paris' theft of Helen from Menelaus.⁹⁸ Fisher notes that in Athens, as in many Mediterranean societies throughout history, the seduction or rape of a wife or other female relative "has been held to be the most extreme and desperate 'dishonour'" which can be done to a man, one which "demands a satisfactory response".⁹⁹ As we saw earlier, seduction was prosecutable under the *graphe moicheia*, while rape was likely prosecutable under the *graphe hubreos* and *dike biaion*. Normally, the punishment for both *moicheia* and rape was the payment of a fine to the *kurios*, but under certain circumstances both the *moichos* and *rapist* could be punished with death.¹⁰⁰ As discussed earlier, Draco's law on justifiable homicide allowed for the possibility that an enraged *kurios* might kill a seducer/rapist whom he catches in the act, and stated that in such an event the *kurios* was not to be exiled as a murdered. The existence of this loophole reveals just how sensitively Athenian men could be expected to feel such slights to their honour.

The strict control of female sexuality and the potentially severe punishments for adultery and rape might at first appear to function as a deterrent to sexual violence. Indeed, Stewart argues that rape was rare in societies like Athens that had strict honour-codes and which "vigorously defended" the "dignity and integrity" of their women.¹⁰¹ First, it is important to remember that only certain forms of sexual violence were criminalized under law – namely the rape of a woman incorporated into the *oikos* of an Athenian citizen, without her *kurios*' permission. A man's rape of his own wife and slaves was not criminalized. Second, the

⁹² NORTH 1977.

⁹³ LLEWELLYN-JONES 2003, 122, 157.

⁹⁴ LLEWELLYN-JONES 2003, 157 and 2011, 252.

⁹⁵ Aeschin. in *Tim.* 1,182; Plut. *Sol.* 23,2. It should be noted that we do not know of any instance of Solon's law being put into use in the classical period.

⁹⁶ Lys. 1,4.

⁹⁷ Athen. 8,40 [348b–c] = Arist. Frag. Rose, 558,14.

⁹⁸ E.g., Hom. *Il.* 13,620–27.

⁹⁹ FISHER 1998, 78–79.

¹⁰⁰ Potentially as the result of a *graphe*, should the judges agree, or by utilizing Draco's law on justifiable homicide.

¹⁰¹ STEWART 1995, 77.

honour-code and the strict control of female sexuality actually function as risk factors for sexual violence, primarily because they feed into the construction of an “ideal” victim and lead to victim-blaming attitudes. Women who failed to abide by the strictures of appropriate female behaviour could be blamed for their rape and/or be perceived as adulterous. Moreover, the shame instilled in women regarding their sexual behaviour may lead them to deliberately conceal their sexually violent experiences. Indeed, this is a common trope in Greek literature, particularly in tragedy and new comedy: a woman attempts to conceal her rape due to her feelings of shame and her fear of her family’s reaction. Usually, she is right to be afraid – when her rape is revealed, her *kurios* refuses to believe her claims of non-consent and punishes her with violence, including death.¹⁰²

Moreover, the concern with sexual purity and family honour could lead directly to the marriage of rapist and victim. As discussed earlier, this is the usual solution to rape in new comedy, a genre which is generally taken to reflect Athenian “social reality”.¹⁰³ In societies like Athens which place a high value on female sexual purity, loss of virginity can make it difficult for a woman to find a husband. By agreeing to marry his victim, the rapist demonstrates that he did not intend the rape as a deliberate act of *hubris* designed to insult the woman or her family. Robson explains that “by asking for the girl’s hand, the rapist demonstrates that he does not intend to dishonour the girl’s *kurios* and family by leaving them with a female dependent who has lost her virginity and is thus unmarriageable”.¹⁰⁴ Moreover, marriage ensures the legitimacy of any child that might result from the rape, and thus serves to protect the integrity of both the *oikos* and the *polis*. Thus a victim can be forced into an ongoing relationship with her rapist.

The community level:

The community level examines the community contexts in which relationships are embedded. It examines the characteristics of community settings that are associated with victimization and perpetration of violence. Risk factors at this level include a general tolerance of sexual and gender-based violence within the community, weak community sanctions against sexual and gender-based violence, lack of institutional supports for victims (especially lack of shelters and assistance), women’s exclusion from community groups, and traditional gender and social norms that restrict women’s public visibility.¹⁰⁵ Once again, all these risk factors were in operation in Classical Athens. We have already discussed how the concern with female sexual purity and family honour led to an “ideal of seclusion” for women, which restricts their public visibility. In the discussion below, I focus particularly on the tolerance for gender-based violence within the community, and the lack of supports for victims.

(i) A general tolerance of, and weak community sanctions against, sexual and gender-based violence:

As part of his argument that Athens was a low-rape society, Stewart lists the lack of surviving rape cases, stating that “had it [rape] been common, one might expect both more prosecutions and more moralizing about it”.¹⁰⁶ First, low levels of reporting rape are not evidence that rape is rare – rather, it suggests that rape is tolerated and normalized in a society.¹⁰⁷ Second, only a very narrow selection of rapes was prosecut-

¹⁰² See, for example, Euripides’ *Alkmene*, *Alope*, *Antiope*, *Auge*, *Danae*, *Ion*, and *Melanippe* plays; Sophocles’ *Acrisius*, *Amphytryon*, *Danae*, *Children of Aleus*, *Mysians*, *Creusa*, and *Tyro* plays; and Menander’s *Epitrepontes* and *Samia*.

¹⁰³ OMITOWOJOU 2002, 6.

¹⁰⁴ ROBSON 2013, 109–10; see also SCAFURO 1997, 239–40 and HARRIS 2004.

¹⁰⁵ BOTT – MORRISON – ELLSBERG 2004, 15; KRUG et al. 2002, 13, 159.

¹⁰⁶ STEWART 1995, 77.

¹⁰⁷ EU Agency for Fundamental Rights 2014, 25.

able under Athenian law in the first place – namely the rape of a woman incorporated into the *oikos* of an Athenian citizen, by someone other than her *kurios*, and without her *kurios*' permission. Marital rape was not criminalized, as we have seen, nor was a man's rape of his own slaves. This lack of criminalization is a glaring risk factor for these forms of sexual violence, and implies that such violence was normalized and tolerated within society.

Moreover, Stewart claims that rape would be rare in a society where slaves and sex workers are readily available.¹⁰⁸ This argument rests on a fundamental misunderstanding of sexual violence and how it operates, implying as it does that slaves and sex-workers – the very groups most vulnerable to sexual exploitation – cannot experience rape. The sexual assault of household slaves appears to have been common in ancient Greece: Euphiletus' wife complains about her husband's sexual activity with their slave girl,¹⁰⁹ and in Homer's *Odyssey* Laertes' restraint in not sleeping with the enslaved Eurycleia is considered unusual enough to require explanation.¹¹⁰ The rape of slaves is regularly joked about in Aristophanic comedy,¹¹¹ while enslaved war-captives are routinely exploited for their sexual labour in both epic¹¹² and tragedy.¹¹³ As many sex-workers were enslaved, any sexual relations they engage in are, by nature, coercive. Even those sex-workers who were not enslaved and entered the profession of their own accord could still experience acts which they did not consent to.

Our best source for the lives of sex-workers in ancient Greece is Apollodorus' speech *Against Neaira*. It is clear from this account that Neaira was subjected to various acts of sexual violence throughout her life and that she was powerless to do anything about it. Nikarete bought Neaira as a child and put her to work at a very young age: Apollodorus tells us that Neaira was "working with her body, though she was too young as she had not yet reached puberty", ἐργαζομένη μὲν ἤδη τῷ σώματι, νεωτέρα δὲ οὔσα διὰ τὸ μήπω τὴν ἡλικίαν αὐτῇ παρεῖναι (59,22).¹¹⁴ This makes it clear that Neaira is below the usual age of marriage (twelve to fifteen) when she is forced into the sex trade. Glazebrook suggests that she could be anywhere between the ages of seven and eleven.¹¹⁵ Glazebrook further notes that while there were laws against the sexual exploitation of free minors, these laws did not apply to enslaved individuals like Neaira.¹¹⁶ Later in her life, Neaira manages to purchase her freedom with the aid of a substantial monetary contribution from Phrynion, a former client.¹¹⁷ Phrynion takes her to Athens, where he – and his fellow partygoers – treat her outrageously, forcing her into voyeuristic situations and successively raping her while she is drunk.¹¹⁸ That Neaira perceives this treatment as wrongful and hubristic is made clear from her later complaint to Stephanos.¹¹⁹ Scholars have questioned why Apollodorus would risk creating sympathy for Neaira by recounting Phrynion's abuse of her.¹²⁰ However, it is clear that Apollodorus does not expect his portrayal of Neaira to

¹⁰⁸ STEWART 1995, 77.

¹⁰⁹ Lys. 1, 12.

¹¹⁰ Hom. *Od.* 1,430–4.

¹¹¹ E.g., Ar. *ach.* 271–75; *Thesm.* 1172–1216; *vesp.* 764–70; *eq.* 1384.

¹¹² E.g., Homer's *Iliad*: Briseis, Chryseis (1,29–31), Iphis and Diomedes (*Il.* 964–66); see also Hom. *Il.* 2,232; 2,354–55; 8,291.

¹¹³ E.g., Euripides' *Troades*, *Hecuba*, and *Andromache*; Sophocles' *Ajax* and *Trachiniae*; Aeschylus' *Seven Against Thebes*.

¹¹⁴ Apollodorus, *Against Neaira* [Demosthenes 59]. Translation adapted from Carey 1992.

¹¹⁵ GLAZEBROOK 2021, 72.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*; the laws in question are recorded in Aeschines 1,13–15.

¹¹⁷ [Dem.] 59,31–32.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.* 59,33–34.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.* 59,37. This is the only time in the speech that the term *hubris* is used to describe Phrynion's treatment of Neaira.

¹²⁰ GLAZEBROOK 2021, 72 citing KAPPARIS 1999, 46–47 and FISHER 2001, 189–90.

arouse sympathy for her, and Omitowojou has argued that Neaira's assault would not be viewed as *hubris*, since she does not have a *kurios* to take offence and prosecute a case on her behalf.¹²¹ Apollodorus' aim is to establish Neaira's status as a sex-worker, and it is telling that it is her sexual mistreatment which he offers as proof of that status. It indicates that sexually violent and degrading treatment was considered a normal part of sex-work. This is further supported by the treatment of Theoria in Aristophanes' *Peace* (894–904). Robson notes that Theoria is treated like sex-worker, and her gang rape at the hands of the Prytaneis shares similarities with the abuse of Neaira by Phrynion and his friends.¹²²

Thus the sexual assault of slaves and sex-workers, as well as marital rape, was tolerated and normalized in Athens. Moreover, there is even evidence that the rape of a free citizen woman could be treated leniently, if the aggressor appeared to be acting out of passion or youthful foolishness rather than *hubris*. Lape questions why, if rape could be considered an act of *hubris* under the law, rapists in Menander are not portrayed as violent criminals transgressing social norms.¹²³ She argues that the context and scenarios of rape in Menander help to decriminalize it – the rapist is often under the influence of alcohol and thus did not intend to commit an act of *hubris*, and the rapes usually take place during nocturnal festivals where social norms are temporarily held in abeyance. This is a good example of how social norms and attitudes facilitate sexual violence by trivializing and excusing it – the trauma of rape is downplayed, and the rapist is not punished, because he did not “mean” it. A similar excuse is offered by Herakles for his rape of Auge in Euripides (*Auge* fr.272b): νῦν δ' οἶνος ἐξέστησέ μ'· ὁμολογῶ δέ σε / ἀδίκημ' ἐγένετ' οὐχ ἐκούσιον, “As it is, wine made me lose control. I admit I wronged you, but the wrong was not intentional”.¹²⁴ The same sentiment is also found in Aristotle's advice to tyrants – he tells them to avoid resentment by making sure they appear to act out of passion rather than *hubris*.¹²⁵

Finally, both Fisher¹²⁶ and Llewellyn-Jones¹²⁷ argue that a certain degree of domestic violence against wives, children, and slaves was commonplace and acceptable in Athens. Llewellyn-Jones lists the scenarios in which a husband might resort to violence: when his wife speaks out of turn, goes against his wishes, incites rumours of infidelity, or refuses to have sex with him.¹²⁸ Such “domestic” violence was seen as a way to “teach” women proper behaviour. According to Fisher, “the standard ideological positions were probably that husbands should usually be able to persuade their wives to conform or obey, and that on the other hand women should not complain if failings were dealt with by physical punishment, provided it was not ‘excessive’”.¹²⁹ Such violence was widely tolerated within the community, with cross-cultural studies indicating that it was viewed as a private matter in which neighbours and other members of the community should not involve themselves.¹³⁰

¹²¹ OMITOWOJOU 1997.

¹²² ROBSON 2014, 321.

¹²³ LAPE 2001, 92–94.

¹²⁴ Trans. COLLARD & CROPP (2008).

¹²⁵ Arist. *Pol.* 1315a.

¹²⁶ FISHER 1998, 77.

¹²⁷ LLEWELLYN-JONES 2011.

¹²⁸ Ibid. 253.

¹²⁹ FISHER 1998, 77.

¹³⁰ LLEWELLYN-JONES 2011, 253.

(ii) A lack of supports for victims:

Scholars are generally in agreement that rape victims were viewed sympathetically and were not punished in the same way that adulterous women were.¹³¹ However, while the law did not seek to punish rape victims, it also did not seek to support them, and that is a significant distinction. There were no supports or assistance for victims of sexual and gender-based violence in Classical Athens. On the contrary, some of the “solutions” to rape in Athens could be detrimental to the wellbeing of the victim (even if that was not the intention of the law), such as marriage to her rapist, discussed earlier.

The societal level:

The societal level examines the larger, macro-level factors that influence violence, such as gender inequality, religious or cultural belief systems, societal norms and economic or social policies that create or sustain gaps and tensions between groups of people.¹³² Social and cultural factors can facilitate violence by “creating an acceptable climate for violence” and “reducing inhibitions against violence”.¹³³ Examples of risk factors at this level include: cultural norms that entrench male dominance over women and children, such as traditional gender norms that give men economic and decision making power in the household; lack of legal rights for women, including access to divorce; social norms that justify violence against women and which support violence as an acceptable way to resolve conflicts; social norms supporting ideas of male superiority and sexual entitlement; and lack of criminal sanctions for gender based violence. They also include health, educational, economic, and social policies that maintain high levels of economic or social inequality between groups in society.¹³⁴ Once again, all these factors were in operation in Classical Athens. We have discussed several of them already throughout the course of this paper. In the discussion below, I focus primarily on the lack of political, legal, and economic rights for women relative to men and on the gender norms that normalize male sexual aggression and fuel “rape myths”.

(i) Lack of political, legal, and economic rights for women relative to men:

Women in Classical Athens had no active political rights - they could not attend, speak or vote in the citizen assembly, and they could not serve as council members, magistrates or generals.¹³⁵ This exclusion of women from political and government roles is a major societal level risk factor for gender-based violence because it denies women the opportunity to hold office and exercise political power, and it denies them the opportunity both to publicly advocate for their interests and to influence public policy by voting. Women were also excluded from the realm of law: they could not sit on juries,¹³⁶ represent themselves in court, or give evidence in court.¹³⁷ They were considered permanent legal minors, incapable of determining their own interests, and therefore placed under the guardianship of a male *kurios* for their whole life.¹³⁸ We have already discussed how the *kurios* system functions as a relationship level risk factor for violence, due to the degree of authority and control it grants men over the women in their care. Here we see how various levels of the ecological

¹³¹ SOMMERSTEIN 2006; HARRIS 2014, 2023.

¹³² WHO 2010, 19.

¹³³ BOTT – MORRISON – ELLSBERG 2004, 15; KRUG et al. 2002, 13.

¹³⁴ BOTT – MORRISON – ELLSBERG 2004, 15; KRUG et al. 2002, 13, 159.

¹³⁵ BLUNDELL 1995, 128; JUST 1989, 9.

¹³⁶ Ibid.

¹³⁷ BLUNDELL 1995, 114; JUST 1989, 23–27.

¹³⁸ BLUNDELL 1995, 114; GOULD 1980, 43; JUST 1989, 18; POMEROY 1975, 62.

model interact with each other: the assigning of a *kurios* (a relationship level factor) is the direct result of women's low legal and political status (societal level factors).

The exclusion of women from law and the courts is a societal level risk factor for sexual violence because it denies women the opportunity to influence the creation of laws that impact their lives (such as the laws against sexual violence), with the result that such laws protect the interests of the male guardian rather than the woman herself; it also curtails her ability to seek justice for any wrongs committed against her, and leaves her with no legal recourse except via her *kurios*. Since women were treated as permanent legal minors, they were also largely excluded from economic activity: according to *Isaeus* 10.10 women (like children) could not make wills, buy or sell land, enter into contracts or make financial transactions greater than the value of a *medimnos* of barley. As we saw earlier, a woman's dowry was managed by her husband.

The low legal, political, and economic status of women was justified and naturalized by pernicious gender stereotypes which view women as weak-willed, irrational, and thus incapable of governing both themselves and the *polis*.¹³⁹ In his *Politics* Aristotle argues that the deliberative faculty of the psyche is inoperative (ἄκυρον) in women, and that "moral goodness" (ἠθικὴ ἀρετή) is different for men and women: "fortitude in the one, for example, is shown in connection with ruling; in the other, it is shown in connection with serving", ἡ μὲν ἀρχικὴ ἀνδρεία ἡ δ' ὑπηρετικὴ.¹⁴⁰ Such stark distinctions based on gender stereotypes, and the power imbalance inherent in them, constitute a societal level risk factor for violence against women.

This distinction in gender roles also influenced male and female education: while boys were educated in rhetoric and physical activity in order to prepare them for their future role in the political life of the *polis*, there is no evidence that girls received any formal education outside of the house.¹⁴¹ Educational policies that maintain high levels of economic and social inequality between groups in society are a societal level risk factor for violence.¹⁴² Another system that maintains extreme forms of social inequality between groups of people is that of slavery. Those enslaved are rendered even more powerless than free women, as they are entirely disenfranchised by the law and isolated from their kin and community networks. As discussed previously, the sexual exploitation of slaves appears to have been widespread and normalized in Classical Athens.

(ii) Gender norms that normalize male sexual entitlement and aggression and which fuel "rape myths":

Men in Athens were afforded much more sexual freedom than women. They could have multiple sexual partners and engage in extra-marital sex, for example with concubines (*pallakai*), sex-workers (*hetairai* and *pornai*) and domestic slaves, something that was strictly forbidden for women.¹⁴³ When Clytemnestra critiques this double standard in Aeschylus' *Choephoroi*, Orestes responds by implying that men are entitled to engage in extra-marital sex because they contribute more to the household than women do, by going out to work.¹⁴⁴ Earlier we saw that there was a sense of entitlement to marital sex, which was viewed as a husband's right and a wife's duty.

Male sexual aggression was naturalized and normalized by certain beliefs about gender and sexuality, such as the idea that sexual penetration is the "lot" of women, and that sex – even with a non-consenting

¹³⁹ Arist. *Pol.* 1,1254b, 1259b; JUST 1989, 136.

¹⁴⁰ Arist. *Pol.* 1,1260a. Trans. BARKER (1946).

¹⁴¹ BLUNDELL 1995, 132; POMEROY 1975, 74.

¹⁴² BOTT – MORRISON – ELLSBERG 2004, 15; KRUG et al. 2002, 13, 159.

¹⁴³ [Dem]. 59,122; Eur. *Med.* 244–47.

¹⁴⁴ Aesch. *Cho.* 917–21.

partner – is only natural. In Menander's *Epitrepontes*, Onesimos quotes a line from Euripides' *Auge* in an attempt to reason with Smicrines and make him accept his daughter's rape.¹⁴⁵ The line reads:

ἡ φύσις ἐβούλεθ', ἣ νόμων οὐδὲν μέλει·
 γυνὴ δ' ἐπ' αὐτῷ τῷδ' ἔφυν
 (Eur. *Auge*, fr. 265a)

Natured willed it, which cares nothing for convention.
 A woman was created by nature for this very purpose.¹⁴⁶

It is likely Herakles spoke this line to Auge's father in his apology for his rape of her. In another fragment from the same play, he blames his behaviour on the fact that he was intoxicated (fr. 272b). As we saw earlier, rape was viewed more leniently when the rapist appeared to be acting out of intoxication or passion rather than *hubris*. Herakles thus justifies his act of rape by (a) blaming it on his intoxication and (b) naturalizing it as the lot of women. This idea that sexual penetration is the "lot" of women is found also in Euripides' extant *Alcestis*. When Herakles asks Admastus to look after his prize-woman (the disguised Alcestis), Admastus protests that he would not be able to ensure the girl's sexual integrity, since his house is full of young men:

πότερα κατ' ἀνδρῶν δῆτ' ἐνοικήσει στέγην;
 καὶ πῶς ἀκραιφνῆς ἐν νέοις στρωφωμένη
 ἔσται; τὸν ἡβῶνθ', Ἡράκλεις, οὐ ῥάδιον
 εἶργειν: ἐγὼ δὲ σοῦ προμηθίαν ἔχω.
 (Eur. *Alc.* 1051–54)

Shall she stay in the men's quarters? And how, moving among young men, shall she remain untouched? It is not easy, Heracles, to rein in a young man in his prime. In this I am looking out for your interests.¹⁴⁷

The implication being that a woman who shares space with men "invites" sexual attention, and that this attention is only a natural reaction on the part of the men. Moreover, the reminder that Admastus is looking out for Herakles' interests reminds us that female sexual purity was inextricably linked to the honour of their male kin. Such sentiments place the responsibility on the woman and her *kurios* to preserve her sexual purity, and thus feed into the "ideal of seclusion" and male control of female sexuality. The idea that it is natural and normal for a man to engage in sexual intercourse with a woman – even if that woman is unwilling – is also found in Homer's *Iliad*. Agamemnon swears an oath to Achilles that he never had sex with Briseis while he held her captive, ἥ θέμις ἀνθρώπων πέλει ἀνδρῶν ἠδὲ γυναικῶν, "as is the way of mankind between men and women" (9,133). Later, Thetis advises her grieving son to partake in both food and sex, saying ἀγαθὸν δὲ γυναικί περ ἐν φιλότῃτι / μίσγεσθ', "it is a good thing to join with a woman in love" (24,129–31).¹⁴⁸ Of course, the only women available to Achilles in the encampment of the Greek army are war-captives.

¹⁴⁵ Men. *epit.* 1123–24.

¹⁴⁶ Trans. COLLARD & CROPP (2008).

¹⁴⁷ Trans. KOVACS (1994).

¹⁴⁸ Trans. HAMMOND (1987).

Furthermore, the harm sexual violence causes the victim is downplayed by gender stereotypes that see women as naturally promiscuous and desirous of sex, to such an extent that they find even forced sex pleasurable. In Euripides' *Troades*, Andromache, upon learning of her sexual enslavement to Neoptolemus, cites a cultural maxim which claims that one night of sex is enough to turn a woman's hatred for a man into desire.¹⁴⁹ The context makes it clear that this initial sexual encounter is non-consensual, and thus the female sexual appetite is conceptualized as so great that it has the potential to turn a violent rape into an enjoyable experience. A similar sentiment is found in Aristophanes' *Lysistrata*, when Lysistrata advises the other women to respond to their husband's use of force by coldly submitting and not moving their hips.¹⁵⁰ The underlying implication is that the women would naturally derive sexual pleasure from their husbands' acts of rape.

This stereotype of women as naturally promiscuous, combined with the stereotype that they are naturally deceitful, leads to the formation of another rape myth: the idea that women lie about rape. The "Potiphar's wife" story-pattern – in which a woman makes a false accusation of rape against her love interest – was common in the ancient world, forming the basis of several tragedies and cropping up regularly in Greek mythology.¹⁵¹ The idea that women lie about rape may also be detected in the opening of Herodotus' *Histories*, where the claim is put forward that no woman allows herself to be abducted unless she wishes to be, δῆλα γὰρ δὴ ὅτι, εἰ μὴ αὐταὶ ἐβούλοντο, οὐκ ἂν ἠρπάζοντο. (1,4,2). In Euripides' *Helen*, when Helen laments that she will be forced to marry Theoclymenus against her will, Menelaus responds by saying such a rape would be a betrayal of him, for force is just an excuse.¹⁵² Such rape myths are a hallmark of rape culture, as they downplay the harmful impact rape has on the victim and allow her claims of non-consent to always be called into question.

(iii) Lack of criminal sanctions against sexual violence:

We have already discussed the criminalization of sexual violence in detail, but some points bear repeating: Athenian law criminalized the rape of a woman incorporated into the household of an Athenian citizen, without the permission of her *kurios*. A man's rape of his own wife and slaves was not criminalized, nor was any sexual activity with his female relatives or slaves to which he had granted permission. This lack of criminalization is a major risk factor for these forms of sexual violence. Moreover, the reason some forms of sexual violence were criminalized while others were not is because the law sought to protect the right of the male *kurios* to control the sexuality of the women in his household, rather than the wellbeing of the victims themselves. This is another hallmark of rape culture.

Conclusion

Classical Athens was a gender unequal society, and gender inequality was the root cause of sexual violence. Many aspects of the political, legal, economic, and social position of women in Athens operated as major risk factors for sexual violence, on various levels of the ecological model. Aspects of Athens' socio-cultural environment, and notably its beliefs and norms regarding gender and sexuality, had the potential to facilitate and enable acts of sexual violence. Thus, Classical Athens meets the criteria of a rape culture.

¹⁴⁹ Eur. *Tro.* 665–66.

¹⁵⁰ Ar. *Lys.* 163,225–28.

¹⁵¹ Most notably Euripides' extant *Hippolytus*, but see also the following fragmentary plays: Euripides' *Hippolytus Veiled*, *Peleus*, *Stheneboea*, and *Phoenix*; Sophocles' *Iobates* and *Phaedra*; and Astydamas' *Bellerophon* and *Phoenix*.

¹⁵² Eur. *Hel.* 834.

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Taking Thratta's Cherry: The Rape of Enslaved Domestic Laborers in Aristophanes

SARAH BRUCIA BREITENFELD

Introduction

ΤΡΥΓΑΙΟΣ

ταύτης δ' ὀπώρας, ὑποδοχῆς, Διονυσίων,
αὐλῶν, τραγῳδῶν, Σοφοκλέους μελῶν, κιχλῶν,
ἐπυλλίων Εὐριπίδου –

...

κιττοῦ, τρυγοίπου, προβατίων βληχωμένων,
κόλπου γυναικῶν διατρεχουσῶν εἰς ἀγρόν,
δούλης μεθυσούσης, ἀνατετραμμένου χοῶς,
ἄλλων τε πολλῶν κἀγαθῶν.

(Aristophanes, *pax* 530–39)

TRYGAEUS: Harvest time, parties, festivals for Dionysus, pipes, tragedians, songs by Sophocles, thrush meat, Euripides' witticisms, [...] ivy, a wine strainer, bleating flocks, the bosoms of women scampering to the fields, a drunken slave girl, an upturned jug, and a host of other fine things!¹

Characterizing the pleasurable scent of the character Holiday, the personification of the festival herself, the comic hero Trygaeus lists his favorite things. With the arrival of peacetime, this is an opportunity to celebrate! What has more pleasant associations for a citizen man than good theater, good food, good drink – and an intoxicated enslaved woman, available for consumption like that upturned wine jug? This chapter reconsiders that “drunken slave girl.” What can we learn about ancient Athens and its attitudes towards rape by focusing on her, not as a source of enjoyment for Trygaeus or his Aristophanic peers, but as a person in her own right?

Though Athens did not have a word for “rape” that encompassed all the term's modern resonances,² sexual assault is an attested phenomenon in the 5th and 4th centuries BCE (known as the Classical period) and stories involving sexual violence against citizen women feature prominently in the court cases of the Attic

¹ Translation lightly adapted from HENDERSON 1998b. I would like to thank Elina Pyy for her invitation to be part of this volume and the anonymous reader for their insights. My appreciation is also owed to Deb Kamen, Anna Uhlig, and Grace Funsten for their productive feedback. All mistakes are my own.

² Our surviving legal texts use a range of terms that depended on context to signify sexual assault, including βία (“force”), αἰσχύνη (“shame”), and ὕβρις (“insult”). HARRIS 2006, 297–332, esp. 306 and 331, has argued that because expectations around sexual violence are culturally specific, it is anachronistic to use the word “rape” when referring to sexual assault in Classical Athens. On a similar premise, OMITOWOJU 2002, esp. 26–28 has shown that the (lack of) consent from the victim of sexual violence did not factor into considerations of sexual assault in the Classical period, thereby problematizing the use of the word “rape” in the context of Classical Athens. For critiques of Harris's arguments against calling Classical Athens a rape culture, see Lynch in this volume.

orators and the New Comedy plays of Menander.³ As noted in the introduction to this volume, societies with a rape culture normalize sexual violence and render rape invisible.⁴ Those in a position of power within a rape culture use the threat of sexual assault as a method of enforcing divisions and of controlling the behaviors of people with less autonomy. By this definition, Rabinowitz has argued that Classical Athens constituted a rape culture, showing that Athenian playwrights depicted widespread sexual violence in tragedy and that they minimized rape by “assimilating it to desire.”⁵ She further notes that in the rape culture of Classical Athens, status and consent were “mutually constitutive,”⁶ focusing on upper class women who were newly navigating enslavement in warfare (these women were of primary interest to the Greek tragedians). To have a full understanding of Athens as a rape culture, however, we must nuance scholarship’s general focus on the rape of more privileged people, such as citizen wives and daughters, by including evidence for the rape of the most vulnerable population in Classical Athens – namely, enslaved women and girls.⁷

Sexual assault against captive women is well attested in the immediate aftermath of city sacks,⁸ but fades from view in the long years after these people were sold into slavery and distributed as domestic laborers into individual households. However, though the rape of female household slaves is documented in our sources only on occasion, we can find evidence that it did take place. Ischomachus in Xenophon’s *Household Management* states (according to Socrates’s narration) that sex with one’s wife is more pleasurable than the rape of an enslaved woman (διάκονος) because “the wife is also willing to please, whereas a slave girl is forced to do what you want.” (ἄλλως τε καὶ ὁπότεν τὸ ἐκοῦσαν χαρίζεσθαι προσῇ ἀντὶ τοῦ ἀναγκαζομένην ὑπηρετεῖν).⁹ In Lysias’s *On the Murder of Eratosthenes*, Euphiletus recounts that his wife accused him of making sexual overtures towards a domestic slave (θεράπαινα), claiming she was suspicious of his request that she leave the room: “‘Yes, so that you,’ she said, ‘may have a try here at the maid. Once before, too, when you were drunk, you pulled her about.’” (ἴνα σύ γε” ἔφη “πειρᾷς ἐνταῦθα τὴν παιδίσκην· καὶ πρότερον δὲ μεθύων εἴλκες αὐτήν).¹⁰ The *graphē hubreōs*, the public lawsuit against *hubris*, also attests to slave rape by offering a legal framework for a slaveholder to respond to the assault of an enslaved person under his ownership. *Hubris*, as defined by Fisher, was the “deliberate and willful attempt to inflict serious humiliation and dishonour” on another person and encompassed offenses such as sexual assault.¹¹ By including protections for enslaved people, the law suggested that slave rape was also illegal in certain circumstances.¹²

³ In the case of Attic oratory, however, these references are often in the form of general legal expectations (e.g., Lys. 1,32), while Athenian New Comedy exclusively features citizen women as the explicit victims of sexual assault (e.g., Men. *epit.* 486–90). The bibliography on rape in these genres is vast but see especially OMITOWOJU 1997; PIERCE 1997; SCAFURO 1997; LAPE 2001, 2004; GARDNER 2012; JAMES 2014; GLAZE BROOK 2015; HARRIS 2018; OMITOWOJU 2016; SCAFURO 2017.

⁴ See Lynch in this volume.

⁵ RABINOWITZ 2011, 16. On Athens as a rape culture, see also KOUTSOPETROU-MØLLER 2021.

⁶ RABINOWITZ 2011, 7, see esp. 7 n. 44.

⁷ Enslaved boys and young men were also very vulnerable to sexual violence, see TODD 2013, *passim*.

⁸ GACA 2010, 2011, 2014, 2018.

⁹ Xen. *oec.* 10,12. Aristophanes’s *Lysistrata* also attests that some men preferred enthusiastic sex with a woman to forced sex, even with their own wives, see Ar. *Lys.* 160–66, 225–27. For διάκονος in the feminine, see also Dem. *Tim.* 197.

¹⁰ Lys. 1,12.

¹¹ FISHER 1976, 181, see Arist. *rh.* 2,2,6,1378b23–25 and FISHER 1995, 45. MACDOWELL 1990, CAIRNS 1996, and CANEVARO 2018 argue that the disposition of the perpetrator is a significant determining factor in cases of *hubris*. Nevertheless, KAMEN 2024, 244 notes that “when it comes to the *technical* or *legal* sense of *hubris*... the intention to insult another person appears to be key. After all, there needs to be a victim in order for an Athenian lawsuit to be brought.” OMITOWOJU 2002, 39–49 and HARRIS 2006, 316–19 show that this law applied to crimes such as sexual violence.

¹² Dem. *Meid.* 46–47; Aeschin. in *Tim.* 17. For *hubris* against slaves, see FISHER 1995; DMITRIEV 2016; CANEVARO 2018; KAMEN 2024. COHEN 2015, 125–30 argues that this law protected enslaved people from rape and HUNT 2016, 151–52 asserts that a *graphē hubreōs* could be a way to prosecute the mistreatment of one’s slave by others. FORSDYKE 2021, 37–38 also notes the law of *hubris*,

When discussing the *graphē hubreōs* as a legal protection for enslaved people against rape, however, the importance of context cannot be overstated because enslaved people could not pursue lawsuits without citizen assistance, which made them reliant on their own enslavers (another citizen man had few incentives to bring a court case on an enslaved person's behalf if he did not own that person as property).¹³ For this reason, if a *graphē hubreōs* were to be applied to the rape of an enslaved person, it would most likely be brought by a slaveholder against someone who abused that slaveholder's property – as Marshall and Kamen note, “in the case of someone using their own enslaved person sexually, no damage is done to the owner's honor, and there is no crime.”¹⁴ Therefore, while the law against *hubris* applied to sexual violence against enslaved domestic laborers in theory, it did not offer significant protections in practice.

Since an enslaver faced few legal consequences for using sexual violence against his own slave, based on this evidence, we can hypothesize that the rape of enslaved women occurred in domestic settings with regularity. To develop a more nuanced understanding of how and where domestic laborers experienced rape, however, we must reassess the brief references to citizen men's sexual interest in enslaved women, especially in genres such as Aristophanic comedy. Three early plays by Aristophanes characterize rape of domestic slaves in Classical Athens through passing remarks: *Acharnians* (performed in 425 BCE), *Wasps* (performed in 422 BCE), and *Peace* (performed in 421 BCE). This chapter aims to put these references to sexual violence in “dynamic relationship with lived reality,”¹⁵ recontextualizing the humor of Aristophanic comedy by focusing on the enslaved domestic laborers who existed behind these triumphant boasts and celebratory remarks. For the purpose of clarity, my use of the terms “rape”, “sexual violence”, and “sexual assault” denotes any sexual contact, whether explicit or implied by innuendo, between an Athenian citizen and an enslaved person. I use these terms to emphasize that coercion is inherent to enslavement, although I acknowledge that ancient Athenian enslavers did not consider sexual acts with their own slaves to be rape. Given slavery's power dynamic, we do not need direct accounts written by enslaved people to know that an enslaver's sexual contact with an enslaved woman was inherently non-consensual and constituted rape.

Sexual activity, including rape, features prominently in Aristophanes's plays, and Henderson characterizes obscenity, including sexual violence, as “a major ingredient in the grotesque humor, the wild lyrical flights, the free and abundant fantasy, and the savagery and abandon of personal and political invective” that exemplifies Aristophanes's first five plays (three of which will be examined in this chapter).¹⁶ Sommerstein regards rape in this genre as an event that is “always threatened, anticipated, or imagined” but never actualized.¹⁷ He argues that the act of rape distinguishes the young and “rejuvenated” male characters from their emasculated elderly counterparts.¹⁸ Because nonconsensual sex is also threatened against citizen wives in

by preventing the most extreme forms of abuse against enslaved people, aimed at social control by preventing social upheaval like slave rebellions.

¹³ On the inability of chattel slaves to access legal protections, even if a law were hypothetically applicable to them, see KAMEN 2024, esp. 249–53. As Kamen shows, enslaved people were especially vulnerable to their own enslaver because another citizen would be extremely unlikely to pursue a *graphē* on behalf of another man's slave, particularly because there were financial risks involved in bringing such a case to trial (see Dem. *Meid.* 47). If an enslaved person were violently assaulted by a person who did not own them as property, it would be up to their enslaver to determine when or even if such a case were worth undertaking, but even then, a *dikē blabēs* (a private suit for damage of property) would likely be preferable to undertaking the financial risks associated with a *graphē hubreōs*.

¹⁴ MARSHALL – KAMEN 2021, 4, see also KAMEN 2024, 250.

¹⁵ PROFFITT 2011, 153.

¹⁶ HENDERSON 1991, 57.

¹⁷ SOMMERSTEIN 1998, 105.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 110.

this genre, he asserts that rape “is not a statement about slavery, it is a statement about gender.”¹⁹ Addressing the role that obscenity has in Aristophanes’s comedies, Halliwell connects the rape fantasies in these plays to an “institutionalized shamelessness” in which the audience is invited to participate,²⁰ while Robson notes that references to rape in Aristophanic Comedy are expressions of fantasy, where the victim is typically of low status.²¹ Robson shows that, by setting the assault scenes as an imagined scenario, Aristophanes downplays the violence of these passages and highlights that these fantasies enable the audience to take pleasure in the protagonist’s attack, freed from any legal or social repercussions.²² Robson’s analysis is particularly important for contextualizing rape scenes within Aristophanes’s literary project, but what can these rape fantasies tell us about how historical male citizens in Athens interacted with the enslaved domestic laborers they encountered each day?

In this paper, I will show that Aristophanic comedy articulates the pleasure that Athenian slaveholders took in assaulting enslaved women, as well as what circumstances these enslavers constructed to make such violence socially acceptable amongst their own citizen peers. The scope in this paper is narrow, excluding both the rape of enslaved boys,²³ and the sexual exploitation of the silent on-stage sex laborers, musicians, and personified abstractions, who have already been more thoroughly addressed in scholarship.²⁴ Rather, I will focus on three scenes in the Aristophanic corpus that illustrate how Athenian men at times amused themselves by raping enslaved domestic laborers: 1) the phallic song in *Acharnians*, where Dicaeopolis fantasizes about sexually assaulting another man’s slave (lines 271–75), then 2) the trial of the household slaves in *Wasps*, where Bdelycleon suggests that his father Philocleon could stay home from the jury trials to punish the household slaves, a scene steeped in sexual innuendo (lines 768–76, 826–28), and finally 3) the choral parabasis in *Peace*, where the chorus members associate the pleasures of peacetime with kissing an enslaved woman (lines 1138–39). Notably, each of these three scenes uses the name Thratta, the Thracian girl, to label the enslaved women under attack.²⁵ I will conduct a close reading of these three references to sexual assault, examining the violent terminology and innuendo in the context of each play. I will then compare these depictions to other extant evidence from Classical Athens to emphasize that these three scenes depict consistent victims, settings, and excuses for sexual assault that are also reflected in other literary and epigraphic genres from the late 5th and early 4th century in Athens. Finally, I will reflect on the broader implications of my findings: what can these Aristophanic scenes tell us about the rape of female domestic laborers in Classical Athens? I argue that these passages are more than rape fantasies – they reflect credible

¹⁹ SOMMERSTEIN 2009, 139, see also SOMMERSTEIN 1998, 105–09. HUNTER 1994, 172 notes that female slaves “are discussed mainly as the object of men’s amorous advances,” and acknowledges that “male and female reactions to [these scenes] must have differed.”

²⁰ HALLIWELL 2002, 123–24.

²¹ ROBSON 2018, 315, see also ROBSON 2013, 59.

²² ROBSON 2018, 316, 325–26.

²³ For which there is evidence at Ar. *eq.* 1385. On the sexuality of male slaves in Aristophanes, see TODD 2013, 37–41.

²⁴ On these groups of enslaved women, see ZWEIG 1992; MARSHALL 2000; HUGHES 2012, 201–14; WALIN 2012, 210–14; RUFFELL 2013, 255–56; GOLDMAN 2015; OLSEN 2017. On enslaved people in general in Aristophanes, see especially EHRENBURG 1951, 165–91; DUBOIS 2003, 117–30, and the contributions in AKRIGG – TORDOFF 2013.

²⁵ There are four references to women named Thratta in Aristophanes’s plays: the three listed above, and the (imagined) attendant of the Kinsman in Ar. *Thesm.* 280–94. As noted by KANEVOU 2011, 198, these four instances make Thratta the most common name for enslaved women in the Aristophanic corpus and EHRENBURG 1951, 172 highlights that Thrattai in Aristophanes are housemaids, attendants, and “servants of farmers.” Whereas MACTOUX 1999, 30 reads each reference to a Thratta in Aristophanes as standing in for enslaved women in general, I believe that we can conduct both generic and specific readings of this name (i.e., these attestations reference *slave girls in general* and also reference in each instance *an individual slave girl* named Thratta within the world of the play). MACTOUX 1999, 31–33 also emphasizes that Thracian women are represented as particularly ‘barbaric’ in Athenian literature, which helps justify their sexual oppression in these Aristophanic scenes. We will return to this point in the concluding section of this chapter.

circumstances where male citizens sexually assaulted enslaved women from private households. The fact that the attacks against these women are not actualized on stage should not distract us from recognizing that sexual violence against enslaved domestic laborers was an important component of the rape culture of Classical Athens.

Acharnians: *Strymodorus's Thracian Girl*

In Aristophanes's first extant play *Acharnians*, which was staged at the Lenaea festival in 425 BCE, Dicaeopolis, the protagonist of this comedy, expresses a violent wish. Dicaeopolis is frustrated at the Athenians' inability to secure an end to the Peloponnesian War. After brokering a thirty-year peace treaty with the Spartans exclusively for himself, he celebrates a Rural Dionysia. This revelry includes a song addressed to Phales, the personification of the phallus, which Dicaeopolis performs onstage in the presence of his wife, daughter, and two enslaved men.²⁶ Hidden amongst this celebratory song, however, is a rape scene that Dicaeopolis anticipates now that peace has been restored. He exclaims:

πολλῷ γάρ ἐσθ' ἥδιον, ὦ Φαλῆς Φαλῆς,
κλέπτουσιν εὐρόνθ' ὠρικὴν ὕληφόρον,
τὴν Στρυμοδώρου Θρᾷτταν ἐκ τοῦ φελλέως,
μέσῃν λαβόντ', ἄραντα, καταβαλόντα
καταγυαρτίσαι.

(Ar. *ach.* 271–75)

Yes, it's far more delightful, Phales, Phales,
to catch a budding girl carrying stolen wood –
Strymodorus's Thratta from the Rocky Region –
and grab her waist, lift her up, throw her down
and take her cherry.²⁷

Though embedded into a longer song, Dicaeopolis's desire to assault a girl named Thratta is an explicit rape fantasy involving an enslaved domestic laborer. If we zoom out from the highly stylized text of this song,²⁸ we can extract words and phrases that reflect how some citizen men may have enacted such assaults. In particular, the identity of the victim, the context for the assault, and the motivation behind the attack are all scenarios where enslaved domestic laborers, as represented by Thratta, were particularly vulnerable.

First, Dicaeopolis specifies that the person he plans to rape is a young, enslaved woman from Thrace on the brink of puberty. The adjective “budding” (ὠρικῇ), which is used to introduce the girl, evokes the bloom of youth.²⁹ This, paired with the subsequent word choice used to describe her rape, “take her cherry”

²⁶ See HENDERSON 1991, 57; HALLIWELL 2002, 120, 122–23; WALIN 2012, 135; ROBSON 2018, 317–18. On the phallic procession, see CSAPO 2013.

²⁷ Translation lightly adapted from HENDERSON 1998a.

²⁸ In an example of an (overwhelmingly positive) literary reading of this passage, SILK 2000, 185–86 characterizes the style of the song as lively and well-organized.

²⁹ Ar. *ach.* 272. OLSON 2002 ad loc. notes that ὠραῖος and ὠρικός are “used to describe a thing that is caught at the perfect time (ῥα) and is thus particularly desirable,” see also ROBSON 2013, 45. *Schol. ach.* 272 notes that Aristophanes also used the phrase ὠρικὴν ὕληφόρον in Ar. *daitaleis* fr. 245.

(καταγαρτίσαι, discussed further below), suggests that the girl is (ideally, in Dicaeopolis's mind) a virgin.³⁰ Her name, Thratta, is also sufficient to signify that this young woman is both enslaved and from Thrace, the geographic region to the west of the Black Sea.³¹ Aristophanes reinforces her Thracian origins with the name of her enslaver; Strymodorus is an attested name for Aristophanic characters and historical figures alike, but also alludes to the Strymon River, a geographic feature which was considered part of Thrace in the 420s BCE.³² Strymodorus and Thratta's names also stand in contrast to the area of Attica where they are currently living – Phelleus (here translated as "Rocky Region") designates a mountainous landscape in Attica that is not particularly fertile.³³ With this emphasis on the enslaved girl's Thracian origin and pubescent age, Aristophanes makes clear through Dicaeopolis's song that young enslaved girls, even those belonging to another man, are objects of sexual fascination.

Second, Dicaeopolis makes clear that he hopes to execute this attack in a rural location, and that he associates this opportunity for violence against the enslaved with the arrival of peacetime. While exclaiming his song, Dicaeopolis specifies that he is "gladly returning to [his] deme"³⁴ from the city. Compared to the toils of administering a war, he finds it "far more delightful"³⁵ to participate in what the remote location can offer him; namely, the opportunity "to catch a budding girl carrying stolen wood."³⁶ The isolation of the countryside is central to Dicaeopolis's fantasy and to the danger presented towards the enslaved victim. Mirroring the rural locations represented in lyric poetry, Dicaeopolis can act on his violent desires here without the presence of witnesses.³⁷ In his ideal scenario, he also imagines finding this girl in the act of theft (she is both κλέπτουσιν, "stealing," and ὕληφόρον, "carrying wood"), presumably taking firewood from his own land. The presence of wood, a coveted resource in Attica especially during wartime,³⁸ further calls to mind the remoteness of this imagined assault, invoking the image of the rural countryside. Additionally, Aristophanes bookends this rape fantasy with images that reference a soldier's transition from war to peace. In the buildup to the rape fantasy, Dicaeopolis states his enthusiasm that he no longer must engage with the "bothers and battles" of warfare.³⁹ Dicaeopolis's song then transitions into his imagined sexual assault, associating it with his private ceasefire, before returning again to the pleasure of peacetime by encouraging Phales to join him in drinking "a cup of peace" while his "shield shall be hung by the hearth."⁴⁰ What does a man such as Dicaeopolis associate with the end of the Peloponnesian War? His peace treaty gives him the chance to spend time on his remote property, where he can prey on enslaved women who intrude onto his land.

³⁰ Ar. *ach.* 275. See HENDERSON 1991, 166.

³¹ Schol. *ach.* 273 says that the name Thratta is synonymous with an enslaved woman, see also LEWIS 2011, 99.

³² On attestations for the name Strymodorus, see Ar. *vesp.* 233, *Lys.* 259; Dem. *pro Phorm.* 28–29. The region was extremely wealthy in gold, silver, and (ironically) timber, which helps to add humor to the image of the Thracian girl taking wood, especially because it was this area that supplied wood for the Athenian fleet in the Peloponnesian War. On the connection between this name and the river in Thrace, see MACTOUX 1999, 30; OLSON 2002 ad loc.; KANAVOU 2011, 45. On the supply of wood from this region, see Thuc. 4,108,1; MACTOUX 1999, 32.

³³ See KANAVOU 2011, 44–45, who also notes the pun between Φελλεύς (Rocky Region) and Φάλης (Phales, the addressee of this song). On this geographic area, see also Ar. *nu.* 71.

³⁴ τὸν δῆμον ἐλθὼν ἄσμενος, Ar. *ach.* 267.

³⁵ πολλῶ... ἥδιον, Ibid. 271.

³⁶ κλέπτουσιν εὐρόνθ' ὠρικὴν ὕληφόρον, Ibid. 272.

³⁷ ROBSON 2018, 327 n. 27, who briefly connects this setting to the taming of the Thracian filly in Anac. fr. 417. HALLIWELL 2002, 122 notes that the setting evokes "nostalgia for the countryside." On the lack of witnesses in this setting, see ROBSON 2018, 319.

³⁸ MARSHALL – KAMEN 2021, 5.

³⁹ πραγμάτων τε καὶ μαχῶν, Ar. *ach.* 269.

⁴⁰ εἰρήνης ... τρύβλιον, Ar. *ach.* 278, ἡ δ' ἀσπίς ἐν τῷ φεψάλῳ κρεμῖσεται, Ar. *ach.* 279.

Third and finally, in constructing the circumstances for this assault, Dicaeopolis uses vocabulary that emphasizes that the violence is a distinct source of pleasure for him. Dicaeopolis details the punishment he intends to enact in vivid vocabulary: if he can find this slave girl stealing wood, Dicaeopolis will “grab her waist, lift her up, throw her down and take her cherry!”⁴¹ Scholarship has generally prioritized what this song tells us about Dicaeopolis’s mental state over the information it provides on slave rape, but the language is intense and physically violent.⁴² In a series of four verbs, Aristophanes and Dicaeopolis draw parallels between sexual assault and sport. Wrestling metaphors fill the passage, calling to mind a physically dominant athlete throwing his opponent to the ground with force.⁴³ Dicaeopolis will “grab her by the waist,” a wrestling move to be sure, but the word choice in Greek (μέσῃν λαβεῖν) also evokes seizing a person’s genitals.⁴⁴ He will “lift her up and throw her down,” employing actions that are physically violent (ἄραντα, καταβαλόντα), especially because compounds of the Greek verb “to throw” (βάλλειν) appear in Aristophanic scenes associated with assault.⁴⁵ The conclusion to this series of brutal actions is his desire to “take her cherry (i.e., grape)” (καταγυαρτίσαι), an agriculture metaphor that evokes the girl’s virginity and the forceful pressing of wine.⁴⁶ The fact that Dicaeopolis also speaks of this assault as “more delightful” or, literally, “sweeter” (ἥδιον) reinforces the connection between the taste of wine and his sexual pleasure.⁴⁷ Taken together, Dicaeopolis’s physical and sexual language unequivocally shows that he relishes having sex with another man’s domestic slave if he can get away with it. The description of Thratta’s body, tossed to the ground and penetrated against her will in the countryside, may bring Dicaeopolis comic rejuvenation and fulfillment, but it is nevertheless a detailed description of what a citizen man would like to do to enslaved

⁴¹ μέσῃν λαβόντ’ ἄραντα καταβαλόντα / καταγυαρτίσαι, Ar. *ach.* 274–75.

⁴² For example, HENDERSON 1991, 59–60 characterizes this passage as exemplifying the rural countryside, including “playful sexual aggressiveness” and “wholesome sex,” presumably referring to the rape of this slave woman. Although SOMMERSTEIN 1998, 109 does not dismiss the violence of this passage, he does focus on what the rape fantasy conveys to audiences about Dicaeopolis himself, highlighting that such an expression is “an *assertion of youthful vigour*” on the part of the old man (italics by Sommerstein). HALLIWELL 2002, 122 addresses the way in which Dicaeopolis’s “earthy sex drive” is representative of shamelessness in this passage, noting that the audience is invited to enjoy the way in which this passage plays with the conventions of decency. For WALIN 2012, 135, too, the rape of Thratta is “the ultimate outlet of the build-up of sexual tension” and the imagined sexual assault demonstrates Dicaeopolis’s rejuvenation. RUFFELL 2013, 260, by contextualizing this scene with those where Dicaeopolis himself is the threatened with violence, shows that the protagonist is “drawing attention to the powerlessness of the ordinary citizen male.” Only recently has the violence of this passage come under extended scrutiny, with ROBSON 2018 exploring the way in which Aristophanes’s plays incorporate imagined rape as part of the comic project. ROBSON 2018, 325–26 highlights that Aristophanes does not dwell on Thratta’s physical appearance, and that “distress and suffering is thus an element which Aristophanes, understandably enough perhaps, chooses to omit from his peacetime sexual assault fantasies.”

⁴³ HALLIWELL 2002, 121; OLSON 2002, ad loc.; ROBSON 2018, 319. Curiously, after HENDERSON 1991, 156 notes that this terminology at Ar. *ach.* 274 is “probably borrowed from wrestling,” HENDERSON 1991, 169 later states that “Aristophanes hardly ever uses this kind of metaphor [a palaestra metaphor]. In fact, there is only one instance of an erotic image from the palaestra (E 965 f.), unless we admit P 899 as a borderline case.” The distinction, it seems, is that whereas Henderson views Dicaeopolis’s actions as violent, the other passages that he cites are viewed by him as erotic (or romantic?). See also Ar. *pax* 871–908, esp. 894–908, discussed further below.

⁴⁴ HENDERSON 1991, 156, and cf. Ar. *ach.* 1216–17 when Dicaeopolis instructs two women: “And you two hold the thick of my cock; take hold, my girls!” Ἐμοῦ δέ γε σφὼ τοῦ πέους ἄμφω μέσου / προσλάβεσθ’, ὃ φίλαι.

⁴⁵ According to HENDERSON 1991, 170, “throw her down” (καταβαλόντα) should be understood as “throw to the ground preparatory to rape.” The word also has military associations where it denotes attacking and killing, see for example Hom. *Il.* 2,269; Hdt. 4,64.

⁴⁶ The verb has also been translated as “stone her fruit,” “crush her grape,” “press her grape,” “de-pit,” and “take out the kernel,” see SILK 1980, 132; SOMMERSTEIN 1980, 65; SILK 2000, 123; duBOIS 2003, 105; ROBSON 2018, 319. OLSON 2002 ad loc. raises the possibility that this word may denote the act of “stick[ing] my grape-stone/penis into her,” see also ROBSON 2018, 327 n. 29. On virginity, see HENDERSON 1991, 166. MACTOUX 1999, 34 notes that the agricultural metaphors here emphasize that the pleasure of intoxication is conflated to the pleasure of sex. On agricultural imagery in Aristophanes, especially in *Peace*, see KANELAKIS 2022.

⁴⁷ ἥδιον, Ar. *ach.* 271.

girl, if given the opportunity. In other words, the fantasy assault scene presents us with a specific circumstance that would have been dangerous for an enslaved woman like Thratta.

Additionally, in Dicaeopolis's fantasy, Thratta is not his own slave – he associates her ownership with a man named Strymodorus. Dicaeopolis seems to take special pleasure in having sex (by rape) with another man's slave, but the passage is carefully constructed to alleviate blame for Dicaeopolis by highlighting the enslaved girl's theft – only in these specific circumstances could Dicaeopolis enact this violence in a manner that is socially condoned as a punishment for her transgression.⁴⁸ An additional sinister detail from his fantasy is that he has a *specific* victim in mind, which suggests that he has seen this woman before, desired her, and hopes to act on those desires now that peace has been restored to him and he can catch her in the act of theft. In other words, by imagining the assault and then voicing it in this passage, the character Dicaeopolis invokes a particular premeditated scenario where he can take unrestrained pleasure in assaulting this girl without consequences.

Though this passage regarding Thratta is not the only reference within *Acharnians* to Dicaeopolis's sexual encounters with enslaved women, it is certainly the most overtly violent.⁴⁹ The rape fantasy that Dicaeopolis expresses in *Acharnians* reflects an anticipated and desired event – more specifically, an attack against a young Thracian girl caught stealing wood in the countryside. The details of the enslaved person's identity, the context for the assault, and the excuse that Dicaeopolis offers for the attack are consistent with what we will see in *Wasps* and *Peace*. Together, these features of the assault scene suggest that during peacetime, Athenian men could find ways to rape enslaved women, even if these women and girls belonged to another man.

Wasps: *The Maid and the Thracian Girl*

Only three years after *Acharnians*, Aristophanes staged *Wasps* at the Lenaea festival of 422 BCE. Amid the Peloponnesian War, Aristophanes's new comedy satirized the reforms introduced by the Athenian statesman Cleon, criticizing his pro-war agenda and his proposal to increase jury pay. *Wasps* is noteworthy for its sustained attention on the plight of the enslaved, as recognized by duBois, who highlights that that slavery is a significant metaphor throughout the play.⁵⁰ The punishment of enslaved people was ideologically corporal in Athens,⁵¹ and *Wasps* also prominently features the physical abuse of enslaved male characters,

⁴⁸ OLSON 2002, ad loc.; WALIN 2012, 139; TODD 2013, 38n5; ROBSON 2018, 325. This imagined account of the thieving slave girl punished with sexual assault helps to show that on certain occasions citizens could have forced sex with enslaved people outside of their ownership and domination, even without the owner's permission. It would be difficult to be found guilty of *hubris* (deliberate insult towards the slave's enslaver) if catching the enslaved person in the act of theft.

⁴⁹ Other examples include when the chorus of this play contrasts Lamachus standing guard in the cold with Dicaeopolis, who will “be sleeping with a very ripe young girl, getting his thong squeezed,” τῷ δὲ καθεύδειν / μετὰ παιδίσκης ὥραιότητος, / ἀνατριβομένη γε τὸ δεῖνα, Ar. *ach.* 1147–49. The “young girl” (παιδίσκη) here is likely enslaved, and, like Thratta, is near puberty: “very ripe,” (ὥραιότητος). For the obscenity in this passage, see HENDERSON 1991, 62. For the way in which this slave girl also represents peace for Dicaeopolis, see WALIN 2012, 136. Dicaeopolis will end the play with a slave girl on each arm (Ar. *ach.* 1197–1232). He enters the final scene fondling two enslaved women (Ar. *ach.* 1197–98) and ordering them to give him kisses (Ar. *ach.* 1199–1200). In contrast to Lamachus's two soldiers supporting his wounded leg, Dicaeopolis directs the enslaved women to support his phallus (Ar. *ach.* 1216–17). These two onstage women are silent characters. There is a certainly literary purpose behind Dicaeopolis's sexual attention towards the enslaved throughout this play and this scene paired with the phallic song principally serves to create a clear contrast between Dicaeopolis and Lamachus, see HENDERSON 1991, 62; HALLIWELL 2002, 124; WALIN 2012, 126, 136.

⁵⁰ duBOIS 2003, 124–25.

⁵¹ For this ideology, see Dem. *Andr.* 55; Dem. *Phil.* IV 27; Dem. *Tim.* 166–67; HUNTER 1992; 1994, 54–84, 165–73. On marked slaves who show signs of corporal punishment, see KAMEN 2010. On references to the corporal punishment of enslaved people, see also Aeschin. in *Tim.* 39; Pl. *leg.* 777a4–6; Xen. *mem.* 2.1, 16.

including repeated references to the beating of men and boys.⁵² Yet within this wider pattern of violence in *Wasps*, enslaved women are consistently singled out for sexual assault by citizen characters. In contrast to the explicit rape fantasy in *Acharnians*, Aristophanes's *Wasps* addresses sexual violence against enslaved domestic laborers using innuendo. Despite the euphemistic language (as opposed to overt threats of rape), the play nevertheless suggests that male enslavers viewed sexual violence against the enslaved domestic laborers in their own households as a socially acceptable source of entertainment.

The central conflict of *Wasps* focuses on the relationship between the elderly Athenian Philocleon, who is obsessed with attending the courts as a juror daily, and his son Bdelycleon, who is determined to prevent his father from doing so. Bdelycleon has tried everything to keep his father away from the jury trials, including ordering the enslaved members of the household to physically restrain Philocleon, but nothing is working.⁵³ After Philocleon states that he would rather die than no longer be a juror, Bdelycleon suggests an alternative: "All right, since that's what you enjoy doing, just stop going to court. Stay here instead and judge the household slaves."⁵⁴ Bdelycleon's proposal in turn prompts an investigation into which enslaved individuals in the household should be punished. Notably, both the people first nominated by Bdelycleon are female domestic laborers. Ultimately, however, the figure brought to trial is the household dog.

To convince his father to stay home, Bdelycleon suggests Philocleon could do the following to a household slave:

ΒΔΕΛΥΚΛΕΩΝ

ὅτι τὴν θύραν ἀνέφξεν ἡ σηκὶς λάθρα,
ταύτης ἐπιβολὴν ψηφιεῖ μίαν μόνην·
πάντως δὲ κἀκεῖ ταῦτ' ἔδρας ἐκάστοτε.
καὶ ταῦτα μὲν νῦν εὐλόγως, ἣν ἐξέχῃ
εἴλη κατ' ὄρθρον, ἡλιάσει πρὸς ἥλιον·
ἐὰν δὲ νεῖφῃ, πρὸς τὸ πῦρ καθήμενος·
ῥοντος εἴσει· κἂν ἔγρη μεσημβρινός,
οὐδεὶς σ' ἀποκλήσει θεσμοθέτης τῇ κινγκλίδι.

ΦΙΛΟΚΛΕΩΝ

τουτί μ' ἀρέσκει.

(Ar. *vesp.* 768–76)

BDELYCLEON:

Say the maid opens the door in secret. Vote her a single stiff penalty – anyway, it's what you used to do there regularly. And now you'll do this judging in a reasonable way, out in the sun if it's warm at dawn; if it's snowing, then sitting by the fire; if it starts to rain, going indoors. And if you sleep till noon, no magistrate will close the gate on you.

⁵² For example, two enslaved men, Sosias and Xanthias, begin the play referencing the possibility of sore ribs as a result of a beating (Ar. *vesp.* 3–7), Bdelycleon threatens to put a slave in chains (Ar. *vesp.* 435), Philocleon mentions tying Xanthias to an olive tree to beat him (Ar. *vesp.* 449–50), Xanthias bemoans his beaten back (Ar. *vesp.* 1292–96), Xanthias describes Philocleon beating him and calling him "boy, boy" (παῖ, παῖ, Ar. *vesp.* 1307), among other references. For slavery as a metaphor used by both Bdelycleon and Philocleon throughout the play, see duBois 2003, 117–30, esp. 120–21.

⁵³ Ar. *vesp.* 67–135.

⁵⁴ σὺ δ' οὖν, ἐπειδὴ τοῦτο κεχάρηκας ποιῶν, / ἐκεῖσε μὲν μηκέτι βάδιζ', ἀλλ' ἐνθάδε / αὐτοῦ μένων δικάζε τοῖσιν οἰκέταις, Ar. *vesp.* 764–66. Translation lightly adapted from HENDERSON 1998b.

PHILOCLEON:

That I like.

Bdelycleon frames himself as the principal slaveholder in the household, capable of giving orders that supersede those of his father.⁵⁵ As part of playing that enslaver role now, this young man shows that he views enslaved women's bodies as instruments that can be used as entertainment for his father.⁵⁶ By inviting Philocleon to stay home from court, Bdelycleon alleviates some of his own responsibility for his father's public behavior, but he also increases the daily risk for the enslaved people, now vulnerable to additional scrutiny by a (bad tempered) citizen who is present to watch them. And what does that punishment entail? "Say the maid opens the door in secret," says Bdelycleon, "Vote her a single stiff penalty."⁵⁷ Bdelycleon's suggestion involves 'fining' the enslaved housemaid (ἡ σῆκίς) for secretly leaving the building, or, perhaps, subtly leaving the door ajar to eavesdrop on her enslaver.⁵⁸ Though the literal meaning of ἐπιβολή is a monetary fine, it carries a double meaning that crosses into sexual euphemism.⁵⁹ It is also a compound of βάλλειν, a word that, as we have noted,⁶⁰ often connotes sexual assault in Aristophanes's corpus. Therefore, rather than literally fining a household slave, Bdelycleon suggests that Philocleon could rape the enslaved woman in retribution for her own transgressions. Besides, as Bdelycleon notes, such a punishment is a routine event for Philocleon: "anyway, it's what you used to do there regularly."⁶¹ On an initial pass, "there" (ἐκεῖ) ostensibly refers to the court,⁶² but it also evokes the house that the two men stand before onstage. If we are to believe Bdelycleon, nothing now should prevent Philocleon from taking pleasure in enacting judgements and punishments – not bad weather, not sleeping in, not even a grumpy magistrate.⁶³ Though our textual references to punishment in this scene literally discuss fining, the threat of rape hangs over the passage through sexual innuendo.

Next, the father and son then talk about the logistics of transforming their home into a courtroom, and Philocleon calls for his first case. This provides Bdelycleon with another opportunity to nominate a domestic slave who, in his mind, is currently deserving of punishment. Bdelycleon ponders:

φέρε νυν, τίν' αὐτῷ πρῶτον εἰσαγάγω δίκην;
τί τις κακὸν δέδρακε τῶν ἐν τῇ οἰκίᾳ;

⁵⁵ As Xanthias notes in the opening scene while gesturing towards Bdelycleon, "That's our master up there, the big man asleep on the roof. He's put his father under house arrest and posted us as sentries to prevent his escape," ἔστιν γὰρ ἡμῖν δεσπότης ἐκείνοσι / ἄνω καθεύδων, ὁ μέγας, οὐπὶ τοῦ τέγους. / οὗτος φυλάττειν τὸν πατέρ' ἐπέταξε νῦν, / ἔνδον καθεύδρας, ἵνα θύραζε μὴ ᾤξῃ, *Ar. vesp.* 67–70.

⁵⁶ This is a consistent character trait for Bdelycleon, who begins the scene offering to hire a female sex laborer for Philocleon: "That's right, and I'll support him by providing whatever a senior citizen needs: ... a whore to massage his cock and his tailbone," καὶ μὴν θρέψω γ' αὐτὸν παρέχων / ὅσα πρεσβύτη ξύμφορα / ... πόρνην, ἣτις τὸ πέος τρίγει / καὶ τὴν ὀσφύν, *Ar. vesp.* 736–40.

⁵⁷ ὅτι τὴν θύραν ἀνέφξεν ἡ σῆκίς λάθρα, / ταύτης ἐπιβολὴν ψηφιεῖ μίαν μόνην, *Ar. vesp.* 768–69.

⁵⁸ On sneaking out of the house, see BILES – OLSON 2015, ad loc. On eavesdropping, see HUNTER 1994, 83. On a σῆκίς as a homeborn slave, see BILES – OLSON 2015, ad loc. There may also be sexual connotations to this accusation and the proposed punishment. Though attending to the door is nominally a designated task, the word "door" (θύρα) can also euphemistically refer to the woman's genitalia (HENDERSON 1991, 137). By 'opening the door in secret,' Bdelycleon suggests that this maid may be sneaking out of the house to have sex without the permission of her enslaver (HENDERSON 1991, 137; WALIN 2012, 140; BILES – OLSON 2015, ad loc.).

⁵⁹ HENDERSON 1991, 121; SOMMERSTEIN 1998, 106, 109; WALIN 2012, 139–40; BILES – OLSON 2015, ad loc.

⁶⁰ καταβάλοντα, *Ar. ach.* 274.

⁶¹ πάντως δὲ κάκεῖ ταῦτ' ἔδρας ἐκάστοτε, *Ar. vesp.* 770.

⁶² For ἐκεῖ as the court, see *Ar. vesp.* 767, and repeated as κάκεῖ in *Ar. vesp.* 770.

⁶³ *Ar. vesp.* 771–75.

ἡ Θράττα προσκαύσασα πρώην τὴν χύτραν –
(Ar. *vesp.* 826–28)

Let me see now, what case will I bring him first? Has any of the household misbehaved? Thratta, who scorched the pot yesterday –
(*Philocleon cuts him off to ask why this courtroom does not have railings.*)

Bdelycleon's consideration of handing over an enslaved Thracian cook to his father for punishment reinforces that the household slaves are sexually available to these men. As we saw in *Acharnians*, the use of the name Thratta is sufficient to demarcate an enslaved woman, nominally one trafficked from Thrace. This Thratta has made a mistake in her role as a cook by burning an earthenware pot and, perhaps, the food within it.⁶⁴ If we count the proposed rape of the housemaid in the preceding passage of *Wasps*, Thratta is now the second enslaved domestic laborer whom Bdelycleon frames as a potential victim for Philocleon. We do not learn what punishment the younger man has in mind for his father to deal out because he is interrupted.⁶⁵ Given that Bdelycleon proposed that Philocleon could rape the enslaved maid, however, it is likely that he has a similar fate in mind for the Thracian cook.

Before any trial and punishment of these enslaved people can take place, Bdelycleon and Philocleon argue back and forth about how to properly recreate a courthouse. While the older man goes back inside to prepare, the enslaved character Xanthias complains to his enslaver Bdelycleon that the household dog has recently stolen a wheel of cheese. This in turn supplies Philocleon with his first court case and victim – the thieving dog, whom Philocleon votes to execute (though he accidentally casts the 'acquittal' ballot). Ultimately, the victim who is tried from Bdelycleon's house is not an enslaved person after all. Nevertheless, these scenes involving Bdelycleon's and Philocleon's sexual interest in enslaved women fit into a network of scenes with similar themes of sexual coercion.⁶⁶ Bdelycleon may control access to the enslaved people in the household, but he readily supplies Philocleon with enslaved women for distraction, all in the name of punishment. These Aristophanic passages demonstrate that young and old Athenian men alike enjoyed their proximity to domestic laborers in their own households and the sexual access it gave them. The play also suggests that Athenian men may have framed punishment as a pretext to use these enslaved domestic laborers sexually.

Peace: Kissing the Thracian Girl

Both *Acharnians* and *Wasps* feature men who contemplate raping enslaved women named Thratta, likening sexual violence to a recreational activity. As in these preceding plays, *Peace*, staged in 421 BCE at the City Dionysia, also includes casual references to the rape of domestic laborers. *Peace* responded directly to the Peloponnesian War, depicting an Athenian named Trygaeus who sets out to rescue the personification of

⁶⁴ LEWIS 2011, 101; BILES – OLSON 2015, ad loc.

⁶⁵ The lines describing her offense also have sexual connotations, as words denoting burning or scorching, including blackened kitchen implements, are commonly used in erotic contexts throughout Aristophanes, see HENDERSON 1991, 142–43, 177. Like the enslaved woman 'opening the door,' this line may refer, once again, both to a transgression involving Thratta's literal role in the kitchen, and to unsanctioned sexual activity on her part.

⁶⁶ This includes when Philocleon attempts to proposition an onstage flute-player named Dardanis by offering her freedom in return for sexual services, Ar. *vesp.* 1342–63, esp. 1351–53. On this scene and the identity of the person playing Dardanis, see ZWEIG 1992, 77–81; MARSHALL 2000, 20–22; WALIN 2012, 106–15; GOLDMAN 2015, 38–39.

Peace from the personification of War. Trygaeus is ultimately rewarded for his success with a marriage to the personification of the Harvest (Oporia) and the opportunity to present a personification named Holiday (Theoria) as a gift to the Athenian city council. The play *Peace* features the sexual coercion of enslaved domestic women in several scenarios,⁶⁷ such as Trygaeus's reference to his enjoyment of "a drunken slave girl," discussed above.⁶⁸ Towards the conclusion of the play, the chorus and its leader celebrate the return of peacetime, singing about their hatred for being soldiers and their excitement that the war has ended.⁶⁹ As we saw in *Acharnians*, the chorus identifies the arrival of peace with sexual access to enslaved laborers. What can they look forward to, now that peace has been restored to them? They list the following:⁷⁰

ἡδομαί γ' ἡδομαι
κράνους ἀπηλλαγμένος
τυροῦ τε καὶ κρομμύων.
οὐ γὰρ φιληδῶ μάχαις,
ἀλλὰ πρὸς πῦρ διέλ-
λων μετ' ἀνδρῶν ἐταί-
ρῶν φίλων ...
[...]
κάνθρακίζων τοῦρεβίνθου
τὴν τε φηγὸν ἐμπυρεύων,
χᾶμα τὴν Θραῦτταν κυνῶν
τῆς γυναικὸς λουμένης.

(Ar. *pax* 1127–39)

I'm delighted, yes delighted,
to be rid of helmets
and cheese and onions.
For I take no pleasure in battles,
but in bending an elbow
by the fire with good
friends, ...
[...]
and toasting the chickpeas,
and roasting some acorn,
and kissing Thratta
while the wife's in the bath.

⁶⁷ In what is perhaps the most graphic scene of sexual coercion in Aristophanes, Trygaeus and an enslaved man fondle and strip Holiday, a silent female character onstage, who is depicted as a sex laborer (Ar. *pax* 871–908, esp. 894–908). Trygaeus goes on to suggest that Holiday should be given to the Athenian city council for a series of athletic events steeped in sexual innuendo: a wrestling match, a fight in the pankration, and a chariot race where the council members are envisaged as multiple jockeys riding Holiday. On this scene and on Holiday's portrayal, see WALIN 2012, 127–29; ROBSON 2018, 320–22.

⁶⁸ δούλης μεθυούσης, Ar. *pax* 538.

⁶⁹ On the chorus's changing identity in *Peace*, see MCGLEW 2001.

⁷⁰ The text here is particularly challenging and I have passed over the problematic lines (e.g., ἐκπεπρεμισμένα at Ar. *pax* 535) to keep our focus on the case study at hand, especially because the lines that feature the Thracian girl (Ar. *pax* 1138–39) are well-attested.

In an evocative list of enjoyable activities, the chorus of *Peace* celebrates returning home from war with a reference to a woman named Thratta. Given the previous analyses of Thracian women in *Acharnians* and *Wasps*, we should now recognize that this Thratta in *Peace* represents an enslaved woman who is about to be sexually assaulted. The arrival of peace, her identity as a Thracian domestic laborer in the household, and her vulnerability in the wife's absence all reinforce that this woman is about to experience sexual violence.

Throughout this song, the members of the chorus frame themselves as returning soldiers, emphasizing the contrast between the violence of warfare and the leisure of peacetime. They begin by exclaiming that they are “delighted, yes delighted,” (ἡδομαί γ’ ἡδομαί) to be home from war,⁷¹ echoing the word choice that Dicaeopolis uses in his phallic song to introduce the rape of Strymodorus's Thratta (ἡδον).⁷² As we saw in the *Acharnians*, this term also evokes the sweetness of food, and the entirety of the passage frames the enslaved woman Thratta as an object of consumption. The chorus members no longer wish to eat “cheese and onions,”⁷³ the rations of war. Rather, they prefer “toasting the chickpeas, and roasting some acorn.”⁷⁴ The preparation of these two foods not only references agricultural imagery,⁷⁵ but also serves as a euphemism for sexual intercourse.⁷⁶ Additionally, the chorus members emphasize their pleasure in “kissing Thratta,”⁷⁷ but given the double meaning of ‘roasting’ those ‘chickpeas and acorns,’ this sexual activity is indicative of much more than a quick kiss – kissing an enslaved woman should also be understood as a violent sexual act suggestive of rape.⁷⁸ Using the imagery of domestic bliss, the chorus makes clear that the enslaved Thracian is yet another sexual object to enjoy, yet another food to consume, now that peace has returned.

However, the next line demonstrates that the male chorus cannot make unrestrained sexual use of an enslaved Thracian. Rather, in contrast to the other scenes from Aristophanic comedy thus far, the scene in *Peace* also features another female figure who impacts the rape scene: the chorus envisages enacting this assault “while the wife is in the bath.”⁷⁹ How does this female enslaver factor into the domestic vignette? A wife's distraction is central to the chorus's enjoyment of Thratta because it makes such an assault possible. Gaca has recently shown that Athenian women controlled their husbands' sexual access to female slaves in their own households, especially following warfare.⁸⁰ The martial rape of captured women was acceptable for soldiers on campaign, Gaca notes, but once Greek men returned home, they had an obligation to hand over the enslaved women to their own wives. From this point forward, these female enslavers were the “intermediary managers”⁸¹ of the enslaved women, controlling when and how often their husbands had sexual access. The chorus in *Peace* is speaking as a group of soldiers celebrating their return to domestic life and they construct a specific scenario in which they can enjoy raping Thratta while the wife is not in the vicin-

⁷¹ Ar. *pax* 1127.

⁷² Ar. *ach.* 271. The word ἡδον is used directly a little later by the chorus leader at Ar. *pax* 1140.

⁷³ τυροῦ τε καὶ κρομμύων, Ar. *pax* 1129.

⁷⁴ κἀνθρακίζων τοῦρεβίνθου / τήν τε φηγὸν ἐμπυρεύων, Ar. *pax* 1136–37.

⁷⁵ On agricultural imagery in *Peace*, see esp. KANELAKIS 2022, 437–40.

⁷⁶ On ἐρέβινθος and φηγός as euphemisms for an “erect member,” see HENDERSON 1991, 119–20. On ἐμπυρεύειν as “to roast my phallus in coitus,” see HENDERSON 1991, 179.

⁷⁷ χᾶμα τὴν Θρατταν κυνῶν, Ar. *pax* 1138. MACTOUX 1999, 30 recognizes that this Thratta stands in for all enslaved people in the household.

⁷⁸ On the sexual connotations of kissing, see HAWLEY 2007, 5–8. As noted by HENDERSON 1991, 181, kissing in Aristophanes “often has a definitively obscene tone” and is “treated as an aspect of sexual congress.” HENDERSON 1991, 182 labels this scene as a “playful rape.” Pace TODD 2013, 38 n. 5 when he says the scene is “non-coercive” (though he notes there is “no hint of consent”).

⁷⁹ τῆς γυναικὸς λουμένης, Ar. *pax* 1139. Ar. fr. 376 may also refer to a wife bathing.

⁸⁰ GACA 2021.

⁸¹ GACA 2021, 45.

ity to object. In other words, when the female slaveholder is distracted in the bathtub, an enslaved Thracian woman becomes particularly vulnerable to sexual abuse from her male enslaver.

The chorus does not conclude their song with the image of kissing Thratta. Rather, the choral leader continues to evoke the pleasure of peacetime by stating that, “Yes, nothing’s more delightful than having the seed in the ground,”⁸² and that even male and female slaves can take part in the celebrations (“have Syra call Manes in from the vineyard”).⁸³ This is far better, the chorus emphasizes, than being a soldier who is forced to serve an ineffective commander. In sum, the description of “kissing Thratta” presented in *Peace* complements what we have noted in *Acharnians* and *Wasps*: Athenian men associate the rape of Thracian girls with the arrival of peacetime and with leisure activities. They partake in such violence with pleasure as long as they can do so without social repercussions – in this instance, by making sure the wife does not notice. Yet this scene of male fantasy changes considerably when we view it from the Thracian woman’s perspective. An enslaved domestic laborer had to be aware of her enslavers’ movements at all times. If the female slaveholder became distracted, even for a moment, that enslaved woman might face sexual abuse from her male enslaver.

Aristophanic Thracian Girls

In *Acharnians*, *Wasps*, and *Peace*, Aristophanes articulates that Athenian men were sexually interested in enslaved women, providing some of our best evidence that domestic laborers were subjected to rape by citizens. In this final section, I contextualize the sexual abuse of these three Thracian women through a socio-historical lens, reflecting on the consistent representation of the victims, settings, and excuses portrayed in these scenes. By demonstrating the commonalities in slave rape not only in Aristophanic comedy but also in Athenian literature and epigraphy more broadly, I aim to show that, though Athenian social customs discouraged slaveholders from raping domestic laborers indiscriminately, male citizens nevertheless constructed specific scenarios to sexually abuse female slaves without repercussions. Our extant sources infrequently mention the sexual abuse of enslaved domestic laborers, but Aristophanic comedy nevertheless demonstrates that enslaved women were forced to navigate households where they had reason to fear sexual violence. In turn, the threat of rape must have had a profound influence on their emotions, health, and behavior.

In *Acharnians*, *Wasps*, and *Peace*, Aristophanes portrays three enslaved domestic laborers named Thratta as potential victims of sexual assault: Dicaeopolis fantasizes about catching Thratta stealing wood, Bdelycleon suggests that his father could punish Thratta for her mistakes completing housework, and the chorus anticipates kissing Thratta when their wives are bathing. As Mactoux has shown, the Athenians associated Thrace with violence and barbarity, which helped to justify their sexual oppression of Thracian women living in enslavement.⁸⁴ In enacting their slave trade, the Athenians regularly captured and purchased people from Thrace, the geographic region to the west of the Black Sea, and Thracians were a well-attested slave population in Athens.⁸⁵ Throughout Athenian literature, we hear stories about the ransoming of enslaved Thracians,⁸⁶ (prejudiced) accounts of Thracians selling their own children into slavery,⁸⁷ and

⁸² οὐ γὰρ ἔσθ’ ἡδίων ἢ τυχεῖν μὲν ἤδη ἵπαρμένα, Ar. *pax* 1140.

⁸³ τὸν τε Μανῆν ἢ Σύρα βωστρησάτω ἔκ τοῦ χωρίου, Ar. *pax* 1146. See MACTOUX 1999, 27.

⁸⁴ MACTOUX 1999, 31–33. For the rape of Thracian girls, see in particular Anac. fr. 417, which uses sexually violent imagery to describe breaking a Thracian filly (thereby likening Thracian women to animals).

⁸⁵ For an overview of scholarship on the Black Sea slave trade, see LEWIS 2011, 91–92.

⁸⁶ Antiph. 5.20.

⁸⁷ Hdt. 5.6.1.

jokes that Thracians fill the Athenian mills as chattel slaves.⁸⁸ Additionally, Athenian slaveholders routinely assigned ethnic names to enslaved people, such as Thraix for a man and Thratta for a woman.⁸⁹ References to enslaved domestic laborers named Thratta also extend beyond Aristophanic comedy into historical records that document the existence of enslaved women in Athens with this name, such as the “Thratta” held in enslavement by the freed woman Neaira.⁹⁰ Corroborating this association between enslaved people and Thracian women are the Attic stelae documenting the property confiscations of 415 BCE, where at least five women are labelled “Thratta,” alluding to their perceived ethnicity.⁹¹ Overall, Aristophanes’s scenes of rape in these three plays reflect a social reality where Thracian women, an attested group of enslaved people in Athens, were domestic laborers and vulnerable to rape.

Furthermore, Aristophanes consistently associates sexual assault with peacetime and leisure, reflecting a reality where such circumstances afforded male enslavers physical proximity and sexual access to their household slaves.⁹² Why was peace the best time to sexually abuse enslaved domestic laborers? We should first note that while engaged on campaigns soldiers were absent from their households and domestic slaves became accessible to them only after returning home. Secondly, as Hunt has demonstrated, the chaos of wartime made escape more accessible to enslaved people,⁹³ so slaveholders had to be especially mindful of how they wielded corporal violence: a male citizen in Aristophanes’s *Clouds* states that he cannot beat his slaves during wartime, while another in *Peace* asserts that the runaway slave stands to benefit from war by using the opportunity to escape.⁹⁴ Similarly, I suggest, Aristophanes associates raping Thracian girls with peace because peacetime afforded Athenian men a level of security that enslaved people would be less likely to successfully flee. Additionally, enslaved people were vulnerable to abuse while completing domestic work, such as weaving and cooking.⁹⁵ By working in the household, these women experienced sexual exploitation from their male enslavers because they were in close proximity to these men and any small mistake could be used as a justification for punishment. As demonstrated by Aristophanes, the rape of domestic laborers took place in household settings (as in *Wasps* and *Peace*) and elsewhere on an individual’s property (as in *Acharnians*). The fact that these assaults are offered as fantasies of peacetime and leisure should not dissuade us from also recognizing them as a reflection of reality. Enslaved women were forced to complete their domestic work while navigating the looming threat of sexual abuse.

However, Athenian men did not have unfettered access to enslaved women. Rather, they had to create specific scenarios to make this violence socially and legally acceptable. We saw that in *Wasps*, Aristophanes constructs the act of rape through the lens of punishment, complementing the idea that enslaved

⁸⁸ *Men. asp.* 242–45.

⁸⁹ As demonstrated by ROBERTSON 2008, esp. 81, citizens used this practice of naming enslaved people with ethnic markers to create ideological distance between themselves and the people they held in enslavement. VLASSOPOULOS 2010, esp. 130 challenges this view by arguing that the majority of enslaved people were assigned names that also applied to citizens. On ethnic slave names, including Thratta, see ROBERTSON 2008, 85–88; VLASSOPOULOS 2010; LEWIS 2011, 93–98; VLASSOPOULOS 2015, 106–11; FORSDYKE 2021, 94–95, 172.

⁹⁰ [Dem.] 59,35; 59,120; 59,124. In tallying the attested references to the Athenian slave name Thratta, Vlassopoulos 2010, 136 counts four attestations of a real slave named Thratta, five attestations of fictional slaves with this name, one attestation of a freed slave, two possible real slaves, and three women with unknown status.

⁹¹ *IG I³* 421,34, 421,35, 421,40, *IG I³* 422,195, 422,197 (see esp. LEWIS 2011, Appendix 1). For epigraphic and archaeological evidence of Thracian family groups located in Athens, see FORSDYKE 2021, 67, 177–79.

⁹² For the association between sex with enslaved women and peacetime, see also *Ar. ach.* 1147–49.

⁹³ HUNT 1998, 106–15.

⁹⁴ *Ar. nu.* 5–7, *pax* 451.

⁹⁵ See *Xen. oec.* 7,41 and 9,9–10.

people faced physical and sexual abuse for their perceived transgressions. Enslaved women are attested as victims of corporal punishment in other Athenian sources as well.⁹⁶ This is best demonstrated by the court case *On the Murder of Eratosthenes*, which portrays a male enslaver threatening an enslaved woman with a whipping or labor in the mills if she does not provide him with information about his own adulterous wife.⁹⁷ Further evidence for this phenomenon includes the threat of beatings and drownings in plays by Menander,⁹⁸ a graphic scene of punishment by whipping at a symposium recounted by Demosthenes,⁹⁹ and, on a public level, a law that specifies whipping as the punishment for a commercial transgression by an enslaved man or woman.¹⁰⁰ In sum, enslaved women experienced corporal punishment like their male counterparts, and their physical abuse also crossed into the realm of sexual assault, as evidenced by both *Wasps* and *Acharnians*.¹⁰¹

Considering the fact there was at least one law (i.e., the law of *hubris*) that prevented individuals from raping enslaved women who were owned by others, perpetrators of violence had to be able to justify their actions and make clear that their attacks were not prompted by a desire on their part to dishonor the woman's enslaver. The rape scene from the *Acharnians* reframes Dicaeopolis's culpability for attacking another man's slave by specifying that he caught Strymodorus's Thratta stealing wood at the time of the attack. Dicaeopolis can carry out this fantasy without guilt, not solely because the woman is enslaved,¹⁰² but because he is enacting a punishment for *her* transgression.¹⁰³ Enslaved people are frequently accused of theft in our sources, especially with regards to foodstuff.¹⁰⁴ An enslaved person caught stealing could expect to face physical violence, even from individuals who were not their own enslaver. This is affirmed by the court case *Against Nicostratus*, where Apollodorus describes how his opponent Nicostratus sent an Athenian boy into Apollodorus's garden to steal flowers so that Apollodorus, thinking he was a slave, would chain or beat him.¹⁰⁵ Though the deception was unsuccessful, Nicostratus's plan is an elaborate attempt to trick Apollodorus into committing an act of *hubris* against a citizen and thereby indict him. The case demonstrates that, while Apollodorus may have faced a *graphē hubreōs* for striking a citizen boy, he would have been unlikely to encounter the same consequences if he punished an enslaved person caught stealing. Therefore,

⁹⁶ On gender and punishment, see Xen. *oec.* 7,41, 9,15; HUNTER 1994, 172–73.

⁹⁷ Lys. 1,18. See FORSDYKE 2021, 129–31.

⁹⁸ Men. *dys.* 195–96, *epit.* 1063–74.

⁹⁹ Dem. 19,196–98; c.f. Aeschin. 2,4,153–57. See GLAZEBROOK 2021; KAMEN – LEVIN-RICHARDSON 2022; BREITENFELD, forthcoming.

¹⁰⁰ A 375/4 BCE Athenian law on the approvers of silver coinage (Agora Inventory I 7180, lines 30–32) stipulates whipping as an available punishment for an enslaved offender who refused to accept legal tender. For refusing to accept valid coins verified by the *dokimastēs* (approver), a citizen could be fined, but enslaved men and women could be beaten. On this law, see STROUD 1974; HUNTER 1994, 155–58; FORSDYKE 2021, 136–37, 196–97.

¹⁰¹ Though beyond the scope of this paper, Ar. *vesp.* 448–51 is also suggestive of rape as a form of corporal punishment against a male slave for stealing (cf. the parody of this scene at Theoc. *Id.* 5,116–19).

¹⁰² Pace SILK 1980, 132–33, as well as HALLIWELL 2002, 121, who suggests that this rape would be “an illegal act” if enacted in reality.

¹⁰³ As ROBSON 2018, 319 notes in the context of this passage, “A citizen’s punishment of a slave is difficult to cast as an act of *hybris*, for example, and a slave’s wrong-doing arguably justifies the use of force, *bia*.” HARRIS 2006, 329 similarly remarks that “sexual violence could be used as a form of punishment and not be considered *hybris*... had she [Thratta] been free, Dicaeopolis would not have been able to act the same way.”

¹⁰⁴ e.g., Ar. *plut.* 320,113–45, see also 26–27; *vesp.* 448–51; Pl. *leg.* 845a, 854d–e; Xen. *oec.* 14,2; IG II² 1362 (from around 350–300 BCE) says that the theft of wood in the sacred precinct of Apollo Erichthaseus is punishable for a slave with 50 lashes (a citizen is fined). As noted by FORSDYKE 2021, 205, when enslaved people stole from citizens, and particularly from their own enslavers, acts of theft could be reconceptualized as “justified reappropriation of the fruits of their labor.” On stealing as a contrary strategy, see also McKEOWN 2011, 158, 161; HUNT 2017.

¹⁰⁵ [Dem.] 53,16.

the act of theft in *Acharnians* is essential to understanding the framework for Dicaeopolis's imagined assault of Thratta because it provides justification for this act of violence against Strymodorus's slave.¹⁰⁶

Alternatively, the scenario described in *Acharnians* may denote an act of deception, as is also attested in *Peace*. While Dicaeopolis may be able to justify his rape of Strymodorus's Thratta with her theft, another possible reading of this scene is that Dicaeopolis is enacting this rape without Strymodorus's knowledge (a scenario that is perhaps more likely, given the violent vocabulary that suggests a spur-of-the-moment attack). Relying on the isolation of this rural location, Dicaeopolis may intend to commit this violent act in secret, suggesting an additional social loophole that citizen men may have relied on to rape enslaved people who did not belong to them. In *Peace*, the chorus makes clear that they picture 'kissing' Thratta only when their wife is not present (in this case, distracted by bathing). The passage suggests that citizen men preyed on enslaved domestic laborers in their wives' absence. This assertion is supported by many sources that attest to wives objecting to their husbands' unapproved sexual attentions towards enslaved women. As noted in the introduction to this chapter, the adulterous wife in *On the Murder of Eratosthenes* accuses her husband of urging her to leave the room so that he can make sexual advances on the domestic laborer,¹⁰⁷ while Plutarch recounts that the orator Gorgias's wife objected to his sexual interest (ἔρως) in a household slave.¹⁰⁸ A passage from Aristophanes's *Ecclesiazusae* also documents this phenomenon when the citizen woman Praxagora objects to enslaved women 'stealing' citizen men, stating that they should only be sexually involved with male slaves.¹⁰⁹ In *Peace*, Athenian men use secrecy to gain sexual access to enslaved people nominally under their wives' supervision. This suggests that enslaved women had to be particularly wary of sexual abuse when left alone with their male enslavers.

In conclusion, *Acharnians*, *Wasps*, and *Peace* show that Athens' rape culture was fully operational in the context of enslavement. All three of these Aristophanic scenes include an enslaved woman named Thratta, so I will conclude by offering a vignette that illustrates the danger that many enslaved domestic laborers in similar circumstances likely faced every day.¹¹⁰ In doing so, I hope to demonstrate that the rape fantasies of Aristophanes can provide insight into the lived experiences of enslaved women:

She was not born into enslavement, but after foreign slavers kidnapped her from her Thracian homeland she came to live in an unknown place in the household of a strange man and his wife. She did not speak the language when she first arrived, but she eventually recognized that when these people shouted 'Thratta!' they were calling for her. She was forced to perform household chores every day under the wife's supervision, such as monitoring the door and preparing food, but she had to be careful not to make mistakes – one wrong move, and she would face consequences. One time she accidentally burned the food and narrowly avoided being handed over to the man for punishment. She was safer when this man was out of the house, especially if he was away on a military campaign, but when he was home, she had to be wary of his wandering eyes and prodding hands. He would take every opportunity to touch her, especially if his wife was bathing or in another room. On occasion, these people would send her to complete tasks outside of the house, but this did not reduce the violence she experienced.

¹⁰⁶ Pace HALLIWELL 2002, 136 n. 6 who states that "it is hard to believe that rape was allowed in these circumstances." Pl. *leg.* 936c–e suggests that if a slave damages another person's property they could be handed over to that person for punishment, see FORSDYKE 2021, 224.

¹⁰⁷ Lys. 1,12.

¹⁰⁸ Plut. *Mor.* Loeb vol. II 144 B–C recounts Gorgias's wife being jealous of the slave girl, see BABBITT 1928.

¹⁰⁹ Ar. *eccl.* 722–24. For further attestations of citizen women objecting to their husbands' sexual interest in enslaved women, see Hom. *Od.* 1,428–33; Charit. 2,1,8–9. Theophr. *char.* 4,7 also suggests using secrecy to assault a female domestic laborer.

¹¹⁰ Though not a formal critical fabulation, this concluding section is inspired by the methodology of HARTMAN 2007, 2008. See also KAMEN – LEVIN-RICHARDSON 2022.

One time she was sent to gather firewood and came across another strange man who assaulted her and claimed she had been stealing his timber. She didn't tell anyone what had happened – who would believe her anyway?

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Rape Normalization and Menandrian Apologetics in Callimachus' *Acontius and Cydippe*¹

BRIAN MCPHEE

In this paper, I read the famous *Acontius and Cydippe* elegy from Book 3 of Callimachus' *aetia* (fr. 67–75 Pfeiffer/Harder = 166–174 Massimilla) as a document of ancient Greek rape culture – that is, as a poem that normalizes and even romanticizes a coercive style of male sexuality. Reading *Acontius and Cydippe* as a kind of rape narrative is not unprecedented, and, as we will see, it even has ancient antecedents; my primary contribution is rather to uncover an apologetic program underlying Callimachus' characterization of his protagonist. Relying on parallels with the highly stylized portrayal of rape in Menandrian New Comedy, I identify features of the Callimachean text designed to preserve readerly sympathy for Acontius despite his sexual aggression. This whitewashing represents another strand of rape culture, insofar as it serves to reduce the rapist's moral culpability. And yet from a different point of view, I will argue, we can recognize in the very fact that Callimachus felt the need to excuse Acontius' behavior some amount of moral discomfort with non-consensual sex.

My argument will proceed in two parts. First, I lay out the evidence for reading *Acontius and Cydippe* as a kind of Greek male rape fantasy that abets the norms of rape culture. Part II then turns to the Menandrian apologetic devices that I argue Callimachus uses to maintain audience identification with Acontius despite his quasi-criminal behavior. I conclude by reflecting on how Callimachus' characterization of his protagonist reflects the ambivalent attitudes toward consent that seem to have prevailed in the ancient Greek world.

Acontius and Cydippe as Greek male rape fantasy

I would like to begin broadly, with the disturbing sense that one often gets from studying ancient Greek materials that for Greek men, the rape of women and boys was something of a forbidden fruit: desirable per se, but legally and socially proscribed. A plain testimony to this fact comes in the thought experiment of the ring of Gyges featured in Book 2 of Plato's *Republic* (360b–c). There Socrates' interlocutor Glaucon imagines a scenario in which, via a magical ring that confers invisibility upon its wearer, a man could commit any crime he liked without fear of getting caught. He opines that if given such power, no man could resist the allure of a variety of transgressions, including, notably, “enter[ing] into houses and l[y]ing with whom he pleased” (εἰσιόντι εἰς τὰς οἰκίας συγγίγνεσθαι ὅτῳ βούλοιοτο).² In so doing, Glaucon sums up, such a man would be “conduct[ing] himself among mankind as the equal of a god” (πράττειν ἐν τοῖς ἀνθρώποις ἰσόθεον ὄντα).

¹ The idea for this paper was inspired by class discussion in my Ancient Greek Sexuality seminar at Indiana University, Bloomington, in Spring 2021. I am pleased to thank my students, as well as those who provided feedback on earlier versions of this piece: Patricia Rosenmeyer, Hannah Sorscher, the journal's anonymous reviewers, the audience at my talk at the 2022 meeting of the Society for Classical Studies (virtual), and the participants at the “Ancient Rape Cultures” conference at the Finnish Institute in Rome. Any remaining errors are mine alone.

² Text and translation from SHOREY 1937.

These comments are highly suggestive for the popular attitude toward rape,³ and the likening of an unpunishable rapist to a god must particularly remind us of the ubiquitous incidence of divine rape in the cycles of Greek mythology.⁴ Although such rapes were sometimes justified in theological terms as the means of siring the race of demigods (and thence the ancestors of many a Greek state or aristocratic family),⁵ the phenomenon of same-sex divine rapes, as in Zeus' rape of Ganymede, suggests that the begetting of noble lineages does not exhaust the full purpose of such myths. At some level, these stories represent male power fantasies: Zeus, like the everyman in Glaucon's thought experiment, does whatever he wants – up to and including the rape of powerless mortals – because no one can stop him.⁶

In many ways, Callimachus' story of Acontius and Cydippe represents a similar fantasy of divine rape, though partly translated into human terms. As we can reconstruct it from papyrological remains and later quotations and testimonia, especially a paraphrase by Aristaenetus (1, 10 = fr. 75b Harder),⁷ the elegy tells the story of Acontius, a much-desired young aristocrat from Ceos who becomes infatuated with the equally well-bred Cydippe of Naxos. For reasons never specified, Acontius does not try to court Cydippe in any ordinary way,⁸ but rather has recourse to a trick (τέχνην, fr. 67, 3; ἀπάτης, Aristaenetus 1, 10, 26) taught to him, the narrator tells us, by Eros himself: he inscribes an apple with an oath to the effect, "I swear to Artemis that I shall marry Acontius."⁹ When he rolls this apple toward Cydippe, she inadvertently binds herself before Artemis by pronouncing the oath inscribed thereupon. It subsequently transpires that when Cydippe's father Ceyx arranges for her to marry another man, on three separate occasions, she falls violently ill before her wedding, and the ceremony must be canceled. Naturally, Ceyx consults the oracle of Apollo, from whom he learns that Artemis is responsible for Cydippe's mysterious afflictions – punishments¹⁰ for the imminent violation of her involuntary oath to marry Acontius. Accordingly, their union is arranged post-haste, and Acontius, we are assured, would not have traded the joys of his wedding night for the world. The narrative ends by pointing the story's etiology: the couple's descendants will be the Acontiads, an illustrious Cean clan based at Iulis.¹¹

Earlier generations of critics once celebrated Callimachus' elegy as an unproblematic "Liebesgeschichte" on par with the romances of the Greek novel,¹² and it seems clear that this is indeed the kind of reading that the text itself invites us to adopt. More recent commentators, however, have been troubled by

³ Glaucon's argument is meant to represent the popular morality (358a–c). The man in the thought experiment is related to Plato's portrait of the tyrant, whose lifestyle of amoral self-indulgence is similarly framed in the myth of Er as the ill-advised fantasy of the unphilosophical everyman (*resp.* 10, 619a–d). For the *topos* connecting tyranny with rape, see, e.g., HOLT 1998, 225–37 (citing the Gyges passage at 226).

⁴ On the topic of divine rape in myth, see, e.g., POMEROY 1975, 11–12; ZEITLIN 1986; KEULS 1993, 47–56; cf. LEFKOWITZ 1993.

⁵ E.g., see [Hes.] *Sc.* 27–29 (with RUSSO 1950, ad 28); Corinna fr. 654, iii, 22–25, 44–48 *PMG* (with SKINNER 1983, 15). In general, see DOBLHOFFER 1994, 83–88; HARRIS 2006, 320–24.

⁶ For this aspect of divine rape myths, see, e.g., ZEITLIN 1986, 124; SKINNER 2014, 35.

⁷ For the relationship of Aristaenetus' letter to Callimachus' elegy, see, e.g., DIETZLER 1933, 27–42; HARDER 1993; see further the commentary on the relevant fragments in HARDER 2012, *passim*.

⁸ Perhaps because she was already engaged (HARDER 2012, 2, 558; cf. VAN OPHUIJSEN 1988, 92), though it is unclear how Acontius would know this; cf. Ovid (*her.* 21, 125–28), who draws attention to this gap in the narrative.

⁹ So Aristaenetus records the oath (μὰ τὴν Ἀρτέμιω Ἀκοντίῳ γαμοῦμαι, 1, 10, 37–38; see also Call. fr. 75a, 3–4 Harder = *dieg.* Z 3–4), though this precise formulation would not fit Callimachus' elegiac meter; on this issue, see BARCHIESI 1993, 355 n. 32. AR-RIGONI (2013, 509) argues that the oath's style, with its definitive γαμοῦμαι, reflects its writer's masculine, assertive perspective on marriage. Text and translation of Callimachus' fragments and testimonia are from HARDER 2012.

¹⁰ Or, perhaps, warnings; so, e.g., BOPP 1966, 1 ("mahnendes Zeichen"); cf. further HARDER 2012, 2, 598.

¹¹ For this genealogy as the elegy's *aition*, see HARDER 2012, 2, 542.

¹² See, e.g., ROHDE 1914, 93–95; FUSILLO 1989, 56–57.

Acontius' fundamentally coercive method of courtship, even if few have outright labeled what he does "rape".¹³ In fact, Callimachus' poem is atypical among ancient Greek rape narratives, in that the application of violence is here displaced from the rapist himself onto the gods.¹⁴ Nevertheless, Acontius' trick of the inscribed apple does extract an involuntary oath from Cydippe, who is thus "forced", in the words of Rosenmeyer, "to hand over her whole self, body and soul".¹⁵ Cydippe tries her best to resist Acontius, first by attempting to stop herself from pronouncing the final syllables of the oath¹⁶ and then by hiding her oath from her father.¹⁷ Her unwillingness, moreover, results in real physical harm, as Artemis ravages her body with intense illness to punish her attempted oath-breaking.¹⁸ Neither Cydippe nor her father consents to the match except under supernatural duress,¹⁹ and we may observe that the effect of Acontius' deception is precisely what we find in more standard cases of rape in Greco-Roman antiquity: Acontius renders Cydippe unmarriageable to any man but himself. It is also notable that the heroic dynasty that ensues from this union, the Acontiads, is, as mentioned earlier, a typical feature of myths of divine rape.²⁰

Beyond the coercive dynamic of Acontius' relationship to Cydippe, the poem itself reflects the norms of rape culture on a narratological level. As many critics have observed, Callimachus' elegy is written almost exclusively from the male point of view, inviting the narratee's emotional identification with Acontius as protagonist of the story rather than with Cydippe, his object.²¹ For instance, while Cydippe's subjectivity seems not to have featured much at all in the poem,²² we are treated to a tender depiction of Acontius' pining after her in the Cean countryside, complete with a lovesick soliloquy rendered in direct speech.²³ For the most part, we are left to infer Cydippe's feelings – in particular, her firm resolve not to marry Acontius – from her actions, including her willingness to endure horrific bouts of illness, apparently indefinitely, rather than reveal her oath to her family. The one glimpse of her emotional life that we are afforded – her shamefaced blush on throwing away the trick apple – is described in thoroughly erotic terms that once

¹³ E.g., KUHLMANN (2005, 28) recognizes that Cydippe's wedding is "im Grunde erzwungenen"; KÖVES-ZULAUF (2009, 19) refers to Acontius as "ein erotischer Erpresser"; RYNEARSON (2009, 357) refers to the "troubling one-sidedness of the love story of Acontius and Cydippe" and "the sense of dissatisfaction aroused by ... the elision of Cydippe's agency".

¹⁴ Cf. KÖVES-ZULAUF 2009, 37; see further KUHLMANN 2005, 19, on the elegy's "ritualistisch-magischen Götterverständnis".

¹⁵ ROSENMEYER 1996, 13.

¹⁶ Aristaenetus 1, 10, 40.

¹⁷ See ROSENMEYER 1996, 22–23; RYNEARSON 2009, 355–56 with n. 27; ARRIGONI 2013, 509–11. Cydippe's hiding of her oath (including, presumably, swearing her enslaved attendant to secrecy, as ROSENMEYER assumes) is comparable to the victim's concealment of her rape and resultant pregnancy in many ancient rape narratives (e.g., in myth: SCAFURO 1990, 126; DEACY 1997, 56), including in New Comedy (DOBLHOFFER 1994, 69–70; SCAFURO 1997, 273–78).

¹⁸ fr. 75, 12–19. These afflictions represent the cruel, unromantic counterpoint to Acontius' elegiac lovesickness. On their mirrored symptoms, see RYNEARSON 2009; see further KAZANTZIDIS 2014, whose medical reading of the poem turns precisely on Cydippe's lack of desire. For the elegy's subversion (or perversion) of amatory tropes, see SÁNCHEZ ORTIZ DE LANDALUCE 1994, 426–28.

¹⁹ In this respect it is instructive to compare the story of the Danaids, who (as one of the anonymous reviewers reminds me) are mentioned in the *aition* immediately prior to Cydippe's (fr. 65–66). The daughters of Danaus, too, were violently coerced into forced marriages, though unlike Cydippe, they discovered an equally violent means to escape their predicament.

²⁰ Thus ZIEGLER (1937, 32) compares the myths of Zeus' rapes elsewhere in Callimachus' oeuvre.

²¹ E.g., DIETZLER 1933, 42–44; ZIEGLER 1937, 31–36; KUHLMANN 2005, 24, 26, 28.

²² This absence is especially striking if we compare Cydippe to Pieria, the heroine of another story in *aetia* 3 (fr. 80–83b); see HARDER 2012, 2, 672–73. Cf. further Ov. *her.* 21, in which Cydippe gains a voice of her own (see, e.g., HINTERMEIER 1993, 133–37); Nicander ap. Ant. Lib. 1, in which the initially-parallel figure of Ctesylla follows a very different narrative arc (see, e.g., ZAFFAGNO 1976); and other elegiac love stories in which the beloved often does reciprocate desire (e.g., BOPP 1966, 10–11).

²³ Aristaenetus 1, 10, 58–79, reflected in fr. 73–74. For the disjunction in affective language and apostrophizing used of Acontius vs. Cydippe, see HARDER 1990, 304–09. The narrator's clinical description of Cydippe's illnesses is a particularly striking illustration of his lack of sympathy for her (e.g., HOWALD 1943, 36–37). Cydippe also seems to have been denied the opportunity for direct speech, except, perhaps, when she reads aloud the oath that Acontius has scripted for her (MASSIMILLA 2018, 51).

again accommodate her to the male gaze.²⁴ This moment encapsulates the perverse catch-22 that prescribes Cydippe's role in the sexual dynamics of the entire elegy: her resistance only makes her all the more appealing as a potential bride, in that it underscores the becoming modesty that should attach to any "decent girl" (σεμνή παρθένος, Aristaenetus 1, 10, 41) of her station.²⁵

The most explicit example of the narrator's tendency to privilege Acontius' point of view is his virtual invitation to the reader to identify with Acontius' elation on his wedding night:

οὐ σε δοκέω τημοῦτος, Ἀκόντιε, νυκτὸς ἐκείνης
 ἀντί κε, τῇ μήτρῃ ἦψαο παρθενίης,
 οὐ σφυρὸν Ἰφίκλειον ἐπιτρέχον ἀσταχύεσσιν
 οὐδ' ἂ Κελαινίτης ἐκτεάτιστο Μίδης
 δέξασθαι, ψήφου δ' ἂν ἐμῆς ἐπιμάρτυρες εἶεν
οἵτινες οὐ χαλεποῦ νήιδές εἰσι θεοῦ.

(Callim. *Aet.* fr. 75,44–49)

"Then, I deem, Acontius, that for that night, wherein you touched her maiden girdle, you would have accepted neither the ankle of Iphicles who ran upon the cornears, nor the possessions of Midas of Celaenae. And my verdict would be attested by all who are not ignorant of the stern god [i.e., Eros]."

The focus remains, as ever, on Cydippe's desirability as an erotic object, and with the first-person verb *δοκέω* ("I deem") and the excited apostrophe to Acontius (*Ἀκόντιε*), the narrator stages his own intellectual efforts to empathize with the joy that his protagonist must have felt in finally consummating his lust in this forced marriage.²⁶ Indeed, in the last two lines, this dubious pleasure is framed as a universally relatable experience for a presumably male audience acquainted with the highs and lows of love – the rapist's ill-gotten delights become paradigmatic of all Greek male sexual satisfaction.

It might be objected that my argument seems to be projecting modern preoccupations with consent onto an ancient text without such notions.²⁷ More particularly, one might be inclined to suspect that as ancient Greek marriage customs did not privilege the bride's consent in marrying the man selected for her by her *kurios*, it might make little practical difference to Cydippe if she was made to wed Acontius or some

²⁴ Aristaenetus 1,10,42–45. For the likelihood that Aristaenetus' description of Cydippe's blush reflects the contents of Callimachus' elegy, see, e.g., CAIRNS 2005, 198–200. CONSONNI (2000, 122 n. 14) calls the blush "praticamente l'unico accenno di vita psicologica della giovane"; see further DRAGO 2007, 204. Aristaenetus' description is focalized externally (n.b. *δοκεῖν*, 43); indeed, it is telling that in a poem in which even oxen can serve as internal focalizers (fr. 75,10–11; D'ALESSIO 1996, 1, 5–6), apparently Cydippe herself was never so privileged. For the emphasis on Cydippe as erotic object, see further fr. 67,1,8–14; 73,2; 75,44–49 (quoted below); Aristaenetus 1,10,1; 3–6; 59–61; 106–10.

²⁵ For this trope, see, e.g., KOST 1971, 187–88, 356–58. New Comedy often characterizes its rape victims similarly by noting signs of resistance (see n. 37 below). N.b. that Aristaenetus explicitly labels Cydippe's oath "involuntary and false" (*ἀκούσιόν τε καὶ νόθον*, 1, 10, 39). If *ἀκούσιον* reflects anything from Callimachus' text, then the poet may have underlined Cydippe's unwillingness via etymological wordplay linking Acontius' name to *ἀκόντως* or *ἀκοντί*, "unwillingly" (ROSENMEYER 1996, 15 n. 13); cf. CAIRNS (2002), who rather connects this same pun to Acontius' rejection of his own suitors (against this view, cf. KÖVES-ZULAUF 2009, 18–19). The other word Aristaenetus uses to describe the oath, *νόθον*, literally means "bastard," which is, notably, the standard byproduct of rape in Greek literature (see below on New Comedy).

²⁶ KUHLMANN (2005, 24) notes the narrator's "wink of complicity" ("augenzwinkernder Komplizenschaft") here. Despite what some scholars assume (e.g., see KÖVES-ZULAUF 2009, 28–29 with n. 34), there is in fact no indication in the text that Cydippe also enjoys her wedding night or that she reciprocates Acontius' love either now or later.

²⁷ See further the conclusion of the present article.

other strange man whom, presumably, she also did not love.²⁸ In fact, Cydippe's own actions in the narrative flatly contradict this assumption: whereas she participates (by all indications voluntarily) three times over in the weddings arranged by her father, we have seen that she staunchly resists Acontius' illegitimate suit, from the first moment she attempts to abort her involuntary oath on through the months and months (n.b. fr. 75, 17) in which she keeps this oath a secret from her father, even at the cost of enormous physical suffering that brings her to the brink of death (n.b. esp. fr. 75, 15).²⁹ I would add that the testimony of Ovid in his own retelling of the myth in *Heroides* 20–21 shows that for at least some in Greco-Roman antiquity, Acontius' actions could indeed be understood precisely according to the paradigm of rape. I cannot demonstrate this point at length here, but Ovid raises the idea that Acontius' trick amounts to rape again and again in these poems, even if his highly defensive Acontius is at pains to forestall this characterization.³⁰

In his comparison of the two treatments of the myth, Kuhlmann argues that Ovid's recourse to the language of rape simply clarifies the violence implicit in his Callimachean model.³¹ In fact, I contend that Callimachus already betrays an awareness of the problematic nature of Acontius' conduct insofar as his elegy takes pains to preempt the narratee's natural objections on precisely this score. To make this point, Part II will compare Callimachus' narrative with an ancient genre in which rape is regularly excused in much more obvious ways, namely, the New Comedy of Menander and its Roman reflexes in Plautus and Terence.³²

Rape apologetics in New Comedy and *Acontius and Cydippe*

Callimachus' elegy has often been likened to “the plots of thwarted love and a happy ending in New Comedy”,³³ but I argue that such sanguine formulations miss deeper correspondences in the strategies these works use to preserve audience sympathy for their young male protagonists despite their sexual aggression. Rape looms distressingly large in New Comedy – in fact, already in the Hellenistic period, the “rapes of girls” (β[ι]α- | σμους παρθ[έ]- | νων, Satyrus *vita Euripidis* fr. 39, VII, 8–10 Arrighetti) was recognized as a veritable genre feature, alongside such staple tropes as the conflicts between husband and wife, father and son, or slave and master.³⁴ Notably, Satyrus connects rape specifically to the play's *peripeteia* (τ[ὰ κ]α- | τὰ τὰς π[ερ]- | πετείας, 6–8); his testimony suggests that rape was a convenient plot device largely because the

²⁸ Cf. NIKITINSKI 1996, 128: “Auf Wunsch ihres Vaters sollte das Mädchen einen Jüngling heiraten, den sie nicht liebte.”

²⁹ Cf. ZIOGAS 2021, 145: “Acontius, probably more than her father, who arranges a marriage for his daughter, forces Cydippe to comply with his desire.” I must admit that Callimachus never clarifies whether Cydippe herself realizes that her maladies are the result of her attempted oath-breaking (cf. *Ov. her.* 20,93–116; 179–186; 21,9; 31–34; 153–56), so she may not be knowingly risking her health in order to resist Acontius' suit.

³⁰ N.b. the following diction in *Heroides* 20, likening Acontius' entrapment of Cydippe with an involuntary oath to rape: *crimina* (7), *rapuere* (37), *crimen* (38), *raptā* (48), *rapinae* (51), *crimine* (68), *iniuria* (93); and n.b. the *exempla* for his courtship that Acontius cites approvingly: Paris and Helen (49), Telamon and Hesione (69), and Achilles and Briseis (69). Cf. also the contrast Cydippe draws between persuasion and compulsion in her letter (21,125–32). Notably, Aristaenetus explicitly portrays the consummation of Acontius and Cydippe's marriage as rape (1,10,111), though he imagines mutual affections developing thereafter (111–23). But n.b. that we know that this section of Aristaenetus' narrative corresponds to nothing from the Callimachean original (DIETZLER 1933, 41); moreover, the epistolographer may simply be deploying the traditional trope of the bride's resistance to the groom on their wedding night (on which see, e.g., HARDER 2012 ad Call. fr. 110,13–14; GIBSON 2021, 181–83; and THIES, this volume) without necessarily intending to characterize the dynamics of Acontius and Cydippe's relationship as particularly coercive. For Aristaenetus' incorporation of non-Callimachean materials into his epistle, see further GALLÉ CEJUDO 1995, 584–87.

³¹ KUHLMANN 2005, esp. 40–42.

³² In using Plautus and Terence to reconstruct Menandrian New Comedy in this connection, I follow FANTHAM (1975, 44 n. 2).

³³ HARDER 2012, 2, 541. FRATANTUONO (2014, 28) even refers to “the Callimachean virtual New Comedy plot”.

³⁴ On rape in New Comedy, see, e.g., PIERCE 1997; SCAFURO 1997, ch. 6; JAMES 1998, eadem 2014; ROSIVACH 1998, 13–50, 146–49; SOMMERSTEIN 1998; LAPE 2001; LEISNER-JENSEN 2002; OMITOWOJU 2002, 169–203. For the Satyrus passage, see LEISNER-JENSEN 2002, 191–92.

shame and secrecy connected with it in ancient Greece and Rome could create the conditions for powerful moments of dramatic reversal and recognition.³⁵ Rape in these dramas serves, first and foremost, to bring about a surprising marriage between a young man and a young woman – surprising, that is, because it does not have the prior authorization of their fathers or guardians.³⁶ The rape also functions to produce a *nothos*, or child born out of wedlock,³⁷ whose eventual recognition as a legitimate citizen, the offspring of two citizen parents, will constitute a climactic point in the resolution of the drama.³⁸

Rape is thus inevitably connected to marriage and the reproduction of the citizen family, the hallmarks of a New Comedy “happy ending”, especially in the hands of Menander. And yet despite its utility as a plot device, rape was in reality a serious crime – a fact that the genre itself occasionally registers, as when Gorgias in Menander’s *Dyscolus* refers to rape as “something deserving of many deaths” (πρᾶγμα θανάτων ἄξιον | πολλῶν, 292–93).³⁹ The criminality of rape threatened to qualify the audience’s sense of a happy ending when the rapist marries his victim or fathers a recognized citizen child by her,⁴⁰ and thus ultimately to destabilize the very ideological foundations of the Menandrian project.⁴¹ To circumvent this existential problem, New Comic playwrights had to find ways to preserve the audience’s sympathy for the rapist by minimizing the severity of his transgression. The result was a whole panoply of conventional excuses for rape that served to mitigate the young man’s guilt in the eyes of the audience.

For instance, we find a stereotyped set of circumstances surrounding the rape itself: it is usually perpetrated at night, in the heady atmosphere of a festival, by a young man whose judgment is clouded by the effects of drink, passion, and youth itself.⁴² As Lape has demonstrated, this recurrent scenario is carefully constructed to reduce the rapist’s liability to legal prosecution for *hubris*: the cover of night obscures the social identity of his victim, and the impairment of his faculties means that he cannot form intent.⁴³ Notably, in some passages, knowing comments from characters in the drama point to an almost metatheatrical awareness of these conventions precisely as conventional. Thus Hegio in Terence’s *Adelphoe* can rattle off the circumstances of a rape in a one-line sketch: “Night, love, wine, youth induced him” (*persuasit nox, amor, vinum, adulescentia*, 470).⁴⁴ Even more strikingly, Onesimus in Menander’s *Epitrepontes* is able to surmise that a rape has been committed from clues of this very sort: when a baby turns up with his master Chari-

³⁵ For the victim’s need to keep her rape secret, see, e.g., Sissa 1990, ch. 8; see further James 2014, 30; n. 17 above.

³⁶ See Fantham (1975, 53–56) on this plot device, which represented one way for playwrights to realize “the romantic ideal of a love sealed by marriage” (56) in societies that normally practiced arranged marriages—though “love” in this context can refer only to the young man’s “overwhelming sexual passion” (Lape 2001, 96).

³⁷ The *nothos* is produced as a result of rape rather than consensual premarital sex in order to preserve the mother’s “respectability”; see, e.g., Fantham 1975, 53–54; Pierce 1997, 166, 178; Scafuro 1997, 233; Rosivach 1998, 14; Sommerstein 1998, 104–05. Indeed, the plays may include certain disturbing details from the assault, such as the ripping of the victim’s clothes or her emotional distress following the attack (Men. *epit.* 488–90), seemingly in order to assure the audience that the young woman resisted as a “good girl” should.

³⁸ A notable subtype of the marriage plot which also features a *nothos* is found in Menander’s *Epitrepontes*, Terence’s *Hecyra*, and possibly in Men. *fab. incert.* 6 Arnott. In these plays, rape does not lead to marriage, but rather a rape committed before a marriage initially threatens its stability by producing a child that was clearly conceived out of wedlock. Ultimately, however, it is revealed that the rapist was none other than the new husband himself, and thus the marriage is saved.

³⁹ On this passage, see, e.g., Brown 1991; Lape 2001, 89–92; Harris 2006, 313–14; idem 2023, 20–21. The text of Menander, Plautus, and Terence is from the Loeb Classical Library; translations are my own.

⁴⁰ For more on this tension in Menandrian New Comedy, see the lucid account in Lape 2001, 80–82.

⁴¹ Thus, e.g., James (1998) argues that Terence portrays particularly despicable rapes in the *Hecyra* and *Eunuchus* in order to critique Roman masculinity and marital ideology.

⁴² For festivals as settings of rape in New Comedy, see, e.g., Furley 2009; Clark 2019, 222.

⁴³ Lape 2001, 93–95. See further Scafuro 1997, 246–59.

⁴⁴ Lape 2001, 93.

sus' ring, Onesimus reasons, "He lost it at the time of the Tauropolia – during a night-festival with women. It stands to reason that this is a case of a girl's rape" (Ταυροπολίοις ἀπώλεσεν τοῦτόν ποτε | παννυχίδος οὔσης καὶ γυναικῶν. κατὰ λόγον | ἔστιν βιασμὸν τοῦτον εἶναι παρθένου, 451–53).⁴⁵ These passages take for granted the audience's familiarity with an already well-developed rhetoric of exculpation surrounding the portrayal of rape in New Comedy.

The scenario depicted in *Acontius and Cydippe* bears many points of comparison with the Menandrian pattern; perhaps most fundamentally, in both cases we find a "romantic" fantasy in which young men effectively bypass their bride's *kurios* to contract their own marriages, either by outright rape or by Acontius' more singular method.⁴⁶ Whether or not Callimachus' characterization of Acontius was directly inspired by Menander is open to question,⁴⁷ but the comparison is illuminating in any event because his elegy has recourse to many of the same tropes that are intended to "decriminalize" rape and rehabilitate the rapist's character. Naturally, Acontius' unique approach diverges from the New Comic scenario in several particulars; for instance, he may bind Cydippe with the oath at a festival, but he does not seem to be drunk and the time of day is not specified.⁴⁸ Nevertheless, here I point to five elements of the New Comic tropology of rape that I believe can shed light on the apologetic function of several features of Acontius' characterization.⁴⁹ After reviewing these tropes as they appear in New Comedy, I consider parallels in Callimachus' elegy.

1. The motif of the rapist's *erôs*. New Comic rapes are standardly motivated by erotic desire,⁵⁰ which virtually compels the young man's transgression; as Gomme and Sandbach observe, "Eros was recognized as a blinding and overmastering force that could sweep young men forward."⁵¹ Perhaps the most overt example of this excuse in the corpus of New Comedy comes from Terence's *eunuchus*. Here Chaerea's *amor* is explicitly framed as an exculpatory factor in evaluating his rape of Pamphila. Chaerea addresses the girl's guardian, Thais:

CHAEREA. *unum hoc scito, contumeliae
me non fecisse causa sed amoris. THAIS. scio,
et pol propterea magis nunc ignosco tibi.
non adeo inhumano ingenio sum, Chaerea,
neque ita imperita ut quid amor valeat nesciam.*
(Ter. *eun.* 877–81)

CHAEREA. Just know this: I did it not as an affront, but out of love. THAIS. I do know, and by Pollux, that is why I now pardon you all the more. My character is not so inhuman, Chaerea, nor am I so naïve as to be ignorant of the power of love.

⁴⁵ PIERCE 1997, 164; LAPE 2001, 93.

⁴⁶ Other parallels with New Comedy besides those delineated below include, e.g., Callimachus' androcentric presentation (cf., e.g., ROSIVACH 1998, 1), or Acontius' dread of revealing his desire to his father (Aristaenetus 1, 10, 52–54; D'ALESSIO 1996, 2, 478 n. 62), and perhaps also his subsequent withdrawal into the country (LEO 1898, 747; HUNTER 1985, 110). For further points of contact, see n. 17 above, 68 below; CAPOVILLA 1967, 2, 371–73; VAN OPHUIJSEN 1988, 93; HARDER 2012, 2, 548, 555, 573, 576.

⁴⁷ According to Athenaeus (11, 496e–f), Callimachus was professionally familiar at least with the work of Menander's rival Diphilus (NERVEGNA 2013, 56). For possible Callimachean allusions to Menander, see further CAPOVILLA 1967, 2, 368–71; THOMAS 1979, 180–87.

⁴⁸ N.b. that it is clear that Acontius knows the identity of his victim, as later he is able to inscribe her name upon the trees in his native Cean countryside (fr. 73).

⁴⁹ For a survey of the rapes in New Comedy, including the attendant circumstances and excuses, see esp. ROSIVACH 1998, 13–50, 146–49.

⁵⁰ N.b. Manilius *astron.* 5,472 (*raptasque in amore puellas*), from a sketch of Menandrian comedy.

⁵¹ GOMME – SANDBACH 1973, 33. See further LAPE 2001, 101–05.

Thais' unhesitating acceptance of this framing shows that "love" could credibly be invoked to excuse even so brazen a rape as Chaerea's,⁵² which is a rare instance of premeditated rape in the genre.⁵³

2. The divine will. The rapist may seek to pardon his behavior by suggesting that it was the will of the gods; a clear-cut example is the rapist Lyconides' claim in Plautus' *Aulularia*, "A god incited me – attracted me to her... I believe it was the gods' will; for if they hadn't willed it, it wouldn't have happened, I'm sure" (*deus mihi impulsor fuit, is me ad illam illexit... deos credo uoluisse; nam ni uellent, non fieret, scio*, 737, 742).⁵⁴ This rhetoric excuses the rapist by suggesting the irresistibility of his godsent passion and implying that his actions have divine approval.

3. Readiness to marry. Marriage is the standard remedy for rape in New Comedy,⁵⁵ and the rapist's willingness to "make things right" by agreeing to marry his victim constitutes a vital means of repairing his character in the eyes of the audience.⁵⁶ The importance of the rapist's marriage proposal is illustrated by a moment in Plautus' *Truculentus*. Callicles' posture toward Diniarchus, his daughter's rapist, turns on a dime when the young man offers to marry her: the father goes from threatening legal action to accepting the rapist as his son-in-law, albeit at the price of a reduced dowry, in the space of just a few lines (840-46).⁵⁷

4. The rapist's worthiness. The New Comic rapist is uniformly a young man from the leisured class, and his family's status represents an important consolation for his victim when they inevitably wed.⁵⁸ This reasoning is articulated explicitly in a passage from Terence's *Adelphoe*.⁵⁹ Here the old nurse Canthara reflects on Pamphila's rape by Aeschinus:

*e re nata melius fieri haud potuit quam factumst, era,
quando vitium oblatumst, quod ad illum attinet potissimum,
talem, tali genere atque animo, natum ex tanta familia.*

(Ter. *Ad.* 295–97)

As it stands, it couldn't have turned out better than it did, mistress, given that the violation was committed, that he of all people was the one involved – such a fine young man, of such good breeding and character, from such a good family.

⁵² Thais' acceptance of this excuse may owe partly to self-interest, as she will make an alliance with Chaerea's family (cf. ROSIVACH 1998, 47). Nevertheless, this interchange shows that Chaerea's excuse could at least be considered plausible.

⁵³ N.b. that Chaerea is not attributing his actions to a lapse of reason in the heat of passion, but is rather denying that his intent was to commit a crime of *hubris* (SCAFURO 1997, 226–28; HARRIS 2006, 326–27).

⁵⁴ On this passage, see ROSIVACH 1998, 14–16. In fact, the audience knows from the prologue that the Lar of the victim's household has indeed intervened to see her married to Lyconides, although the Lar does not claim responsibility for inciting the rape itself (23–33).

⁵⁵ As already Plutarch (*mor.* 712c) observed. On the legal background of this remedy, see, e.g., SCAFURO 1997, 238–46.

⁵⁶ See DOBLHOFFER 1994, 59–62; HARRIS 2006, 327–28.

⁵⁷ On this exchange, see JAMES 1998, 33 n. 17, 35–37; ROSIVACH 1998, 33–35. For another example of this trope, from Terence's *Adelphoe*, see *ibid.* 16–20.

⁵⁸ Cf. Menander's *heros*, which seems to have staged a converse scenario with a tellingly opposite reaction: when a lowly slave falsely confesses to being the rapist, the victim's mother is highly displeased (arg. 8-10 with OMITOWOJU 2002, 192).

⁵⁹ On this passage, see HARRIS 2006, 325–26.

Sostrata, Pamphila's mother, immediately agrees with this assessment.⁶⁰ This passage spells out what is usually implicit in Menandrian theater: the victim's marriage into the rapist's bourgeois family frequently represents an ascent on the socioeconomic ladder.⁶¹

5. The rapist's self-remonstrance. Although New Comic rapes are typically constructed so as to reduce the rapist's criminal culpability, the rapist is nevertheless made to express a winning remorse for his actions.⁶² For example, in the expository prologue of Menander's *Samia*, Moschion is too ashamed to specify precisely how he has become a father, saying only: "The girl got [pregnant]" (ἐκύησεν ἡ παῖς, 49).⁶³ A much more extended staging of a rapist's guilty conscience is provided by Charisius' self-haranguing soliloquy in Menander's *Epileptontes* (878-931). To summarize this lengthy scene: Charisius is touched by his wife Pamphile's steadfast devotion to him despite his readiness to leave her for having given birth to a *nothos* (unbeknownst to him, his own child). Charisius "reviles himself vigorously" (λοιδορεῖτ' ἐρρωμένως | αὐ]τῷ, 899-900) for his callousness, even though he admits that he had "done such a deed [him]self and become the father of a bastard child" (τοιοῦτον ἔργον ἐξαιργασμένος | αὐτὸς γεγονώς τε παιδίου νόθου πατήρ, 895-96). As with Moschion in *Samia*, Charisius' language is evasive, but the ἔργον in question must consist at least partly of the rape he perpetrated (against another woman, as he thinks).⁶⁴ As James notes, Charisius' prolonged self-reproach is designed to rehabilitate his character in the eyes of the audience following the revelation that he is in fact a violent (488-90, 526-29) rapist.⁶⁵

If we now turn back to Callimachus, it is clear that his elegy is nowhere as explicit in excusing its protagonist's actions as the passages from New Comedy surveyed above.⁶⁶ Nevertheless, in view of this sketch of Menandrian rape apologetics, several features of Callimachus' narrative appear in a new light. For instance, we immediately find intimations of three of these conventional excuses for rape clustered together in the elegy's extant opening:

Αὐτὸς Ἔρως ἐδίδαξεν Ἀκόντιον, ὁππότε καλῇ
ἦθετο Κυδίππῃ παῖς ἐπὶ παρθενικῇ,
τέχνην—οὐ γὰρ ὄγ' ἔσκε πολύκροτος—ὄφρα λέγοι
τοῦτο διὰ ζῶης οὔνομα κουρίδιον.

(Callim. *Aet.* fr. 67,1-4)

Eros himself taught Acontius, when the boy burned with love for the beautiful girl Cydippe, his tricks – for he was not very cunning – in order that ... all through his life ... that lawful name.

⁶⁰ Ter. *Ad.* 298.

⁶¹ For the democratic theme of cross-class marriage in Menander, see LAPE 2004, 24-30.

⁶² JAMES 1998, 37.

⁶³ Such evasive language represents yet another New Comic strategy for downplaying the severity of rape. Closely related is the use of euphemism; see Hermog. *inv.* 200-01 Rabe (= Men. *synaristosae* fr. 1 Arnott, the model for Plaut. *cist.* 89-93) with LEISNER-JENSEN 2002, 179-80, 182-83.

⁶⁴ It is often argued that Charisius' guilt concerns his siring of a *nothos* rather than the rape itself (e.g., KONSTAN 1995, 146-52; PIERCE 1997, 166; OMITOWOJU 2002, 178-82; cf. GARDNER 2012, 133-34), but lines 895-96 could be taken to encompass both actions (n.b. τε connecting the participial phrases). For the separability of these issues, see further the conclusion of this article.

⁶⁵ JAMES 1998, 44. See further, e.g., GOLDBERG 1986, 151-52; cf. GARDNER 2012, 133-34 with n. 43.

⁶⁶ Cf. Ov. *her.* 20, which converts several elements of the Callimachean narrative into just these sorts of arguments (e.g., see KENNEY 1970, 393-94).

Acontius' lust is immediately linked to the divine; in fact, the trick by which he ensnares Cydippe cannot be attributed to Acontius himself, but only to his patron deity, Eros.⁶⁷ Together with the emphasis on the ardor of Acontius' passion, which recurs throughout the elegy,⁶⁸ this detail functions to construct the same argument we have seen in New Comedy: Acontius could hardly have helped himself in the face of his irresistible, even godsent desire.⁶⁹ We may also note that Callimachus' Acontius longs specifically for a lawful (κουρίδιον)⁷⁰ and lifelong (διὰ ζωῆς) marriage to Cydippe – “honorable” intentions that literally legitimate his erotic desire.

The fourth rape excuse identified above, the rapist's worthiness as a marriage-connection, finds its first expression in the very next lines of the elegy, which stress that Acontius and Cydippe are equally well-bred and desirable (fr. 67, 5–8) – “both beautiful stars on their islands” (καλοὶ νησάων ἀστέρες ἀμφοτέρω, 8).⁷¹ But the most explicit articulation of this argument occurs in the oracle scene. When Apollo counsels Cydippe's father to fulfill his daughter's oath and marry her to Acontius,⁷² the god tries to preempt Ceyx's natural objections to this coerced match with this very justification (n.b. γάρ):

ὦ Κήρυξ, ἀλλ' ἦν με θέλῃς συμφράδμονα θέσθαι,
 . .]γ. . τελευτήσεις ὄρκια θυγατέρος·
 ἀργύρῳ οὐ μόλιβον γὰρ Ἀκόντιον, ἀλλὰ φαεινῷ
 ἤλεκτρον χρυσῷ φημί σε μειζέμεναι.
 Κοδρείδης σύ γ' ἄνωθεν ὁ πενθερός, αὐτὰρ ὁ Κεῖος
 γαμβρὸς Ἀρισταίου [Ζη]γὸς ἀφ' ἱερέων
 Ἴκμιου...

(Callim. *Aet.* fr. 75,28–34)

But, Ceyx, if you want to make me your counsellor ... you will fulfil your daughter's oath; for I tell you that you will not be mixing Acontius as lead with silver, but as electrum with shining gold. You, the father-in-law, are a descendant of Codrus, he, the Cean son-in-law, of the priests of Aristaeus Zeus the Icmian...

In other words, like Ceyx himself, the narratee is meant to rest assured that Cydippe and her father should have consented to this match even if it were not being forced upon them.⁷³

Finally, in the famous scene of Acontius' pining for Cydippe among the trees in the countryside on Ceos, we have an example of our fifth conventional excuse: the rapist's self-reproaches. Acontius' soliloquy

⁶⁷ We may further note that the gods Artemis and Apollo are instrumental in effectuating the forced marriage.

⁶⁸ See further fr. 70; 73–74; 75, 44–49, 53, 75; Aristaenetus 1, 10, 14–20, 47–52, 72, 75–81, 106–10. Acontius' resolution to die if he cannot be with Cydippe (Aristaenetus 1, 10, 20–21; cf. 71–73; see HARDER 1993, 8) resonates with the hyperbole typical of the New Comic *adulescens amans* (on this trope, see, e.g., DUTSCH 2012).

⁶⁹ Notably, like Chaerea in Terence's *Eunuchus* (n. 53 above), Acontius entraps Cydippe through a trick that requires careful planning (fr. 67, 1–3); his zealous “love” does not preclude a certain degree of rationality.

⁷⁰ On this word, see CAIRNS 2002; GIUSEPPETTI 2019, 57–58.

⁷¹ The poem seems to have continued by comparing the high number of suitors attracted to both Cydippe and Acontius (fr. 67,9–70). For the “like with like” theme, see further Aristaenetus 1,10,1–3; 93–95.

⁷² Apollo's language of advice (συμφράδμονα, fr. 75, 28; cf. HARDER 2012, ad loc.) serves to mystify Ceyx's acquiescence to the oath as though it were a matter of persuasion rather than force; cf. SÁNCHEZ ORTIZ DE LANDALUCE 1995, 90.

⁷³ Cf. KÖVES-ZULAUF 2009, 37–39. Unlike many of her New Comedy analogues, Cydippe is already high-class, but Acontius still represents a worthy match for her. Cf. Helius' apology for Hades' rape of Persephone in the *Homeric hymn to Demeter* (82–87, with HARRIS 2006, 324).

on this occasion, as preserved by Aristaenetus, includes a lengthy apostrophe to Cydippe (1,10,61–74) that effectively evinces his concern for her welfare and his guilt for inciting Artemis' wrath against her; he even suggests that he should be punished in her place. This lovesick soliloquy represents a dramatic touch in Callimachus' elegiac narrative, and I would read it particularly in light of Charisius' self-reproof in Menander's *Epileptontes*, cited above: both passages seem designed to distance their speakers from the image of entitled selfishness that sexual coercion might otherwise suggest by proving their moral feeling and the sincerity of their love. Thus from Acontius' godsent trick to his guilty conscience, all of the elements considered here correspond to generic excuses for rape in Menandrian New Comedy and can be plausibly read as serving the same function in Callimachus, namely, to maintain the narratee's sympathy for the protagonist of the "love story", despite his status as a rapist.

Conclusion

I have suggested that Callimachus' *Acontius and Cydippe* can be read as a document of rape culture in at least two important respects: first, it presents a romanticized fantasy of marital rape abetted by the gods; and second, its subtle program of Menandrian apologetics seeks to minimize the moral salience of Acontius' sexual violence, in order that the narratee may comfortably identify with his erotic satisfaction at the story's denouement. Even so, I would like to close by observing that the attitudes toward consent that drive this narrative ultimately prove ambivalent, in that the poet's efforts to ameliorate his protagonist's behavior presuppose that it requires rehabilitation in the first place. If we are willing to squint, then, we can see in Callimachus' authorial strategies a tacit admission that his narratees would ordinarily take the immorality of Acontius' rape for granted; they must be convinced to do otherwise. It turns out that in this instance, at least, the complicity cultivated by rape culture is hardly natural, but actually requires a great deal of poetic ingenuity to maintain. Indeed, in its attempt to script its readers' response, Callimachus' elegy proves almost as manipulative as Acontius' apple itself. To recover a sense of horror at the violence subtending this "love story", we must follow Cydippe's lead (and that of feminist reader-response criticism) and resist these manipulations as much as we can by reading this poem very much against the grain.⁷⁴

My argument has implications for the broader debate on Greek attitudes toward consent, to which I can only gesture here. It has been argued that, unlike us, the Greeks were relatively unconcerned with the consent of the female rape victim herself; their anxieties rather centered around the potential for illicit sex (whether consensual or not) to produce illegitimate offspring that would adulterate lines of inheritance and citizenship rolls.⁷⁵ This thesis may be true from a socio-legal standpoint, even if it ignores the probable perspective of the rape victims themselves, and of women more generally.⁷⁶ But what is so interesting about *Acontius and Cydippe* is that here we have a rape scenario in which the issue of consent can be cleanly disentangled from concerns over *nothoi*: in this exceptional narrative, Acontius' coercion and the harm that Cydippe suffers remain decoupled from the physical act of intercourse all the way up until the "happy ending" marked by their wedding night. The fact that Callimachus still goes out of his way to apologize for

⁷⁴ Cf. THORSEN (2019, 137) for the idea that Callimachus' story "may in fact have run completely differently, or may include, within itself, its own counter-tale" from Cydippe's perspective.

⁷⁵ See, e.g., DOBLHOFFER 1994, 106–11; OMITOWOJU 2002, 230–33. Cf. HARRIS (2006, ch. III.2), who argues that the injury entailed by sexual violence had more to do with encroachments upon the *kurios*' authority over his womenfolk than with the production of *nothoi* (316). Cf. further idem (2015, 300–01) for situations where consent does make a legal difference.

⁷⁶ JAMES 2014, 24–26.

Acontius suggests a defensiveness and thus discomfort surrounding non-consensual sex per se, irrespective of fears over *nothoi*, even in this male-authored and exceedingly male-identified text.⁷⁷

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⁷⁷ It might be objected that, from an ancient Greek male perspective (cf. HARRIS' view, n. 75 above), the party whose consent is violated is Ceyx, as *kurios*, rather than Cydippe herself. Ceyx's objections are indeed countenanced by the narrative (fr. 75,28–31), but I find it significant that in his apostrophe, Acontius' guilt is directed entirely toward Cydippe, not toward her father or even the "other man" (or men) to whom she is betrothed (though, admittedly, Acontius is also ashamed to face his own father). Doubtless different readers will have responded to the text in different ways, but to me, the surviving fragments and testimonia frame Cydippe as Acontius' primary victim.

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RAPE NARRATIVES IN ROMAN LITERATURE

Medusa in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*: Refracted Rapes¹

SIMONA MARTORANA

Introduction: Rape in the *Metamorphoses* and beyond

Wouldn't the worst be, isn't the worst, in truth, that women aren't castrated, that they have only to stop listening to the Sirens (for the Sirens were men) for history to change its meaning? You only have to look at the Medusa straight on to see her. And she is not deadly. She is beautiful and she is laughing. Men say that there are two unrepresentable things: death and the feminine sex. [...] They need to be afraid of us. Look at the trembling Perseus moving backward towards us, clad in apotropes. What lovely backs! Not another minute to lose. Let's get out of here.²

This passage from Hélène Cixous' famous essay, 'The Laugh of the Medusa', articulates men's stereotypical perception of women as dangerous and mysterious. A dark continent and alterity, women need to be controlled so that their negative energy can be channelled, their destructive potential annihilated.³ Medusa is perhaps the most famous example of how monstrous femininity has been created and accordingly appropriated and mastered by men.⁴ Originally a beautiful maiden, then raped by the god of the sea Neptune, Medusa is ultimately *punished for having undergone sexual assault* in the sanctuary of a virgin goddess, Athena (Minerva for the Romans).⁵ Medusa is neither the first nor the last victim of rape to be stigmatised for being an unwilling and unguilty target of sexual violence. The shame of rape causes Medusa to be transformed into a horrible being, a monstrous alter-ego of what she used to be. This rape has been the subject of various narratives, which are spread over time and across various texts. One of these accounts can be found in the *Metamorphoses* by the Roman poet Ovid (43 BC–17 AD).

Rich in mythological narratives, multi-layered and polyphonic, Ovid's *Metamorphoses* is an extremely complex poem, and this complexity adds a variety of temporal and spatial dimensions to its combination of diverse literary genres. Among the motifs that feature in the *Metamorphoses*, rape is one of the most

¹ Many thanks to Elina Pyy for her invitation to contribute to this volume, and to the audience at the "Ancient Rape Cultures: Greek, Roman, Jewish, Christian" conference for their comments and questions. I also owe a debt to Jacqueline Fabre-Serris, Miriam Kamil, and Amy Richlin (who acted as an external reviewer) for reading and providing insightful feedback at various stages of the process. Obviously, I am responsible for any errors, omissions or inaccuracies. Finally, I thank the Alexander Von Humboldt Foundation for providing me with financial support.

² CIXOUS 1976, 885.

³ "Men have still everything to say about their sexuality, and everything to write. For what they have said so far, for the most part, stems from the opposition activity/passivity, from the power relation between a fantasized obligatory virility meant to invade, to colonize, and the consequent phantasm of woman as a 'dark continent' to penetrate and to 'pacify'. (We know what 'pacify' means in terms of scotomizing the other and misrecognizing the self)"; CIXOUS 1976, 877.

⁴ See e.g. ZAJKO – LEONARD 2006; MORSE 2018, 176–93.

⁵ For the myth of Medusa, see *RE* VII 2, col. 1630–56, s.v. "Gorgo" (WEISS).

prominent.⁶ After the primeval chaos, and the formation and establishment of Olympian power, the poem features the episode of Apollo and Daphne, which is essentially an attempted rape (1,452–567). This initial rape is followed by two other rapes, that of Io by Jupiter (1,568–600) and that of Syrinx by Pan (1,689–712), which establish a motif that will recur throughout the poem.⁷ As rape characterises more than fifty of the tales, female characters in the *Metamorphoses* appear to be helpless, vulnerable and passive. Rape has been a central element in the interpretation of the Ovidian poem in the last three decades, in particular informing feminist readings of the *Metamorphoses*.

Specifically, the traditional opposition between an optimistic and a pessimistic approach to the *Aeneid* – and Vergilian poetry as a whole – has inspired Ovidian scholars to apply similar categories to the *Metamorphoses*.⁸ The dialectic between optimistic and pessimistic views evolved into the dichotomy between resisting and releasing readings of the *Metamorphoses* (and Ovidian poetry more broadly), which build upon feminist interpretations. However, as Alison Sharrock points out, the borders between these conflicting readings (pessimistic and optimistic; resisting and releasing) are permeable.⁹ On the one hand, the “resisters” see it as highly problematic to free and recover the voices of women within Ovid’s texts from the constraints of a reality dominated by patriarchal discourse; yet they also acknowledge that a deeper exploration of the representations of female figures within Ovidian poetry may lead to a greater awareness of sexual harassment and gender inequality, as well as contributing to the contemporary feminist debate. On the other side, the “releasers” argue that female voices can find a niche, a room of their own (to readapt an expression from Virginia Woolf) within Ovid’s writings, and thus indeed be released; concurrently, they acknowledge the precariousness and fragility of this hermeneutical operation, which might lead to distortions of the texts, as well as anachronistic views.¹⁰ When it comes to rape, alternative readings have characterised the scholarly debate.¹¹ In an influential article, Amy Richlin interprets violence against women as an articulation of Ovid’s sadistic and pornographic eye.¹² Contrary to this view, other scholars have read the presence of the female perspective that is often featured in rape narratives as evidence of Ovid’s “empathy” towards women.¹³ Between these two extreme sides of the spectrum, more moderate interpretations see rape and violence against women in the *Metamorphoses* as particularly problematic, both from the perspective of the authorial persona recounting it and from that of the female victim.¹⁴

As well as being interrogated through feminist lenses, rape in the *Metamorphoses* has been navigated through other hermeneutical paths. Historicist approaches read it vis-à-vis its contemporary sociopolitical

⁶ CURRAN 1978, 213–41; ZISSOS 1999, 97–113; MATZ 2022, 47–65.

⁷ “In the *Metamorphoses*, the rape and subsequent death of Daphne initiate a series of rapes and gruesome metamorphoses that receive lurid description in the course of the poem”; KEITH 2000, 122.

⁸ The original dialectic between a pro-Augustan and an anti-Augustan interpretation of the *Aeneid* has subsequently developed into an opposition between “the optimistic European school” and “the pessimistic Harvard school”: see JOHNSON 1976, 8–15; also LYNE 1987, PUTNAM 1995; PERKELL 1997, 257–86; SCHMIDT 2001, 145–71; CLARK 2017, 57–61.

⁹ SHARROCK 2020, 37: “Both the optimistic and the pessimistic responses to the *Metamorphoses* are valid readings of the poem. Often, however, our readings need to acknowledge both possibilities at once and to accept that the coexistence of objectification and empathy should make it impossible for us either to convict or to exonerate the poet”; also SALZMAN-MITCHELL 2005, 18–21; MCAULEY 2016, 16–18.

¹⁰ SHARROCK 2020, 33–53; for some earlier references, see SHARROCK 2002, 95–107; 2011, 55–77.

¹¹ For an updated discussion, see RANGER 2023, 33–36.

¹² RICHLIN 2014, 155: “The pornographic model, then, allows us to take Ovid’s rapes literally; to realize that they are, if not the whole text, an important part of it, not to be ignored; and to consider what we want to do with a canon that includes many such texts, finally weighing their hurtfulness in with their beauty” (see also the essays in RICHLIN 1992).

¹³ See HEATH 1992, with SALZMAN-MITCHELL 2005, 49; and FABRE-SERRIS 2018, 127.

¹⁴ SHARROCK 2020, 33–53.

context, whereas narratological readings interpret episodes of rape as motors that drive the narrative.¹⁵ For instance, Apollo's attempted rape of Daphne initiates a series of episodes concerning relationships between gods and mortals, or demi-gods and minor deities; in Book 5, Pluto's rape of Proserpina (which is told by an internal narrator, the Muse Calliope; cf. 5,341–571) produces a long chain of events, as well as inset narratives.¹⁶ Building upon and combining these interpretations of rape within the *Metamorphoses*, in the remainder of this essay I focus on the episode of Medusa, which – as I argue – features not one but two rapes: the first, perpetrated by Neptune, is real and evident; the second, which is articulated by Perseus' beheading, is more implied and metaphorical. This analysis sheds light on how Ovid constructs Perseus' attack not only as a generic act of violence, but also as sexual assault.

With its profusion of (sexual) violence and brutality, the Ovidian episode of Medusa exemplifies the idea of “rape culture” as it has been conceptualised in the last two-three decades.¹⁷ In particular, I draw on recent works that have considered sexual assault and harassment (as well as related behaviours which can be grouped under the umbrella phrase of “sexual violence”) vis-à-vis racial and socioeconomic factors.¹⁸ The notion that “a rape culture is one that normalises and excuses rape”, where the “desires of privileged aggressors are prioritised over the comfort, safety, and dignity of marginalised populations that are seen as targets, as prey”, resonates in the rape/s of Medusa, as told by Ovid.¹⁹ Medusa's narrative features the rape, the undeserved punishment and the brutal killing (a second act of quasi-sexual violence) of a marginalised woman. Indeed, Medusa's rape is set in Northwest Africa, in a region (roughly present-day Libya) that was considered remote, inhospitable and dangerous. Resonating with Vergil's depiction of Dido as an African, Carthaginian, exotic queen (cf. especially *Aeneid* 1 and 4), this location contributes to the representation of Medusa as an alterity, both in terms of spatial distance and her monstrosity.²⁰ Accordingly, Medusa is represented as foreign, alien and minoritarian by Ovid – and could also have been perceived as such by his Roman readers.²¹ Thus, Perseus' assault articulates various aspects of sexual violence, and rape culture more broadly, that are characteristic of Roman society. Concurrently, the Medusa episode compels us to reflect upon the role of women, and the meaning of gendered violence, within the Ovidian poem.²²

The rapes of Medusa

When analysing rapes in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, scholars have observed that Ovid usually does not describe the sexual assault in much detail.²³ This lack of specificity may lead to passing mentions of rape,

¹⁵ For “historicist” approaches, see KEITH 2000; NGUYEN 2006, 75–112; MATZ 2022, 47–65; for narratological and metaliterary approaches, see COWAN 2020, 80–102; also ZISSOS 1999, 97–113; MOWER RUFO 2016, 203–40.

¹⁶ ZISSOS 1999, 97–113.

¹⁷ See BUCHWALD – FLETCHER – ROTH 1993; FRIEDMAN – VALENTI 2008.

¹⁸ NICHOLLS 2021.

¹⁹ NICHOLLS 2021, 26.

²⁰ See GIUSTI 2018.

²¹ For a recent discussion on how “social and economic dynamics of enslavement and sex work” pertain “to any discussion of Ovid's presentation of gendered sexual violence”, and how that sexual violence reflects on Ovid's (potential) readership, see RANGER 2023, 36.

²² In ancient Mediterranean societies, rape and violent acts were perceived and conceptualised in different ways according to the specific sociopolitical and cultural context. In the Roman world, rape could cover a wide range of offences and violent acts: see NGUYEN 2006, 75–112; MATZ 2022, 47–48.

²³ According to CURRAN (1978, 214, 216–17), this is part of Ovid's narrative strategy. RICHLIN 2014 (140) argues that detailed violence is a substitute for detailed descriptions of rape, as the case of Philomela exemplifies (RICHLIN 2014, 140–43).

which occupy one or two lines, as is the case for the rapes represented on Arachne's tapestry (6,108–28).²⁴ In other cases, episodes which do not openly feature rapes are thematically and intratextually (or intertextually) connected to rape narratives. For instance, Alicia Matz has noted that the episodes of Romulus and Caesar close to the end of the poem recall, in terms of language and motifs, the rape of Proserpina in Book 5 (341–571).²⁵ Leo Curran listed some instances of metaphorical rapes, where rape is not – or not only – enacted but implied. One example is Tereus, who rapes Philomela both physically and metaphorically: first, when he fantasises about rape in his head; and second, when he mutilates her by cutting out her tongue after his sexual assault.²⁶ Similar to Philomela, Medusa is raped twice: the first rape is concretely enacted by Neptune, in Minerva's temple (4,797–801); the second is more implicit and involves another kind of violence, namely Perseus' murder by his sword (4,782–86).

That Medusa, like Philomela, undergoes a pseudo-sexual assault by Perseus, along with physical mutilation, is also suggested by the textual and thematic parallels with other rape narratives, particularly the episode of Thetis in Book 11 (216–65). By building upon my recent reading of Thetis' rape by Peleus vis-à-vis Medusa's narrative,²⁷ I show that the parallels between these two figures further suggest that Perseus' attack on Medusa does not simply represent a generic act of violence, but specifically denotes sexual assault. The *double* rape and the dominant context of (sexual) violence against a minoritarian, marginalised woman such as Medusa further encourage us to interpret the narrative as an expression of (Rome's) rape culture.

From a narratological point of view, the rape of Medusa shows what can be defined as a hybrid focalisation.²⁸ Told by Perseus through indirect speech, the narrative is eventually recounted from the perspective of the male hero, but is in fact rearranged by the primary narrator, namely Ovid's poetic persona: this focalisation enhances Medusa's passivity and helplessness. Zooming in to Perseus' journey, the first part of the narrative emphasises the hostility of the landscape, which functions as a background for Perseus' deeds, along with its alterity and otherness.

*narrat Agenorides gelido sub Atlante iacentem
esse locum solidae tutum munimine molis;
cuius in introitu geminas habitasse sorores
Phorcidas, unius partitas luminis usum;
id se sollerti furtim, dum traditur, astu
supposita cepisse manu perque abdita longe
deviaque et silvis horrentia saxa fragosis
Gorgoneas tetigisse domos, passimque per agros
perque vias vidisse hominum simulacra ferarumque
in silicem ex ipsis visa conversa Medusa.*

(Ov. *met.* 4,772–81)

²⁴ RICHLIN 2014, 138; on Arachne's weaving in the *Metamorphoses*, see SALZMAN-MITCHELL 2005, 117–49.

²⁵ MATZ 2022, 47–65; see also MCPHEE (2019, 769–75) for the subtextual allusion to the rape of Calliope by Oeagrus in Ov. *met.* 2,219.

²⁶ CURRAN 1978, 216–22.

²⁷ MARTORANA 2023, 181–204.

²⁸ For general remarks on focalisation in narratology, see BAL 2017, 132–53.

The hero, descendant from Agenor, told how beneath cold Atlas there lay a place safe under the protection of the rocky mass. At the entrance to this place twin sisters dwelt, the daughters of old Phorcys, who shared one eye between them. Perseus secretly stole this [eye], by craftily placing his hand under it while it was being passed from one sister to the other, and far through trackless and secret ways, and bristly rocks in rough woods, he came at last to the abodes of the Gorgons. And scattered through the fields and along the ways he saw the forms of men and beasts changed into stone by one look at Medusa's face.²⁹

To seize Medusa, Perseus needs to travel to a remote region of the world (*gelido sub Atlante iacentem / esse locum*; 4,772–73),³⁰ first approaching the two daughters of Phorcys, then the Gorgons (Medusa's immortal sisters), and finally Medusa, the most famous of the Gorgons. Perseus' murder of Medusa occurs in what can be defined as a *locus horridus*,³¹ at the inhospitable limits of the world, which features the petrified victims of the Gorgon as a part of a timeless as well as uncanny landscape. As a *locus horridus*, Medusa's abode represents a distorted version of the *locus amoenus*, which is a usual location for rapes within the poem.³² More specifically, Medusa's abode evokes, in terms of both analogy and antithesis, the shore where Thetis (another rape victim) stops after bathing in Book 11. In the *Metamorphoses*, both Medusa and Thetis are therefore said to live in a sort of border-space between sea and land, human society and primeval nature.³³ Furthermore, the description of Medusa's cave highlights its sinister aspects, since the victims of her petrifying gaze are left standing around it (779–81; above),³⁴ whereas the shore where Thetis stops in order to take rest initially appears to be an extremely pleasant place.

*est sinus Haemoniae curvos falcatus in arcus.
brachia procurrunt ubi, si foret altior unda,
portus erat; summis inductum est aequor harenis.
litus habet solidum, quod nec vestigia servet
nec remoretur iter nec opertum pendeat alga.
myrtea silva subest bicoloribus obsita bacis;
est specus in medio (natura factus an arte,
ambiguum, magis arte tamen), quo saepe venire
frenato delphine sedens, Theti, nuda solebas.*

(Ov. *met.* 11,229–37)

There is a basin on the Thessalian coast, sickle-shaped into curved bays. The arms run out to the point where there would be a safe port for ships if the water were deeper. The sea spreads smooth

²⁹ The Latin text of the *Metamorphoses* is from TARRANT 2004; the translation (with changes) is drawn on MILLER 1916.

³⁰ The expression *narrat ... esse locum* is defined as a “singolare modo obliquo” to introduce an ekphrasis, which reflects the “obliqueness” of Perseus' account (in indirect speech), as well as suggesting its (partial) mendacity; see BARCHIESI – ROSATI 2007, 347.

³¹ BERNSTEIN 2011, 67–98.

³² BERNSTEIN 2011, 67–98. On the definition of this kind of abode as a *locus suspectus*, and its antithetical, but at the same time complementary, relationship with the *locus amoenus*, see KAMIL 2021, 70–89.

³³ This is an ekphrastic description and is marked by (a variant of) the common formula *est locum* (4,773): Medusa's place is defined as a remote and savage land (“spazio remoto e selvaggio”) by BARCHIESI – ROSATI 2007, 348.

³⁴ According to BARCHIESI – ROSATI (2007, 348), the hypermetric line 780 suggests a continuation between life and death, which is implied in the transformation from animated beings into stones.

over the sandy bottom. It has a firm shore, which leaves no trace of footprints, delays no journey, is free from seaweed. A myrtle wood grows close, covered with two-coloured berries. There is a grotto in this grove, whether made by nature or art one may not surely say, but rather by art. To this grotto oftentimes, riding your bridled dolphin, o Thetis, naked you used to come.

The spatial descriptions of the two abodes share certain similarities (isolation; at the edge between the land and the sea), but also differ in crucial aspects: Medusa's abode is uneven, scary and dark, while Thetis' place appears pleasant, colourful and bright (11,234–35).³⁵ A closer reading, however, reveals that Ovid's description of Thetis' resting spot closely follows the pattern established by this author when depicting sites of acts of sexual violence.³⁶ Moreover, the word *bracchia* in line 230 has a sinister nuance, as it alludes to both Peleus' frustrated attack (11,246) and his subsequent successful attempt to capture and rape Thetis (11,262). Eventually, the *locus amoenus* where Thetis stops is both antithetical and similar to Medusa's *locus horridus*, and actualises its threatening potential when Thetis is raped by Peleus (11,261–65).

Along with isolation and liminality of their abodes, another analogy between Medusa and Thetis is that both are assaulted while they are sleeping (4,782–86 and 11,250–54). In each case, the assailant prepares, assaults and emerges, one with a head, the other with a rape:

*se tamen horrendae clipei, quem laeva gerebat,
aere percussae formam aspexisse Medusae,
dumque gravis somnus colubrasque ipsamque tenebat,
eripuisse caput collo; pennisque fugacem
Pegason et fratrem matris de sanguine natos.*

(Ov. *met.* 4,782–86)

But he himself had looked upon the image of that dread Medusa reflected from the bright bronze shield, which his left hand bore; and while deep sleep held fast both the snakes and her who wore them, he smote her head clean from her neck and from the blood of his mother swift-winged Pegasus and his brother sprang.

As noted by Curran, rapes in the *Metamorphoses* typically do not happen while the victim is sleeping, but this pattern is much more common in the *Fasti*.³⁷ Equally, the defencelessness of rape victims, which in these cases is denoted by their being asleep, has been regarded as a fundamental element for the success of the rape.³⁸ Furthermore, while in the *Metamorphoses* rape is often perpetrated by gods themselves (mostly Jupiter, but also Mercury or Apollo), the assault of Medusa and the rape of Thetis happen through divine help or advice: Peleus is advised by Proteus at 11,250–54, while Perseus' attack of Medusa is catalysed by divine will.

³⁵ Thetis' cave is depicted as an idyllic place, which is convenient for sex and love: "*Specus, antrum, spelunca* als Schauplatz geheimer, gewaltsamer, verbotener u. ä. Liebe"; cf. BÖMER 1980, 301. Equally, Thetis' abode recalls the description of Diana's cave in Acteon's episode (*met.* 3,155–64), where the motif of invasive and transgressive sight is also prominent.

³⁶ Cf. e.g. *met.* 1,568–87 (Jupiter and Io); 1,690–700 (Pan and Syrinx); 2,405–16 (Jupiter and Callisto); 5,385–95 (Hades and Persephone). To put it in KAMIL's words: "The *locus amoenus* is an apparently serene, but covertly dangerous locale, whose qualities mirror and foreshadow the violence to come" (KAMIL 2021, 70).

³⁷ CURRAN 1978, 218.

³⁸ See MOWER RUFO 2016 (203–40) on favourable circumstances to rape within the *Metamorphoses*.

Although Perseus does not overtly require direct assistance from a supernatural helper against the Gorgon, Ovid alludes to him having offered sacrifices to Minerva, Mercury and Jupiter before slaying Medusa (4,753–64). Relevantly, some Greek authors narrate that Athena not only advised Perseus to wait until Medusa had fallen asleep and use his *clipeus* to look at her without being petrified (as *per* Ovid), but that the goddess also directly assisted the hero in his fight against the Gorgon.³⁹ Later in the narrative, Athena would appropriate Medusa's severed head as an emblem on her breastplate, and accordingly a symbol of her power. Transplanted into the Roman world, Athena is renamed Minerva and soon becomes one of the main Roman deities, as she is included in the Capitoline Triad along with Jupiter and Juno. As a female proxy of Jupiter, in Rome Minerva acquires further layers of meaning vis-à-vis her Greek counterpart Athena, since she embodies traditional cultural values, including violence and militarisation, as well as patriarchal and hierarchical power. That Minerva punishes Medusa for being raped, supports Perseus in his attack against her, and finally appropriates her agency (that is, her severed head) further enhances the depiction of Medusa as a victim of a male-based and discriminatory system.

The features examined so far – Medusa being asleep, along with intratextual parallels to the non-metaphorical rape of Thetis – suggest that Perseus' murder of Medusa alludes to a violent sexual assault, as well as featuring more explicit mutilation of the victim, namely the beheading. Perseus' attack against Medusa re-enacts and at the same time precedes – as I will explain in more detail in the next section – her previous rape by Neptune.⁴⁰ Upon her death following Perseus' stroke, Medusa spawns two creatures, namely Pegasus (Hercules' future winged horse) and the less famous Chrysaor, who spring from her severed neck (4,785–86). While this abhorrent generation recalls the birth of Minerva from Jupiter's head through a sort of parthenogenesis, it is implied that the two creatures are the result of Neptune's rape of Medusa, which had taken place before her transformation into a hideous monster by Minerva (4,793–803). In fact, Medusa's rape by Neptune is briefly mentioned later in the *Metamorphoses*, as one of the rapes represented in Arachne's tapestry: *sensit volucrem crinita colubris / mater equi volucris* ("the snake-haired mother of the winged horse knew you [*scil.* Neptune] as a winged bird"; 6,119–20). After challenging Minerva for primacy in the art of tapestry, Arachne is punished by the goddess for her alleged arrogance and transformed into a spider. Like Medusa, Arachne, who performs the quintessential female task of weaving, is overcome by Minerva, a goddess embodying the Olympian – and accordingly patriarchal – order. The allusions to the ensuing representation of Medusa's actual rape on Arachne's tapestry, along with her childbirth, amplify, refract and *reproduce* the (sexual) violence perpetrated by Perseus in Book 4.

That the birth of the two creatures happens immediately after Perseus' attack suggests that it can be understood as a consequence of Perseus' violence, namely as a distorted form of conception and birth following a sexual assault. The cavity opened by Perseus' blow replaces the uterine cavity in its reproductive function, as well as substituting the female sexual organs as the part of the body offended by the assault.⁴¹ The rape-mutilation of Medusa goes back to the opening of this essay, as it invites us to reflect upon (patriarchal) conceptions of female corporeality as something that must be appropriated and at the same time distanced, due to its inherent alterity and monstrosity. This ambivalence is particularly relevant to the pregnant body, which holds both the necessary and uncanny power of generation. Indeed, pregnancy and motherhood

³⁹ For Minerva's more active intervention, cf. *pyth.* 10,45; 12,7–24; *Apollod. bibl.* 2,4,2–3; also Eur. *Ion* 989–97; Lucan. 9,675–77; see SEGAL 2000, 618–21; LEEMING 2013, 16–18.

⁴⁰ In a similar way, Tereus' mutilation of Philomela (who, like Medusa, had undergone a rape) in Book 6 has been said to articulate a reiteration of sexual violence: see CURRAN 1978, 219; RICHLIN 2014, 142–43.

⁴¹ RICHLIN 2014, 141.

address an ancestral fear of the principal pre-Olympian and Olympian gods, namely that they could be overcome by their offspring. What happened to Uranus, who was killed and overthrown by Cronus, and to Cronus himself, emasculated and overthrown by Jupiter, is perceived as a constant threat to Jupiter, and the entire Olympian order, in several narratives from Greco-Roman mythology.⁴² Two famous examples of this topos are represented by Thetis and Athena: Themis' prophecy concerning Thetis' potential son with Zeus/Jupiter (who, allegedly, would have overcome his father) is never fully accomplished; and Metis' conception of a child more powerful than Zeus is then neutralised through the generation of Athena from his head.⁴³ Perseus' brutal killing of Medusa can therefore be interpreted as a translation of the attempt to annihilate a monstrous pregnant body, along with its (pro)creative potential.

Somewhat developing this traditional view of the monstrous female body, more recent post-structuralist readings have seen pregnancy as a privileged site for the expression – or, conversely, the denial – of female subjectivity. In her interpretation of abjection as something that undermines and at the same time redetermines one's physical identity, Julia Kristeva remarks on how pregnancy and motherhood lead women to acknowledge the abject element as something liminal between the inside and the outside of their body.⁴⁴ Through childbirth, women both expel and acknowledge *the abject within them* (to rephrase Kristeva's own words). The generation of Pegasus and Chrysaor through her severed neck means Medusa expels the materialisation of what caused the loss of her identity both as a beautiful woman and a character within the poem: the first rape by Neptune and the second assault (and quasi-rape) by Perseus, which are hypostasised by the birth of the two creatures.⁴⁵ However, the generation of Pegasus and Chrysaor does not lead to a re-acquisition and re-acknowledgment of Medusa's identity; on the contrary, it causes the complete annihilation of Medusa as a character. Transformed into a monster and slain, even after her death Medusa has her power appropriated first by Perseus, who would later use her head as a weapon to petrify and defeat his enemies, then by Minerva as the emblem on her breastplate. But if Medusa is obliterated as a character, what are the consequences of Perseus' rape-murder at the narratological level?

The alternative rapes of Medusa

The account of Perseus' assault against Medusa arouses the curiosity of someone in the audience, who asks "why Medusa only of the sisters wore serpents mingled with her hair" (*cur sola sororum / gesserit alternis inmixtos crinibus angues*; 4,791–92), thus introducing a new tale. Told by Perseus in direct speech, the tale recounts Medusa's rape by Neptune and punishment by Minerva, and is in fact the prequel to Perseus' previous story, which accordingly inverts the chronological order of the events. In other words, the fabula (namely, the chronological order in which the events of a story take place) differs from the *syuzhet*, or the plot, how the author chooses to relate the events.⁴⁶ By subverting the order of the events, Perseus makes his assault of Medusa happen before Neptune's rape, thereby making his murder appear as the first violation

⁴² The earliest, and perhaps most notable, account of this story can be found in Hesiod's *Theogony* (1–500); see STRAUSS CLAY 2003, 12–30; 49–72; 100–28.

⁴³ On Thetis, see SLATKIN 1991; PAPROCKI – VOS – WRIGHT 2023; on Metis and Athena, see e.g. SEGAL 2000, 613–24; FARAONE – TEETER 2004, 177–208; DEACY 2008; PARK 2014, 261–83.

⁴⁴ KRISTEVA 1982.

⁴⁵ For representations of the female body as abject in Roman elegy, see ZIMMERMANN DAMER 2019, 204–48.

⁴⁶ In strictly narratological terms, the *syuzhet* and the plot subtly differ from each other (for an overview, see COBLEY 1994, 677–81). However, for the purposes of this paper (whose aim is not to dig deeper into narratological technicisms), I will use *syuzhet* and plot interchangeably, as though they were the same concept.

of Medusa's physical integrity. At the same time, the initial lack of a prequel emphasises Perseus' heroism, as it makes it seem as though the hero has defeated what was a hideous monster from the start. Finally, that Perseus relates first his attack and then Neptune's rape strengthens the connection between the two violent assaults, supporting the reading of Perseus' murder of Medusa as a symbolic, and to some extent also physical, rape.

[...] *quoniam scitaris digna relatu,
accipe quaesiti causam. clarissima forma
multorumque fuit spes invidiosa procorum
illa, neque in tota conspectior ulla capillis
pars fuit; inveni, qui se vidisse referret.
hanc pelagi rector templo vitiasse Minervae
dicitur; aversa est et castos aegide vultus
nata Iovis textit, neve hoc inpune fuisset,
Gorgoneum crinem turpes mutavit in hydros.
nunc quoque, ut attonitos formidine terreat hostes,
pectore in adverso, quos fecit, sustinet angues.*

(Ov. *met.* 4,793–803)

Since what you ask is (a tale) well worth the telling, hear then the cause. She was once most beautiful in form, and the jealous hope of many suitors. Of all her beauties, her hair was the most beautiful – for so I learned from one who said he had seen her. It is said that in Minerva's temple Neptune, lord of the Ocean, ravished her. Jupiter's daughter turned away and hid her chaste eyes behind her aegis. And, that the deed might be punished as was due, she changed the Gorgon's locks to ugly snakes. And now to frighten her fear-numbed foes, she still wears upon her breast the snakes which she has made.

Perseus' account presents Medusa as a beautiful maiden (*clarissima forma*; 4,794), thus connecting her description to similar accounts of beautiful (and often semi-divine) girls, who are stereotypical victims of rape in the *Metamorphoses*. Among all of Medusa's possible physical qualities, Perseus highlights her hair: *neque in tota conspectior ulla capillis / pars fuit* (4,796–97).⁴⁷ Through an interplay of analogy and difference, the singling out of Medusa's hair enhances the monstrosity of her future snakelike head. Furthermore, the emphasis on the girl's hair also adheres to a topos that can be found elsewhere in Ovidian instances of the *descriptio puellae*, namely the mention of one or two prominent physical details and the omission of, or allusion to, other bodily features, which serves to arouse the readers' curiosity and libido.⁴⁸ This focus – and focalisation – on potentially attractive aspects of the female body articulates the scopophilic attitude of the male gaze, which lands on women's bodies to get sexual stimulation and pleasure from their exposure.⁴⁹ As in the *Metamorphoses* (and beyond) scopophilia can often anticipate sexual assault, Perseus' selective but suggestive focalisation on (one part of) Medusa's body forecasts both Neptune's rape and his own assault.

⁴⁷ The visual focus on Medusa's hair is defined as “eccesso dello sguardo”, which recalls Medusa's petrifying gaze; see BARCHIESI – ROSATI 2007, 351.

⁴⁸ Cf. Ov. *am.* 1,5, with FREDRICK 1997, 182–83; see also GREENE 1999, 409–18; FREDRICK 2012, 426–39. For a materialistic view of female bodies in Latin elegy, see ZIMMERMANN DAMER 2019; see also Pyy, in this volume.

⁴⁹ On scopophilia, see MULVEY 1989; on the male gaze in Ovid, see SALZMAN-MITCHELL 2005.

Perseus' allusive language and rhetorical strategies go even further. By saying that he found out about Medusa's hair from someone who reported it, Perseus implicitly claims that he had never met Medusa before he slaughtered her. Is he lying? Was he one of the "suitors" (*procorum*, 4,795)? Perseus' over-specification aims to exclude other versions of Medusa's narrative, but produces the opposite effect, namely focalising the reader's attention on potential "windows" (to borrow a fortunate expression that Alessandro Barchiesi used to describe the poetics of the *Heroides*) on Medusa's story.⁵⁰ Noticeably, in the *Metamorphoses* (as well as Ovid's poetic production as a whole), the poet plays with the knowledgeable reader, hinting at alternative versions of the myths while not fully relating them.⁵¹ Indeed, in other versions of her myth, Medusa was a powerful queen, who was assassinated at night during a war against Perseus' army. The hero was so enchanted by her beauty that he cut off her head to show it to the Greek people.⁵² Thus, Perseus' insistence that he had been unfamiliar with Medusa while she was still a maiden serves to sideline and marginalise a less heroic version of his murder.

Furthermore, while emphasising Neptune's rape of Medusa, Perseus keeps the source of this tale undetermined by using the verb *dicitur* ("it is said", 4,799). Who told Perseus about Medusa's first rape? This is not clear. The verb marking the rape is, in this case, *vitio* (4,798), which is not uncommon in Latin to denote sexual violence, or more broadly illicit sexual intercourse.⁵³ Neptune's rape amplifies (at the plot level) and at the same time anticipates (at the fabula level) Perseus' murder, which is indicated through the verb *eripio*. Etymologically connected to *rapio*, *eripio* recalls the semantics of violence in general and sexual violence more specifically, thus further connecting Neptune's rape to Perseus' assault.⁵⁴

The rape of Medusa produces a chain of events, and accordingly represents the very motor and catalyst of the narrative in this section of the poem. Contrary to Perseus' quasi-scopophilic gaze, Minerva does not even look at Medusa's body while she is being raped, and covers her sight behind her aegis (4,799–800). Her gesture nods to the effects of Medusa's power after her transformation, which is the consequence of her unguilty and faultless profanation of Minerva's temple: just as Minerva could not watch Medusa's rape in her sanctuary, so whoever Medusa looks at in the future will be transformed into lifeless stone. To take this a step further, Minerva's reaction anticipates and at the same time reproduces Perseus' attitude while attacking Medusa. As Minerva does not look at Medusa while she is being attacked, so Perseus cannot gaze at Medusa while killing her – assaulting her, figuratively raping her.

The rape of Neptune and the shame of Minerva result in Medusa's transformation into a hideous monster, which obliterates her previous identity as a beautiful girl. Similarly, the rape-murder by Perseus brings about the annihilation of Medusa as a character, and an appropriation of her identity. To echo Cixous' words (mentioned at the beginning of this essay), Medusa thus becomes the emblem of men's conceptualisation of femininity as monstrosity, which serves to justify their limitation and appropriation of female identity. In the subsequent sections of the poem (5,1–249), Perseus uses Medusa's head (and gaze) to kill his enemies; Minerva, who is an embodiment of the Olympian (male-based) order, imprints Medusa's monstrous head on her shield as an apotropaic symbol (cf. *quos fecit, sustinet angues*; 4,803); later in Book 6, Minerva punishes

⁵⁰ BARCHIESI 2001: "The poetics of the *Heroides* suggest [...] that new windows can be opened on stories already completed. Ovid's narrative prowess is evident in the respect he shows for the traditional script" (31).

⁵¹ See e.g. BARCHIESI 2001, 29–47, *passim*; LIVELEY 2008, 86–102.

⁵² Cf. Paus. 2,21,5; also Apollodorus (*bibl.* 2,4,2–3), who recounts that Medusa challenges Athena to a beauty contest: after being defeated by the goddess, she is transformed into a horrible monster, and thereafter killed by Perseus.

⁵³ Cf. Ter. *Eun.* 704, 953; Cic. *Sest.* 115; Liv. 38,46,1; Suet. *Aug.* 71,1; Tac. *dial.* 35,5; ADAMS 1982, 175, 199; OLD, s.v. "vitio".

⁵⁴ For specific Latin terminology concerning rape, see NGUYEN 2006, 75–112; MATZ 2022, 47–48; see also OLD, s.v. "rapio"; ADAMS 1982, 175.

another innocent woman, Arachne, who dares to represent episodes of sexual violence perpetrated by gods on helpless women, including Medusa. While the two rapes of Medusa (by Neptune and by Perseus) are thus responsible for the production and perpetuation of the narrative for some characters, namely Minerva and Perseus, they are also the starting and ending point for the loss of identity and obliteration of another character, Medusa.

Conclusion

In this essay, I have investigated the narrative of Medusa as a prominent example of the pervasiveness of rape in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. Within the episode, murder and rape are conflated, thus doubling and re-enacting the sexual assault; sexual violence is an underlying motif, which features in the poem even when it is not openly stated in the narrative. This normalisation of sexual violence, and violence *tout court*, makes Medusa a perfect case study to shed light on the rape culture that emerges from Ovid's poem, which possibly mirrors his sociopolitical context. Alongside being raped by Neptune, Medusa undergoes what we would nowadays define as a "secondary victimisation", since she is punished by Minerva (the embodiment of a patriarchal and traditional order) for having been raped. As one who *fails* to be virtuous, Medusa is "disparaged, disregarded, and pathologized", since rape cultures "tend to be slut-shaming, and victim-blaming".⁵⁵ Returning to the introduction of this essay, and the dialectic between releasing and resisting readings of Ovid's works, it is impossible to state whether Ovid was sympathetic towards helpless women or sadistically enjoyed their suffering. Equally, it cannot be denied that Medusa's narrative in the *Metamorphoses* reflects a generalised rape culture, whereby sexual violence, particularly on disadvantaged subjects, tends to be accepted and, to some extent, reinforced. This conception demonstrates thought-provoking, yet also alarming, similarities with the definition of rape culture as structural (sexual) violence, which characterises modern societies.

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⁵⁵ NICHOLLS 2021, 27.

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An Ancient Greek Custom? Reading the Rape of the Sabine Women in Dionysius of Halicarnassus, *Antiquitates Romanae* 2, 30

BEN JERUE

Introduction

The historiography of early Rome is punctuated with acts of sexual violence. Not only do the rapes of Rhea Silvia and Lucretia neatly bookend the regal period, but the rape of the Sabine women plays a crucial role in the city's foundation and initial expansion.¹ As a result of this mass abduction, women from neighboring communities were forced to “marry” Roman husbands in what would come to be known as the first Roman marriage.² In Latin literature, this act of violence responded to an existential threat, as we read in Livy's account, by far the most canonical version of the legend: Rome would have lasted only a single generation due to a lack of women (*penuria mulierum*, Liv. 9, 1), had the Romans not taken action.³ Even if the abduction meant committing what would later be classified as *stuprum* under Roman law,⁴ avoiding the city's early demise could be portrayed as necessary⁵ and, perversely, even as an act of generosity given the future greatness of Rome.⁶

Other versions of the story, however, reveal a range of perspectives on this crucial moment from Rome's legendary history.⁷ This paper turns to the less familiar account of the story of the Sabine women found in Dionysius of Halicarnassus' *Antiquitates Romanae*. Though his history of Rome from the foundation to the Punic Wars has not received the same place in the canon as Livy's *Ab urbe condita*, Dionysius' detailed knowledge of Greek historiography and rhetoric as well as his position as an outsider writing the

¹ BEARD 1999, 2, puts it succinctly: “One way of telling the story of the early years of the city is precisely as a story of the repeated sexual violation of women.” Although it is common to refer to the victims of this assault simply as Sabine, Romulus also kidnapped Latin women (for Caenina, Crustumerium and Antemnae as Latin cities, see Plin. *Nat.* 3,68; see WISEMAN 1984, 447 on different variations in which different communities participated in Romulus' games). Nevertheless, the phrase Sabine women will be used for convenience's sake.

² See FANTHAM 1991, 275. Dionysius of Halicarnassus claims that there is a clear line of continuity between this act of violence and marriage customs in his own day (*Ant. Rom.* 2,30,6: ὡς καὶ μέχρι τῶν καθ' ἡμᾶς ἐπιτελοῦνται χρόνων).

³ For other Republican literary accounts, see DENCH 2005, 15; for rape of the Sabine women on the coinage of Lucius Titurius Sabinus, see WELCH 2015, chapter 3. For the Sabines in Rome's early history more generally, see CORNELL 1995, 75–7 and MARTÍNEZ-PINNA 2002, 62–6.

⁴ See FANTHAM 1991 and NGUYEN 2006 for rape and Roman law.

⁵ MILES 1995, 186. According to CONNOLLY 2007, 81, “The “necessary” rape of the Sabine women, their conversion to membership in the Roman community, and Romulus's swift assimilation of their relatives symbolize the hybridity of the community from its birth [...]”. See GABBA 1991, 208–13 for a broader discussion of assimilation in Dionysius and JERUE 2023b with further discussion and references.

⁶ See DENCH 2005, 24 for the “double pull and relative balance of ‘generosity’ and ‘violence’ in accounts of the rape.”

⁷ Many have highlighted the unflattering nature of Rome's early legends. As LABATE 2006, 209 argues, “In the age of *humanitas*, the ancestral legend of the Sabine Rape could not be evoked without embarrassment [...] almost all the versions that have come down to us [...] are marked, to varying degrees, by an apologetic tone.” Also see, WISEMAN 1983; MARTÍNEZ-PINNA 2011, 123–24; WELCH 2015, 96.

history of the Mediterranean's dominant power make his account important for understanding the larger set of meanings with which Rome's foundational myths could be imbued.⁸

A Greek speaker from the Eastern Mediterranean, Dionysius came to Rome after the Battle of Actium and established himself as a writer and teacher.⁹ Besides penning his history of early Rome, he also wrote extensively on literary criticism.¹⁰ Important debates in the scholarship have circled around how to understand Dionysius and his place in Rome, touching on his professional status,¹¹ intended readership,¹² and personal views concerning Rome and Augustus.¹³ Though limitations of space preclude an examination of these important questions, it is worth momentarily mentioning Casper de Jonge's recent suggestion that Dionysius of Halicarnassus should be understood as a "migrant author," which promises to open new, productive lines of research that more fully account for the ambivalences and complexities of Dionysius' relationship with and portrayal of Rome.¹⁴ Drawing on work from postcolonial literary theory, the concept of migrant literature offers a compelling lens for understanding the difficulties and contradictions that migrant authors from the periphery would have encountered when writing about Rome. More specifically, de Jonge has underscored how such writing is often infused with elements of in-betweenness, ambivalence and polyphony.¹⁵ This approach offers a useful backdrop for analyzing a legend concerned with the forced assimilation of outsiders and definitions of what it means to be Roman, itself a central theme in the early books of the *Antiquitates Romanae*.¹⁶

Within this larger framework and in line with the theme of the present volume, this paper turns to Dionysius' story of the rape of the Sabine women and how the character Romulus evokes the very idea of rape culture. In particular, he attempts to gaslight the kidnapped women by claiming that he is merely partaking in "an ancient Greek custom" (*ant. Rom.* 2, 30). Romulus' gesture towards tradition, however, remains imprecise and leaves the reader guessing exactly which Greek custom he has in mind. While previous scholarship has had difficulty making sense of this vague phrase,¹⁷ this paper explores why Dionysius may have employed unspecific language in this crucial episode and how that choice could affect the reception of his work among a diverse reading public. Despite differences with contemporary feminist or postcolonial criticism,¹⁸ the lens of migrant literature helps us see how rape and forced marriage could be read as potent and possibly critical metaphors for Roman expansionism.

⁸ For Dionysius' historiographical project and the Augustan context, see DELCOURT 2005, 61–9; WIATER 2011a and 2011b.

⁹ For a useful overview on Dionysius' background and place in Rome, see DELCOURT 2005, 24–35; DE JONGE 2008, 25–34; HUNTER – DE JONGE 2019.

¹⁰ See BONNER 1939 for literary treatises and the likely sequence of Dionysius' works.

¹¹ See WEAIRE 2005 and 2011.

¹² E.g., BOWERSOCK 1979; GABBA 1991, 79–80; FOX 1996; WELCH 2015. LURAGHI 2003 suggests that Dionysius acted as if he was writing a work for Greeks, though it was really meant for elite Romans.

¹³ KENNEDY 1992 provides a valuable introduction to the general issue. WIATER 2011b, 76–78 & 84 argues that the construction of identity in the *Ant. Rom.* could potentially upset both Greeks and Romans alike. See PEIRANO 2010 on the complexities of defining the Romans as Greeks in the *Ant. Rom.*

¹⁴ DE JONGE 2022. Also see CONNOLLY 2019.

¹⁵ See DE JONGE 2022, 17–8 for a succinct summary of previous scholarship on Greek identity under Rome.

¹⁶ Famously, Dionysius argues that the Romans are really Greeks. The literature on the question is vast. See KIRKLAND 2022, 80–7 for the role of virtue in defining Rome's Greekness and further bibliography.

¹⁷ Some scholars have taken a rather negative and patronizing view of Dionysius and his work. What could be analyzed as ambiguity or ambivalence, for example, has often been seen as signs of carelessness. See DELCOURT 2005, 71–80 and DE JONGE 2008, 4–5 for a summary of some pejorative views towards Dionysius' work.

¹⁸ For an example of such an approach, see ROYNON 2007 on rape, colonization and the classical tradition in Toni Morrison's *Love*. For general trends in postcolonial criticism more broadly, see BOEHMER 2005, 214–43. For a feminist critique of Roman patriarchy and rape, see LAURIOLA 2022, 36–45.

The rape of the Sabine women: An ancient Greek custom?

In Dionysius' history of Rome, the rape of the Sabine women is the first extended narrative section of book 2, the preceding portions of which were largely preoccupied with the Romulean constitution. While the story generally parallels the account offered by Livy, the two accounts do diverge in several meaningful details and hence the relevant passage from the *Antiquitates Romanae* is briefly summarized.

Since nascent Rome had yet to prove herself through an impressive accumulation of wealth or exceptional acts of valor, Romulus assumes (ἐνθυμούμενος, 2,30,2) that the surrounding cities would not be willing to enter into an alliance with him.¹⁹ Hoping to overcome this perceived unwillingness, Rome's newly minted king consults his grandfather Numitor and the senate before setting a trap and orchestrating the mass abduction of neighboring women (δι' ἀρπαγῆς παρθένων ἀθρόας γενομένης, *ibid.*)²⁰ Accordingly, Romulus announces that Rome will host a festival in honor of Poseidon and members of nearby cities flock to the city. On the last day of the festival, Romulus gives the signal to a group of men who rush out and seize all unmarried women that they can find. The Romans then take their captives home but are forbidden from having sex with them until Romulus can first speak with the women. The next day he assembles the prisoners and attempts to console them by claiming that the abduction was not carried out as a malicious act of violence, but rather as a means of contracting marriage (ὥς οὐκ ἐφ' ὕβρει τῆς ἀρπαγῆς ἀλλ' ἐπὶ γάμῳ γενομένης, 2,30,5). In fact, he argues, his actions are not unusual at all and actually conform to an ancient Greek custom and an outstanding way to organize marriages (Ἑλληνικόν τε καὶ ἀρχαῖον ἀποφαίνων τὸ ἔθος καὶ τρόπων συμπάντων καθ' οὓς συνάπτονται γάμοι ταῖς γυναιξὶν ἐπιφανέστατον, 2,30,5).²¹ Romulus then selects husbands for the women and marries them (2,30,6). Following this brazen abduction, the aggrieved families seek to punish Rome. After the men of Caenina, Antemnae and Crustumium not only fail to exact revenge on Rome but succumb to Romulus (2,33–6), the Sabines finally decide to take up the fight and march on Rome (2,33,3). During a protracted and indecisive battle, the Sabine captives/wives ask the senate for permission to intervene, and those who have already given birth are given permission to broker peace (2,36–46).²²

The present argument can only focus on Romulus' claim that his actions are not unusual and, perhaps, even exemplary. Several scholars have also attributed this idea to Dionysius the author, concluding that he saw "nothing problematic" about the rape.²³ The following pages are dedicated to complicating this interpretation.

To begin, the justification for the abduction comes from the character Romulus, and not the narrator himself. In other words, the ancient custom is mentioned as a means to persuade Romulus' interlocutors and is not principally a nugget of recondite information for Dionysius' readers. This distinction has previously been overlooked. While the opinions of narrator and character can certainly coincide, in this section of the *Antiquitates Romanae* the narrator and his protagonist actually give slightly different motivations

¹⁹ Cf. Liv. 1,9,2 where the senate advises Romulus to send ambassadors to make formal requests, which are denied. This process is elided completely at *Ant. Rom.* 2,30,2, though Dionysius elsewhere stresses the importance of diplomacy (see below).

²⁰ On the semantics of παρθένος and other words for females abducted during war, see GACA 2014, 337–39.

²¹ Cf. Liv. 1,9,14–16 for Romulus' arguments, which do not contain any mention of an ancient custom.

²² JERUE 2023b analyzes the detail about motherhood to argue that Dionysius represents childbirth as a means of undermining and eliding the identity of captive communities (cf. DOUGHTERTY 1998). For the importance of children in negotiations and the conflict with the Sabines in particular, see ROHR VIO 2020, 185–87. For the role of Hersilia in the different versions of the legend, see WISEMAN 1983.

²³ MILES 1995, 196. Also see FOX 1996, 58–60 for a similar view that fits in with an unambiguously pro-Roman interpretation of Dionysius' history.

for the rape.²⁴ Furthermore, a close reading of the episode and the rest of the history reveals some areas where Romulus' actions diverge from what is defined as good, honorable or illustrious elsewhere:²⁵ ambushing an enemy or initiating hostilities without following the proper diplomatic protocols are criticized in the *Antiquitates Romanae*, but are nevertheless central elements of Dionysius' version of the Sabine story.²⁶ The historian had even implied earlier that there were already women at Rome, thus undercutting the well-known Livian justification for the rape of the Sabine women.²⁷ All this is subtle, but it enervates more apologetic versions of the story such as Livy's, where procedures are followed and hostile action is only taken out of "necessity".²⁸ All these small incongruences invite further scrutiny and suggest that the passage is rife for "reading between the lines".²⁹

If Romulus' rationalization for the rape is predicated on the idea of well-established behavior, we must ask what the supposedly illustrious precedent for his actions actually is. However, his words are remarkably ambiguous. The phrase "an ancient Greek custom", unsurprisingly, has been a sort of catnip for historians. Yet no proposed identification for the custom has proven compelling, let alone rock solid.³⁰ For his part, Ernst Cary, the editor of the Loeb edition of the *Antiquitates Romanae*, found this so frustrating that he included a footnote lamenting the phrase's vagueness.³¹ Indeed, when Dionysius mentions Greek customs and precedents elsewhere in his history, he tends to be much more specific.³² The question is all the more intriguing when we recall that Cicero and Virgil explicitly stress that the rape of the Sabine women was an unparalleled and crude act.³³

Previous scholarship offers two leading possibilities for identifying Romulus' ancient Greek custom. The first conjecture compares the rape of the Sabines to a passage from Plutarch's biography of Lycurgus (*Lyc.* 15,3–5).³⁴ While this passage does contain a story in which rape and "marriage" appear, there are

²⁴ Contra FOX 1996, 59 who has argued "There is no difference in type between the interpretations of the historian and the motivation of Romulus, no suggestion of a gap of comprehension caused by the great distance in time." For the difference between the given reasons for the rape, cf. *Ant. Rom.* 2,30,1 (Romulus' motives) and *Ant. Rom.* 2,31,1 (Dionysius' reasoning and the views of other historians).

²⁵ This would not be the only instance of a character's analysis differing from that of the historian; cf. *Ant. Rom.* 3,4,3 and 3,6,3.

²⁶ Unlike in Livy (*Romulus legatos circa vecinas gentes misit*, Liv. 1,9,2), Dionysius' Romulus assumes how others will respond without actually asking (*Ant. Rom.* 2,30,2), which does not conform to Roman diplomatic practice described elsewhere in *Ant. Rom.* The *fetiales*, for instance, were responsible for declaring war on Rome's enemies in a way that ensured that the conflict would be just and have a favorable outcome (*Ant. Rom.* 2,7,3–5). For the "Roman way" of beating an enemy, without resorting to tricks, see, for example, Liv. 1,53,4 (on Tarquinius Superbus' capture of Gabii) or Liv. 5,37,5–8 (Camillus' speech to the Faliscan teacher at Liv. 5,37,5–8) with KEEGAN 2021, 77. For Romans claiming that their ancestors would not resort to tricks, see Liv. 42,47, a passage that WHEELER 1988, 24 has dubbed "Roman propaganda".

²⁷ See *Ant. Rom.* 2,12,1 on the formation of the senate and the "fathers". Unlike Livy (Liv. 1,8), Dionysius leaves open the possibility that there were already women at Rome before the kidnapping of the Sabine women.

²⁸ There are many other instances where Dionysius diverges from Livy. For a brief discussion, see GABBA 1991, 212–13; LUCE 1995; OAKLEY 2010.

²⁹ This phrase comes from STRAUS 1943. Cf. AHL 1984 on "safe criticism" and WEAIRE 2005 on the precariousness of being a Greek teacher and intellectual in Rome.

³⁰ Though it cannot be engaged with explicitly here, there is a branch of scholarship (e.g., DUMÉZIL 1979 and MILES 1995, 182–85) that links the story to different Indo-European myths about marriage and anthropological work on bride abduction.

³¹ CARY 1937, 401 n. 1: "It is to be regretted that Dionysius did not see fit to cite some specific instances of this practice from the Greek world."

³² A few examples from earlier in book 2: Roman improvements on a Thessalian and Athenian custom (*Ant. Rom.* 2,9,2); Greek precedents for the Roman senate (*Ant. Rom.* 2,12,4); Lacedaemonian precedent for the *celereres* (*Ant. Rom.* 2,13,4).

³³ Cic. *rep.* 2,12: *novum quoddam et subagreste consilium*; Verg. *A.* 8,635: *raptas sine more Sabinas* (see n. 7 above). For Ovid's treatment of this episode in the *Ars amatoria*, see Mudie in this volume.

³⁴ Those who have supported this parallel include: SPELMAN 1758, ad loc.; CARY 1937: ad loc.; LUCE 1995, 226 and 231; LURAGHI 2003, 279 n. 33. Plutarch is our first and only source for this custom. For other ways in which the Spartans and Sabines are connected, see *Ant. Rom.* 2,49,2 with DENCH 1995, 86–88.

conspicuous ways in which the stories diverge: put simply, none of the vivid details central to the Spartan custom are paralleled in the Roman kidnapping. Unconvinced by this suggestion, Alan Greaves has suggested another candidate for Dionysius' Ἑλληνικὸν τε καὶ ἀρχαῖον... τὸ ἔθος; the foundation of Miletus in Herodotus' *Histories* (Hdt. 1,146), where Athenian colonists abduct and marry Carian women after killing their fathers, former husbands and children.³⁵ In Herodotus, this episode serves as an etiological explanation for why Milesian women refuse to dine with their husbands or call them by their names.

Unlike previous scholars who have assumed that Romulus' argument is made in good faith and that difficulties in identifying the custom simply spring from an unfortunate lack of specificity on Dionysius' part, the present argument does not require there being one perfect parallel for the mass abduction and rape of the Sabine women: if we conceive of Dionysius as a migrant author who can use ambiguity and elusiveness to his advantage, there is no need to assume that vagueness is unintentional.³⁶ Instead, it allows different readers to see what they choose or are predisposed to see. As a result, it is certainly possible that an ancient reader could have thought of either of the abovementioned episodes. That said, Greaves' suggestion that Dionysius refers to the Milesian episode is hardly any more watertight than the previous possibility that he rejected. Again, there are meaningful discrepancies between the actions of the Romans and the Athenian colonists in Herodotus 1.³⁷

Nevertheless, there is a third and, to my mind, more compelling candidate for identifying the ancient Greek custom. Instead of being strictly historical, however, it is a literary parallel that raises fundamental questions about how we interpret crucial moments and conflicts from the past.³⁸ Romulus, I suggest, assimilates his premeditated kidnapping of the Sabine women to the debates over the abduction of women that opens book 1 of Herodotus' *Histories*. This would by no means be some *recherché* allusion, especially when compared to other leading suggestions. In fact, an immediate strength of this proposal is that Dionysius' custom would find a parallel in a programmatic section of Herodotus with which he expected his readers to be familiar.³⁹ In *On composition*, he uses the opening of the *Histories* as an example precisely because it is familiar to most of his readers:

λήψομαι δ' ἐκ τῆς Ἡροδότου λέξεως τὴν ἀρχὴν τῆς ἱστορίας, ἐπειδὴ καὶ γνώριμός ἐστι τοῖς πολλοῖς
[...]

(Dion. Hal. *comp.* 4,8)

Let's use the beginning of Herodotus' *Histories* as an example, because the text is familiar to many readers [...]⁴⁰

³⁵ GREAVES 1998.

³⁶ OAKLEY 2010 deals extensively with Dionysius' penchant for ἀκριβεια (precision or detail); similarly, GABBA 1991, 152; for the painstaking attention to sources in book 1 of the *Ant. Rom.*, see LUCE 1995. At *Ant. Rom.* 5,75 Dionysius justifies the inclusion of what may seem like small and trivial details (τὰ μικρὰ καὶ φαῦλα).

³⁷ On some of these potential incongruities between *Ant. Rom.* 2,30 and Hdt. 1,146, GREAVES 1998, 574 has suggested that the imperfect mapping "emphasizes one of Dionysius' key themes, often repeated in the *Antiquitates Romanae*, that although the Romans were of Greek origin and followed many Greek customs, through their virtue and restraint they were ultimately superior to the Greeks." Also see, GREAVES 2002, 77.

³⁸ There are certainly other parallels that could have come to a reader's mind, including from Greek mythology (see DENCH 2005, 21 with n. 54 for further references), though see DRIEDIGER-MURPHY 2014 on Dionysius' distaste for attributing bad behavior like rape to the gods. For Greek marriage and violence more generally, see DOUGHERTY 1993, 64–65.

³⁹ For Dionysius' analysis of Herodotean accessibility more broadly, see KIRKLAND 2022, 47–51.

⁴⁰ Translation my own.

Dionysius' admiration for Herodotus is patent in his rhetorical writings.⁴¹ Furthermore, various scholars, such as Miguel Ángel Rodríguez Horrillo and more recently Bryant Kirkland, have shown how Herodotus serves as a key model for Dionysius' own historiographical project.⁴² As a result, it is plausible that a reader of the *Antiquitates Romanae* could connect a foundational legend about kidnapping and sexual violence with Herodotus' own account of rape and abduction that opens the *Histories*.

The abduction of women in Dionysius and Herodotus

Immediately following Herodotus' proem where he lays out his intention of preserving the memory of past deeds carried out by Greeks and barbarians alike, his narrative begins with tales of rape and their (debated) significance.⁴³ The passage is difficult, both on the level of syntax with its complex use of indirect discourse as well as on the level of thought and argument, where familiar narratives from epic are recast in a defamiliarizing light.⁴⁴ In his treatment of the rapes of Io, Europa, Medea and Helen, the historian's authorial voice yields to that of the wise Persians, who give their explanation for the origins of the conflict between East and West – though the text contains hints of dissenting Greek and Phoenician voices as well.⁴⁵ A mounting series of betrayals and fraying economic relationships create a vicious cycle of sexual violence in which each hostile act is justified by referencing a previous one. Significantly, in Herodotus' account, these actions are never good.⁴⁶

It is only when the story reaches Helen and Paris that the reader learns just how dangerous this tit-for-tat logic has become:

Δευτέρῃ δὲ λέγουσι γενεῇ μετὰ ταῦτα Ἀλέξανδρον τὸν Πριάμου ἀκηκοῦτα ταῦτα ἐθελῆσαι οἱ ἐκ τῆς Ἑλλάδος δι' ἀρπαγῆς γενέσθαι γυναῖκα, ἐπιστάμενον πάντως ὅτι οὐ δώσει δίκας· οὐδὲ γὰρ ἐκείνους διδόναι. Οὕτω δὲ ἀρπάσαντος αὐτοῦ Ἑλένην, τοῖσι Ἕλλησι δόξαι πρῶτον πέμψαντας ἀγγέλους ἀπαιτεῖν τε Ἑλένην καὶ δίκας τῆς ἀρπαγῆς αἰτέειν. Τοὺς δὲ προῖσχομένων ταῦτα προφέρειν σφι Μηδείης τὴν ἀρπαγὴν, ὥς οὐ δόντες αὐτοὶ δίκας οὐδὲ ἐκδόντες ἀπαιτεόντων βουλοίατό σφι παρ' ἄλλων δίκας γίνεσθαι.

(Hdt. 1,3)

And they claim that in the second generation after these events Priam's son Alexander, when he heard these things, wanted to abduct a bride from Greece for himself. He knew very well that he would not have to pay the price for this, since the Greeks had not done so. After he had abducted Helen, it seemed best to the Greeks first to send ambassadors to ask for Helen's return and reparations for the

⁴¹ The topic is treated extensively by KIRKLAND 2022, 36–45. Also see WIATER 2011a, 132–49.

⁴² For the myth of the *Horatii* in *Ant. Rom.* and other how the historian uses Herodotean motifs to translate Roman stories for a Greek readership, see RODRÍGUEZ HORRILLO 2010, 76–79 with previous references to EK 1942. For Rome's *imperium* and Xerxes' imperial pretensions, see KIRKLAND 2022, 99–100. More generally, see SCHUBERT 1991; FROMENTIN 2006; WIATER 2011b, 72.

⁴³ For the role of rape at the opening of Her., see LAURIOLA 2022, 3–4.

⁴⁴ See especially WĘCOWSKI 2004, 149–55 for the prologue as an “entertaining absurdity” that uses defamiliarization and the rape of women as a way to mock a “pseudo-epic causality” (152) that played an important role in some of Herodotus' predecessors and contemporaries. See LATEINER 1983, 35–43 for Herodotean beginnings.

⁴⁵ For the Greeks, see Hdt. 1, 2: Οὕτω μὲν Ἰοῦν ἐς Αἴγυπτον ἀπικέσθαι λέγουσι Πέρσαι, οὐκ ὥς Ἕλληνες. For the Phoenicians' objection to the Persian version of the story, see Hdt. 1, 5: Περὶ δὲ τῆς Ἰοῦς οὐκ ὁμολογεῖται Πέρσῃσι οὕτω Φοῖνικες. On disagreement and mobility in the opening chapters of the *Histories*, see VASUNIA 2012.

⁴⁶ These were the actions of “unjust men” (ἀνδρῶν ἀδίκων, Hdt. 1,4).

abduction. When the Greeks asked for these things, the Trojans trotted out the example of the abduction of Medea saying that while the Greeks themselves did not grant reparations nor return the woman (though they had been asked!), they nevertheless wanted to have reparations from others.⁴⁷

Paris has heard the previous stories, which serve as a precedent, justification and spur for his subsequent actions. In Herodotus, he is an early receiver of history who embodies the dangers of exemplarity and also demonstrates how narratives of sexual violence can arouse male desire and breed further violence. Accordingly, he abducts Helen and excuses his own bad behavior by pointing to earlier deeds. The previous theft of women sets a precedent for action in the present. Paris, of course, has made a gross miscalculation: the established pattern of avenging one rape by simply committing another breaks down with the Greek expedition against Troy. According to Herodotus' Persians, the Greek reaction to the rape of Helen is the ultimate cause of the conflict between East and West.⁴⁸ In their view, these were certainly not good acts, but they should not be blown out of proportion, since they claim – using a misogynistic argument that can unfortunately still be heard today⁴⁹ – that if women did not want these things to happen, they would not.

Having read these opening chapters of Herodotus, where we find competing and conflicting narratives, one naturally wonders where the author himself comes down. And when Herodotus finally does address the question, the issue famously remains unresolved: “Concerning these things, I am not going to say if they happened in this or that way.”⁵⁰ From here, Herodotus jumps forward in time to talk about material with which he claims to be more familiar (δὲ οἶδα αὐτὸς, 1,5), thus leaving the true origins of the enmity open to debate. The Herodotean passage is marked by an open-endedness in which dissenting voices raise more questions than they manage to answer.

The noun ἀρπαγή and the verb ἀρπάζειν permeate the description of Paris' actions along with the rest of the opening chapters of the *Histories*. These lexemes also play a prominent role in Dionysius' version of the rape of the Sabine women, though he significantly uses different lexemes to discuss other acts of sexual violence in his history.⁵¹ The noun and verb thematize both passages and hence can be taken as sufficiently marked. In fact, a strikingly high percentage of these words' occurrences in the *Histories* are found in the opening pages of book 1.⁵²

While Herodotus claims that his inquiry will preserve the memory of great and wondrous deeds, Dionysius' Romans have yet to perform any memorable deeds of their own (λαμπρὸν ἔργον... οὐδέν, *Ant. Rom.* 2,30,2) and they choose to do so along very Herodotean lines. This language is itself Herodotean: the col-

⁴⁷ Translation my own.

⁴⁸ Hdt. 1,4: Τὸ μὲν νυν ἀρπάζειν γυναῖκας ἀνδρῶν ἀδίκων νομίζουσιν ἔργον εἶναι, τὸ δὲ ἀρπασθεισέων σπουδὴν ποιήσασθαι τιμωρέειν ἀνοήτων, τὸ δὲ μηδεμίαν ὥρην ἔχειν ἀρπασθεισέων σωφρόνων· δηλαὰ γὰρ δὴ ὅτι, εἰ μὴ αὐταὶ ἐβούλοντο, οὐκ ἂν ἥρπάζοντο.

⁴⁹ It is beyond the scope of this paper to discuss parallels, but it is difficult to not mention the 2012 comment by Todd Akins. While running for a seat in the US Senate, he infamously claimed that pregnancies do not result from “legitimate rapes”. For a contemporary report of the incident, see COHEN 2012.

⁵⁰ Hdt. 1,5,3: Ἐγὼ δὲ περὶ μὲν τούτων οὐκ ἔρχομαι ἐρέων ὥς οὕτως ἢ ἄλλως κως ταῦτα ἐγένετο... Of course, Herodotus returns to the topic of Helen and Paris at 2,112–20, further complicating the narrative.

⁵¹ Dionysius also uses other words to refer to sexual violence, such as βιασμός (e.g., *Ant. Rom.* 1,77,3 and 1,78,8), φθορά (e.g., *Ant. Rom.* 1,79,9) and ὕβρις (e.g., *Ant. Rom.* 4,63,1). Words related to ἀρπαγή can also refer to other types of theft, such as illegally assuming a magistracy (*Ant. Rom.* 2,6,3) or stealing cattle or property more generally (e.g. *Ant. Rom.* 3,8,2 and 3,41,1). For the vocabulary of rape in *Ant. Rom.* 1, see JERUE 2023a; for Greek words that can denote rape and sexual violence more generally, see LAURIOLA 2022, 16–22.

⁵² Of the 14 occurrences of ἀρπαγή in Hdt., half are found in 1,1–5. The verb ἀρπάζω is used more broadly in Hdt., but 11 of its 28 occurrences are used in the opening to book 1. As Christina Kraus has rightly pointed out *per litteras*, the verb is also used four times in Gorg. *Hel.* (fr. 11) and can thus be taken as “rhetorically authorized” in discussions of Helen's rape.

location ἔργον λαμπρὸν occurs four times in the *Histories*.⁵³ In fact, Dionysius appears to be citing Hdt. 1,174, where we find the same collocation.⁵⁴ Not only do these parallels increase the Herodotean flavor of the passage,⁵⁵ but, as Kirkland has discussed, Dionysius praises Herodotus' historiographical project using the same language.⁵⁶

The Possible Meanings of Rape in Dionysius

If we privilege this Herodotean allusion, the meaning of “an old Greek custom and the most noteworthy means for establishing marriage,” merits revisiting. Furthermore, the meaning of the phrase can be understood on various levels. Within the narrative context (i.e. Romulus speaking to the Sabine women), the assimilation of the captives to Io, Europa, Medea and Helen surely elevates their suffering to mythical and even epic proportions. While that might sound like an attempt at flattery, it fundamentally reduces their suffering into a mere plot point in a larger narrative that centers on great men and their deeds. The promise of fame and renown seems to be what Romulus can offer his captives in return for their suffering and submission.

And yet there is another level on which the allusion to Herodotus is meaningful: in addition to being productive within the specific narrative context, it can shed light on the larger significance of the story. In this case, with his gesture towards tradition and precedent, Romulus is cast as a new Herodotean Paris.⁵⁷ Like Paris whose actions led to unexpected consequences, Romulus, who wished to establish bonds of friendship with his neighbors,⁵⁸ has miscalculated, at least in part. While some of the families of the kidnapped women choose to let the matter slide, others do not. His actions, of course, gave way to what Dionysius calls a “great and difficult” war with the Sabines (2,33,1), who obviously did not see Romulus' actions as an established way to form an alliance nor a legitimate means of contracting marriage. Even if in the end Rome does come out on top, the choice to kidnap women does not pan out as expected. It is only because of the women's intervention in the conflict, that the war can come to a satisfactory conclusion and Romulus, of course, must share power with the Sabine Titus Tatius (2,46). It was the women's act of bravery, not simply their submission to Romulus' desire, that cemented their place in early Roman history.⁵⁹

Finally, the allusion to Herodotus underscores the centrality of sexual violence within larger historical processes and the escalation of hostilities: both Herodotus' account and the narrative portion of Dionysius' *Antiquitates Romanae* begin with conflicts centered around the contested abduction of women. And in the case of Rome, rape more generally can be read as a metaphor for Roman imperialism.⁶⁰ Importantly, the abduction of the Sabine women was not simply a one-off solution to a particular problem. Rather, it becomes

⁵³ Cf. Hdt. 1,174; 6,15; 3,72; 9,15.

⁵⁴ Dion. Hal. *Ant. Rom.* 2,30,2: οὐτε χρήμασι δυνατοῖς οὐτε λαμπρὸν ἔργον ἀποδεξιμένοις οὐδέν. Cf. Hdt. 1,174: Οἱ μὲν νυν Κᾶρες οὐδέν λαμπρὸν ἔργον ἀποδεξάμενοι ἐδουλώθησαν ὑπὸ Ἀρπάγου, οὐτε αὐτοὶ οἱ Κᾶρες ἀποδεξάμενοι οὐδέν, οὐτε ὅσοι Ἑλλήνων ταύτην τὴν χώραν οἰκέουσι.

⁵⁵ For Herodotean aspects of Dionysius' work and “submerged allusion,” see KIRKLAND 2022, 61–65.

⁵⁶ See KIRKLAND 2022, 90 on Dion. Hal. *Thuc.* 5,5.

⁵⁷ Cf. Livy's account, where the story goes (*satis constat*) that Rome's proto-founder, Aeneas (along with Antenor) had escaped Troy because he had always advocated for Helen's return (...*reddendaeque Helenae semper auctores fuerunt*, 1,1). The difference between Livy's Aeneas and Dionysius' Romulus is striking.

⁵⁸ Dion. Hal. *Ant. Rom.* 2,31,1: τῆς δὲ ἀρπαγῆς τὴν αἰτίαν οἱ μὲν εἰς σπάνιν γυναικῶν ἀναφέρουσιν, οἱ δ' εἰς ἀφορμὴν πολέμου, οἱ δὲ τὰ πιθανότατα γράφοντες, οἷς κἀγὼ συγκατεθέμην, εἰς τὸ συνάψαι φιλότητα πρὸς τὰς πλησιοχώρους πόλεις ἀναγκαίαν.

⁵⁹ For the way Dionysius emphasizes the Romans' reliance on the captured women to resolve a difficult situation, see JERUE 2023b.

⁶⁰ See DENCH 2005.

the first in a long series of forced acts of submission.⁶¹ In fact, the rape is directly linked to Rome's first expansionary ambitions, resulting in the establishment of the city's first colonies in Caenina and Antemnae.⁶² Just as these rapes themselves resulted in new relationships and the production of offspring, Rome forcefully inserts herself into the very fabric of neighboring communities, by planting colonists to live there and displacing others. This is a means of forcing outsiders into unsolicited partnerships from which they cannot disentangle themselves.⁶³ Of course, these processes of conquest and forced assimilation culminated under Augustus' reign, when Dionysius was writing his history.⁶⁴

While undoubtedly traumatic, these acts, from a very particular Roman point of view, give way to a "happy ending," where warring parties are joined together through familial and civic bonds. Similar views on rape, of course, feature prominently in other literary genres, such as new comedy, where marriage is often depicted as a sort of magic salve that undoes the harms and injury of sexual violence.⁶⁵ That said, we can easily detect less charitable ways of understanding sexual violence and ambition for power in ancient literature.⁶⁶ Sextus Tarquinius' rape of Lucretia, which Dionysius consistently refers to with the language of *hubris*, is an obvious example.⁶⁷ Despite some important differences, it is hard to deny other troubling parallels between Romulus' and Sextus Tarquinius' actions.⁶⁸ Who commits these acts of violence and whether the reader identifies with the perpetrator largely determines the extent to which an act could be depicted as justified. The parallel with Herodotus also reminds us that the meaning of rape had been up for grabs from the outset of the Greek historiographical tradition, either seen as an act that can be excused or, alternatively, a brazen and shameless crime requiring punishment.⁶⁹ And there were other Greek historians who were openly critical of Roman expansionism and perceived greed,⁷⁰ such as Metrodorus of Scepsis⁷¹ or Timagenes of Alexandria.⁷² Beyond difference in political or ideological views, it is important to remember that migrant authors could live under very different conditions and enjoy varying degrees of comfort and security.⁷³ These factors not only influence the meaning with which one imbues a story, but also one's ability to speak one's mind frankly.⁷⁴

⁶¹ See WELCH 2015, 95–97 for a similar argument about the depiction of the rape on the coinage of Lucius Titurius Sabinus in the context of the Social War.

⁶² Dion. Hal. *Ant. Rom.* 2,34.

⁶³ See DOUGHERTY 1998, 278–79 on rape as a weapon of war and tool for erasing a community's identity. From a very different perspective, MILES 1995, 186 argues that the rape of the Sabine women can be seen, paradoxically, as a way of promoting cooperation and fostering community.

⁶⁴ See CORNELL 2020 on the end of Roman expansion.

⁶⁵ The point is made by REEDER 2017, 366. See WITZKE 2020 for rape in Plautus, as well as LAURIOLA 2022, 46–48. For new comic strategies for downplaying the seriousness of rape, see McPhee in this volume, especially pp. 69–73.

⁶⁶ REEDER 2017, 380–81 offers several telling examples where rape is condemned or refraining from rape is applauded.

⁶⁷ For Dionysius' treatment of Lucretia, see SCHULTZE 2019, 171–72.

⁶⁸ Both, for instance, mix force with persuasion and gesture towards future glory and greatness. The most important difference between the two stories, of course, is that the women whom Romulus abducts are unmarried (always referred to as παρθέναι), unlike Lucretia.

⁶⁹ For ancient debates over the meaning and legitimacy of wartime rape, see GACA 2014, 330–31.

⁷⁰ For Dionysius' own reference to critical historians, see *Ant. Rom.* 1,5. For other historians who express criticism of Rome, see SCHMITZ – WIATER 2011, 17–18, GABBA 1991, 192–94; CHAMPION 2000; WIATER 2011, 101–02.

⁷¹ We know this from a passing reference at Plin. *nat.* 34,34: *ni Metrodorus Scepsius, cui cognomen a Romani nominis odio inditum est, propter MM statuarum Volsinios expugnatos obiceret.*

⁷² For the anecdotes about Timagenes see *Suida* s.v. Τιμαγένης; Plut. *ant.* 72; Sen. *dial.* 3,23 and Sen. *con.* 10,5,22 with ALONSO-NÚÑEZ 1982, 132–24. For a broader perspective on the conditions of Greeks writing on Rome in the first century, see YARROW 2006, 25–44. For a more tempered view of Timagenes, see DE JONGE 2022.

⁷³ Though BOEHMER 2005, 231 points out in relation to contemporary migrant literature that migrant authors are often part of a new cosmopolitan elite, in an ancient context this may not necessarily have been the case. Cf. WEAIRE 2005.

⁷⁴ Cf. AHL 1984.

Aware of these different understandings of and relationships with Roman power, Dionysius crafts his version of Rome's first expansion so that it is open to various readings. He does not criticize Rome outright, but does give Romulus a somewhat weak argument to justify his questionable actions. As a Greek author writing for a range of audiences in Rome, Dionysius was aware of different reactions that readers could have to key moments in the city's history. The rape of the Sabine women should be considered one of these moments. In telling the story, Dionysius leaves space for readers to make of it what they wish. Surely, this fits into recent approaches to Dionysius that stress the dialogic and interactive nature of his work.⁷⁵ Beyond this well-known interactive nature of Dionysius' work, the author also reflects on how readers from different cultural backgrounds can have radically different reactions to the same story: as he explains in book 5, one's own experiences and background (τῶν ἰδίων παθῶν) condition how one interprets stories about others (τὰ περὶ τῶν ἄλλων λεγόμενα).⁷⁶ This acknowledgement that readers could make sense of historical material in various ways should caution us against forcing a single meaning on consequential and controversial events.⁷⁷ Elsewhere in the *Antiquitates Romanae*, the facts themselves are up for grabs and Dionysius prefers to let the reader choose which version to accept.⁷⁸ He does not tell us what to make of this rape, but allows his readers' views, prejudices and beliefs to shape the story's meaning. All of this, of course, further shows Dionysius' debt to Herodotus, forming central aspects of what Kirkland defines as the "Herodotean sensibility."⁷⁹ The use of ambiguous language to narrate an uncomfortable yet pivotal moment in Rome's early history allows the historian to craft a scene in which different readers can imbue the text with their own values and interpretations.

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⁷⁵ This idea has recently been succinctly discussed by Kirkland 2022, 48 who notes that many of his writings feel "more dialogic than magisterial."

⁷⁶ Dion. Hal. *Ant. Rom.* 5,8,1 where the historian discusses how Greeks and Romans may understand Brutus' choice to execute his son.

⁷⁷ See also, for instance, *Ant. Rom.* 1,8,3–4 on the different desires that can motivate readers to pick up a history. Also, see *Ant. Rom.* 2,68 for how one's "philosophical" convictions have an important bearing on the process of textual analysis. WIATER 2011a, 232 provides a nice discussion of Dion. Hal. *Dem.* 22 where diachronically contingent receptions of a text are discussed.

⁷⁸ E.g. *Ant. Rom.* 2,40,3 on different versions of the Tarpeia story (ἀλλ' ὑπὲρ μὲν τούτων κρινέτω τις ὡς βούλεται) or 8,80,3 on putting the sons of tyrants to death along with their fathers (ἀλλ' ὑπὲρ μὲν τούτων εἴτε ὁ παρ' Ἑλληνισιν ἀμείνων νόμος εἴτε τὸ Πρωμαίων ἔθος κρείττον, ἀφίημι τῷ βουλομένῳ σκοπεῖν).

⁷⁹ See especially KIRKLAND 2022, 32–34.

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Sexual Violence and the So-called ‘Gains of Vengeance’ in Ancient Rome

ASH FINN

Introduction

Book 9 of Apuleius’ *Metamorphoses* contains the so-called ‘miller’s tale’, in which a miller comes home early and catches his wife in adultery with a young boy.¹ After the boy who had been hiding under a tub is revealed to the miller, the latter takes time to consider how to avenge his damaged honour (*damnum pudicitiae*). According to the narrator, the miller reacts in an unusual way. Rather than grow angry and try to attack the boy, he instead remains calm and in a lengthy speech littered with legal terminology assures the boy he will come to no harm. The miller is, however, lying and he takes the boy into the bedroom, locks the door and rapes him, and so “enjoyed the most gratifying revenge for his ruined marriage” (*gratissima corruptarum nuptiarum vindicata perfruebatur*).² The next day, not content with this revenge, the miller has the boy hoisted up by two slaves and proceeds to flog his buttocks with a rod whilst chastising him for his lofty ambitions as an adulterer. He then lets the boy go “with his white buttocks the worse for their treatment both during the night and in the daytime” (*tamen nates candidas illas noctu diuque dirruptus*).³

Among the adultery tales of Book 9, the miller’s tale stands out due to the casualness with which the rape of a young boy is used as a form of revenge for the miller’s damaged honour. The narrator specifically describes the miller as a “good man” (*bonus vir*) and cannot resist but crack a joke about the various types of violence the boy has suffered. When researching rape in ancient Rome, this episode should give us pause to think about the frequency (and acceptability) of the use of sexual violence as a form of revenge or punishment, and what this can tell us about the rape culture(s) of the ancient Mediterranean more widely. This paper considers this question in light of ancient and modern theories about the role of revenge and the retributive emotions. It argues that the use of sexual violence as a form of revenge or punishment provided Roman writers with a paradigm to capture certain intertwined attitudes towards revenge, honour, social competition, and masculinity. Yet before moving on to look at the bigger picture, it is worth examining several more examples of rape used as revenge in Roman literature to further contextualise the miller’s tale.

¹ Apul. *met.* 9,14–30. For discussion see, FRANGOULDIS 2000; PAPAIOANNOU 2000, who both discuss its relationship to theatrical performance. LANGLANDS 2006, 236–46, who discusses it in light of *pudicitia*. All translations are from the Loeb editions unless otherwise specified.

² As was frequently made clear throughout the various conference panels, modern definitions of rape as a non-consensual and criminal act do not always map neatly onto ancient examples. Here I understand rape to be an act of sexual aggression that is undertaken expressly without consent and (usually) by force. As revenge is explicitly defined as an act that inflicts pain and/or suffering on an individual (see below), all of the episodes discussed here are clearly framed by the authors as both painful and non-consensual.

³ Apul. *met.* 9,28.

Sexual violence and sexual humour

As readers of Martial may notice, this tale in Apuleius is an adaptation of a recurring motif in Latin literature, in which a husband catches his wife *in flagrante* with a young lover. In order to avenge the damage to his marriage and his honour, the cuckolded husband then rapes the young boy. This set piece was apparently common enough that Martial could refer to the “boyish punishment” (*supplicium puerile*) and expect his readers to know what he meant.⁴ Similarly, the same motif is adapted by Catullus in *c.* 56 in which he claims to have “caught” a young boy (*pupulus*) having sex with his girlfriend and so, as a punishment, rapes the boy (*protelo rigida mea cecidi*). Moreover, as this motif was apparently based on a mime, it was likely known well outside the educated circles of Apuleius and Martial.⁵ In Catullus *c.* 15, again the idea that adulterers would be punished by rape is used albeit in a slightly different form. The poet warns his associate Aurelius not to violate his trust and try to have sex with the young boy he places in his care. If he does, Catullus warns, he will rape Aurelius with radishes and mullets.⁶ Similarly, Horace intimates that adulterers may not leave with their dignity intact if caught in the act.⁷ Lest we assume such stories were reserved only for novelists and poets, Valerius Maximus records in his collection of *exempla* the various punishments meted out to adulterers by cuckolded husbands including castration and gang-rape by the household slaves.⁸

Sexual violence as a form of revenge might not just be restricted to cases of adultery, however. One example in which the offence does not entail sexual activity *per se*, although still related to sexuality, is Catullus *c.* 16 in which the poet threatens to orally and anally rape (*pedicabo ego vos et irrumabo*) his detractors, who had allegedly impugned his masculinity by suggesting he was as effeminate as his verses.⁹ Several scholars have noted the similarities between this poem and *c.* 56 mentioned above and another collection of poems known as the *Carmina Priapea*. This collection written sometime during the first century CE ostensibly relates the thoughts and words of the god Priapus.¹⁰ Of particular interest for the current paper are the numerous poems in which Priapus, acting in his role as protector of gardens and orchards, threatens to punish those who come to steal with oral, vaginal, and anal rape using his exceptionally large penis. Take as an example *Priap.* 22: “Whoever the robber may be, each has something to offer me (*femina si furtum faciet mihi verve puerve*): The woman her cunt, the man his gob; if a boy, his arse will do the job (*haec cunnum, caput hic praebeat, ille nates*).”¹¹ In another of Martial’s epigrams, he describes the tedious nature of being invited to dinner at the house of an obnoxious freedman, Zoilus. At the end of the poem, after a lengthy display of a combination of wealth and bad manners of the sort only the nouveau riche can embody, the host falls asleep. The poet points out to a friend how now would be a perfect time to take their revenge by orally raping Zoilus. Only one thing gets in their way, as Zoilus is said to actually *enjoy* this kind

⁴ Mart. *epigr.* 2,60; 2,47; 2,49.

⁵ For the relationship between all three, see SCHMIDT 1989. The mime, SCHLAM 1992, 77; PAPAIOANNOU 2002; REYNOLDS 1946.

⁶ Attested elsewhere only in Juv. 10,310–17. A play on the alleged Athenian practice of punishing adulterers by forcing a radish into their anus. Discussed by O’BRYEN 2017, who assumes it actually happened.

⁷ Hor. *sat.* 1,2,37–46; 126–35.

⁸ Val. Max. 6, 1, 13. Castration as a punishment for adulterers was apparently well enough known to be a recurring scene in Roman comedy. Plaut. *Poen.* 862–63; Plaut. *Curc.* 25–38; Ter. *Eun.* 957. Cf. Ar. *eq.* 362–65.

⁹ Discussed by, FITZGERALD 1995, 34–55; SELDEN 2007/1992, 514–32; STEVENS 2013, 71–81.

¹⁰ What exact date in the first century and whether they are single authored or a collection of poems by different authors is debated by scholars. See, the introduction in PARKER 1988; O’CONNOR 2019; HOLZBERG 2005, 368–70; RICHLIN 1992, 141–43. Neither debate changes the direction of the current discussion. Similarities to Catullus, UDEN 2007.

¹¹ Trans. PARKER 1988 with brief commentary. Cf. *Priap.* 11; 13; 15; 24; 28; 31; 35; 44; 52; 59; 69; 74.

of treatment; he is a *fellator*. Thus, the poet and his friend must endure the unhappy position of remaining unavenged.¹²

The use of rape and sexual violence may not just have been restricted to interpersonal vengeance. In his book *On the Spectacles*, Martial appears to recall a particular punishment that had been carried out in the arena in which a female convict had been made to play the role of Pasiphae and forced into having sex with a bull.¹³ Similarly, in Book 10 of Apuleius’ *Metamorphoses*, the narrator relates another tale about a murderess, who had been on a killing spree driven by jealousy after mistaking her husband’s sister for his lover. Perhaps a play on the threat of castration as a punishment for adulterers, the murderess takes her revenge on her rival by thrusting a red-hot poker in her vagina.¹⁴ Having been arrested and put on trial, the woman now awaits punishment *ad bestias*. However, the punishment is not simply to be fed to carnivorous animals but rather to be forced to copulate with an ass in the arena, a fate she avoids after the ass flees not wanting to be subjected to such a public disgrace.

When examining Roman society as a rape culture, we may want to ask as to what extent these texts and examples are evidence for the wider use and acceptance of sexual violence as a form of revenge in ancient Rome. However, variations of genre and literary purpose complicate any straightforward answer. Even more complicating is the inability to securely locate any of these episodes in historical reality. As Edwards points out, these types of anecdotes are absent from the pages of Cicero and Tacitus.¹⁵ Furthermore, as the narrator’s joke about the boy raped by the miller shows, many of the above-mentioned texts and anecdotes are clearly for the purposes of comedic entertainment. We can note, for example, the opening lines to Catullus *c.* 56: “O, Cato, what an absurdly funny thing, worthy for you to hear and laugh at” (*O rem ridiculam, Cato et iocosam, dignamque auribus et tuo cachinno*); “The thing is too absurd and funny” (*res est ridicula et nimis iocosa*). Thus, many of these anecdotes form a sub-stratum of a larger selection of texts that may be grouped together as examples of Roman ‘sexual humour’.¹⁶ Does this mean, then, that they are somehow divorced from reality?

This larger group of texts has been examined by Amy Richlin in her hugely influential study *The Garden of Priapus: Sexuality and Aggression in Roman Humor*.¹⁷ Outlining what she describes as “Priapic” humour, Richlin argues for a humour of aggression in which the joker assumes a dominant position over the intended target. At the centre of this paradigm is a figure who resembles the god Priapus, who is both threatening and “anxious to defend himself by adducing his strength, virility, and (in general) all traits that

¹² Mart. *epigr.* 3,82. i.e., it is consensual. That Zoilus is said to enjoy such treatment is to impugn his masculinity and social status. Precisely what the poet had hoped to achieve by raping him anyway. See below. For oral rape as a method of revenge, cf. Catull. 21,37; Mart. *epigr.* 2,47; 2,83; 3,96; CP 13,22,35,59. These and other examples are discussed by ADAMS 1983, 125–30. See also, RICHLIN 1981.

¹³ Mart. *spect.* 6(5). A similar event is possibly related by Suetonius, *Nero* 12,2.

¹⁴ Apul. *met.* 10,23–29; 34–35.

¹⁵ EDWARDS 1993, 56. That is not to say they have no historical value and numerous social historians have argued for the value of texts such as Apuleius’ novel as a source for social history, e.g. FAGAN 2011a; MILLAR 1981. Perhaps the best candidates are those reported by Valerius Maximus in relation to the punishment of adulterers, or Martial’s account of the woman’s punishment in the arena. See, COLEMAN 1990, 63–64; and 2006, 62–68 with further bibliography, who understands it as likely real. Tacitus, *ann.* 13,17, does, however, record Nero’s alleged rape of Britannicus.

¹⁶ The use of sexual violence in comedy, albeit in a slightly different way, has also been observed in classical Athens. In relation to Aristophanes’ comedies, for example, see Breitenfeld in this volume.

¹⁷ RICHLIN 1992. Richlin has not been the only one to recognize these texts as humorous or entertaining. See also, HOLZBERG 2002; 2005. The argument that Apuleius’ novel is primarily a piece of literary entertainment has been well demonstrated by HARRISON 2013.

are considered normal".¹⁸ The joker threatens those who are the target of the joke (e.g. pathic homosexuals or promiscuous women) just as Priapus threatens thieves, claiming his sexual power over them and exposing them as being in some way sexually abnormal.¹⁹ The question must be asked as to what this form of humour can tell us about wider social and cultural assumptions about sexual aggression. As Richlin shows, and particularly in relation to satire, much comedy comes from its relationship with real life albeit taken to hyperbolic levels, and she demonstrates throughout that the assumptions underlying many of these jokes have their roots in very real Roman attitudes towards social relations and dominance. This does not, however, mean that the texts can be read as historical accounts of actual events, but rather that they are indicative of wider Roman attitudes towards sexuality and violence.

Richlin's study has plenty to commend it and has been largely accepted by scholars, and she does much to develop our understanding of the social and cultural setting of these texts. However, in relation to revenge or punishment not all of the texts can be said to be expressly comedic. Along with those of Valerius Maximus and the punishments in the arena, another example comes from a third tale in Apuleius' *Metamorphoses*. A band of robbers decide to sell a kidnapped maiden to a brothel after she had attempted to escape and deprive them of their expected ransom money. According to their new leader, her repeated rape in the brothel will provide them with adequate revenge (*cum lupanari servierit, vindictae vobis depensuram*).²⁰ Rather than an interpretation of sexual humour, this episode is a variation of a common theme in the Greek romance novels in which a beautiful (and chaste) heroin narrowly avoids sexual exploitation at the hands of criminals.²¹

In Skinner's discussion of theories surrounding Roman sexual humour she suggests that if aggressive comedy permits us to express hostilities with greater freedom and intensity (à la Richlin), and if, in line with some feminist theories, things like pornography allow for a greater propensity for the use of force against children or women, then "literary obscenity would have been complicit in the culture of violence to which Romans were acclimatized".²² This raises the difficult question as to what extent the examples discussed here are reflective of a wider use of rape and sexual violence as a form of revenge or punishment. Did the young boys reading Valerius Maximus in search of *exempla* for declamation really believe that if they caught somebody committing adultery, they might reasonably hand him over to the household slaves to be raped? Would Martial or Catullus' readers have raped a young boy they caught in bed with their wife?

There is no easy answer to this question and scholars are divided about how 'real' many of these examples could be.²³ In Catullus *c.* 37, the poet threatens to orally rape two-hundred tavern goers, surely an impossible feat. As David Wray argues, this threat clearly is not meant to be taken literally but is rather to be understood as "comically absurd bluster."²⁴ On the other hand, as noted, much of the comedy of satire comes from its relationship to real life, and when it comes to the other *ad hoc* punishments for adultery, we

¹⁸ RICHLIN 1992, 58.

¹⁹ Ibid. 58–63, 65.

²⁰ Apul. *met.* 7.9. It is important to note, as with the cases in the arena, the avenger need not always be the one actually committing the act of sexual aggression or rape to secure vengeance. See below, 136–37.

²¹ HIJMANS JR et al. 1981, 144. The story of the murderess noted above is also not expressly comical resembling more closely tragedy.

²² SKINNER 2005, 214.

²³ Discussed by RICHLIN 1992, 215–19, who suggests they could have some basis in reality. FITZGERALD 1995, 64, suggests Priapus' threats reflect real practice. WILLIAMS 2004, 201, suspects they could have happened. UDEN 2007, 5–6 remains unsure. EDWARDS 1993, 56, is sceptical. ADAMS 1983, 125–30, suggests *irrumare* is rarely to be taken literally.

²⁴ WRAY 2001, 80–87, quote at 84.

do know of several examples of angry husbands violently punishing adulterers suggesting that these examples did have some basis in reality.²⁵ And yet, despite appearing in a range of authors and different texts such episodes as discussed here rarely appear outside of satire.²⁶ Moreover, had angry husbands carried out similar revenges they could have been potentially prosecuted for *stuprum*.²⁷ In the case of the robbers and the maiden, it is highly likely that many women were kidnapped and sold into slavery for sex.²⁸ To what extent this was done to satisfy the robbers’ vengeance or simply for profit, we cannot say. In a society in which slaves of either gender were used arbitrarily as sex objects by owners, who could be quick to take revenge on or punish slaves for misdemeanours, it seems likely that rape was used amongst other punishments.²⁹ One case in which we do know rape was used as a form of revenge or punishment was in war.³⁰

To examine further the role of rape or sexual violence as a form of revenge or punishment, and what this can tell us more widely about rape culture in ancient Rome, a different approach is needed to try and elucidate the commonalities from different genres and authors. Another approach to these texts, and in particular Catullus, has been to read them in the context of aristocratic social competition. Wray, for example, argues that Catullus’ poetry ought to be read as performative masculinity in the context of the homosocial interactions between Roman elite males. Catullus is in essence performing “manly excellence”.³¹ An alternative approach, yet in the same context, is highlighted by Skinner who, in noting that at times Catullus appears to be the victim of another’s aggressive masculinity, suggests that his poetry is not simply aimed at demeaning its target but rather grapples with anxieties about the poet’s or the audience’s own social standing.³²

It is notable that the majority of rape revenges in Latin literature are directed at other males, and often (although not always) those considered in some way ‘other’ to the adult citizen male that stood at the centre of Roman thought and action (e.g. boys, freedmen, criminals). In light of Wray and Skinner’s arguments, here I propose to place these revenge episodes and examples in the context of a society centred on the adult citizen male, in which men competed for honour and in which both the ability to take revenge and ideas about sexuality were intimately related to personal power. This means placing the question of historicity aside, and thinking about the social, cultural and emotional factors relating to revenge as a social phenomenon that underpin many of these episodes. Moreover, even in those examples that may be historically “real”, many of the same factors will be applicable. Whilst these episodes may not necessarily be able to reveal how common the use of sexual violence was as a form of revenge, as paradigmatic acts they can reveal much about the competition for honour and power among the elite men of ancient Rome.³³

²⁵ Gell. 17, 18; Quint. *inst.* 3,6,27; 5,10,88; Val. Max. 6,1,13. The jurists recognised the likelihood of violence, *Dig.* 48,5,23(22),3; 48,5,39,8 (Papinian). Discussed by TREGGIARI 1991, 271–75.

²⁶ An interesting comparison is found in Diodorus, 16,93,7, who records the rape of Pausanias in Philip’s court as part of an ongoing feud as a real event.

²⁷ SELDEN 2007/1992, 516; WILLIAMS 2010, 130–35.

²⁸ See above n. 21.

²⁹ Val. Max. 6,1,9. Seneca does mention the violent and vindictive punishments of slaves in *De Ira*, e.g. *dial.* 4,25; 5,34,1, although he does not mention rape.

³⁰ Due to considerations of space, this cannot be given the full treatment it deserves here. But see, WILLIAMS 2010, 112–16; REEDER 2017, esp. 369–82.

³¹ WRAY 2001, quote at 67.

³² SKINNER 2005, 218.

³³ “Absence of evidence does not mean evidence of absence” and I do not wish to argue that acts such as those discussed here did not happen nor that they did not happen frequently, but rather to point to the difficulties presented due to the nature of the available evidence.

Sexual violence as fulfilling emotional and social expectations

Arguably the vindictive emotions are a salient feature of all human societies. In order to elucidate better and provide a greater depth of understanding of Roman views on revenge, and how they might relate to sexual violence, use will be made of more modern research on revenge more widely and in particular the influential work of psychologist and emotional theorist Nico Frijda.³⁴ As we will see, these theories can help explain many of the emotional factors of revenge which will in turn help provide a framework which can be used to examine examples of rape or sexual violence more holistically.

Revenge may be defined as: “a strategy of deliberate *retaliation* (...) aiming to injure somebody as “payback” for wrongful harm they allegedly inflicted on some other party”, usually seeking some form of satisfaction or similar.³⁵ Studies show that an impulse to vengeance – but not necessarily carried out – is possibly an innate feature of human societies.³⁶ Yet despite its prevalence, arguably it is an irrational impulse, serves no practical purpose, and indeed can even be hugely damaging to the avenger.³⁷ In his work on the emotions, Frijda similarly defines vengeance as “an act designed to harm someone else, or some social group, in response to feeling that oneself has been harmed by that person or group, whereby the act of harming [...] is not designed to repair the harm, to stop it from occurring or continuing in the immediate confrontation, or to produce material gain.”³⁸ Working from a position that understands human emotions to have a purpose, Frijda asks whether the desire for vengeance can really be classed as an emotion if it serves no immediate function. He suggests that it can and sets out what he believes to be five “gains of vengeance” or the social functions of revenge.³⁹ These so-called “gains” provide an interesting perspective when considering the role of revenge in ancient Rome more widely, but also the use of rape or sexual violence more specifically.

The first obvious gain Frijda points to is deterrence. By reacting in a particular way to insults or affronts, we can warn others off trying something similar. In his oratorical handbook, *De Inventione*, Cicero describes revenge (*vindicatio*) as an innate instinct implanted in man by the law of nature. It is the means by which we repel violence (*vis*) and insult (*contumelia*) from both ourselves and our loved ones through defending (*defendere*) or avenging (*ulciscor*).⁴⁰ So, in his defence of P. Cornelius Sulla, when he states: “No-one has ever grazed me with the slightest suspicion whom I did not crush and destroy”, he is aiming to deter his opponent, Torquatus, from even *attempting* to assault him – verbally at least.⁴¹ In relation to the texts discussed above, and given the inherent social disgrace attached to being penetrated anally or orally, it is easy to understand the intended deterrent effects of Priapus’ warning against thieves, Catullus’ warnings

³⁴ On aspects of Roman revenge see, THOMAS 1984; NEWBOLD 2001a, 2001b; FLAIG 2003, 137–54; 2009.

³⁵ CHRISTENSEN 2016, 25. Cf. MURPHY 2003, 17: “Vengeance is the infliction of suffering on a person in order to satisfy vindictive emotions or passions [...] The goal of vengeance is simply to provide vindictive satisfaction to victims”; GOVIER 2002, 2–3: “When we see revenge, we seek satisfaction by attempting to harm the other (or associated persons) as a retaliatory measure.”

³⁶ RENTELN 1990, 88–138.

³⁷ CROMBAG et al. 2003, 333; ELSTER 1990, 862.

³⁸ FRIJDA 1994, 266.

³⁹ FRIJDA 1994, 270–82.

⁴⁰ Cic. *inv.* 2,66. Cf. his comments in *De Officiis*, 2,18, in which he describes justice as the means by which “we may ward off any impending trouble, avenge ourselves upon those who have attempted to injure us (*propulsemus ulciscamurque eos, qui nocere nobis conati sint*), and visit them with such punishment (*poena afficiamus*) as justice and humanity will permit.” Seneca at, *clem.* 1,21,1, how one of the outcomes of revenge (*ultio*) is to provide future safety (*securitas*).

⁴¹ Cic. *Sull.* 46.

to Aurelius, or Martial, Horace, and Juvenal's accounts of the rape of adulterers.⁴² In this sense, these humorous anecdotes might be seen as tongue-in-cheek warnings between author or speaker and the audience that reaffirm the societal disapproval of offences such as theft or adultery. Perhaps more seriously, we can assume the deterrent effect being forced to have sex with an animal in a public arena might have on would-be criminals.⁴³ However, as Frijda notes, deterrence cannot be the only function of vengeance.

Perhaps the most important gain of vengeance is that it is thought to remove the pain suffered by the victim of insult or injury.⁴⁴ Although Frijda lists this as his fifth gain, it can reasonably be understood as the resultant effect of gains two through four, which provide suggestions as to how the pain can be relieved. One way in which pain can be relieved is through the restoration of self-esteem.⁴⁵ As Frijda describes, damage to prestige or self-esteem is a major source of vengeful impulses. This is especially pertinent in societies that place a premium on honour.⁴⁶ This role of revenge or payback in honour societies has been described by legal historian William Miller in relation to the concept of an eye for an eye, or talion.⁴⁷ Societies that utilise the concept of the talion are often honour societies and honour societies "did not allow for refusing to redeem lost honour."⁴⁸ Not only does revenge work at a personal level in restoring honour, it also has a societal aspect too. Even if an individual did not want to pursue vengeance, societal or class pressures might make it impossible for him not to. He would always be seen as 'un-whole' in some way.

If we return to Cicero's definition of revenge, he states revenge has a role in "avenging" ourselves on those who have made attempts to harm us. It is this second function of revenge which is most interesting and important for the current discussion. Whilst the words Cicero uses for revenge, *vindicationem* from the stem *vindic-*, and for avenging, *ulciscamur* from the stem *ulcisc-*, can be used as synonyms, it seems that in this instance Cicero is taking them to be two similar but slightly different things. Whilst *ulcisci* can be understood as 'avenging' or the process of taking revenge, it can also be taken to mean 'exacting retribution'. It is, I think, this second meaning Cicero has in mind. Retribution is indicative of some form of payment or compensation for something lost through a wrong or criminal act; it has a restorative function. If we couch this in terms of honour or self-esteem, then revenge served a purpose in repaying or restoring lost honour. This gain of vengeance is not strictly only applicable to sexual violence and could, in theory, involve any form of revenge. That said, when one's honour is intrinsically linked to physicality and control over the body, clearly sexuality plays some role in accruing or losing it.⁴⁹ Moreover, given the inherently public nature of honour, it can also be suggested that any revenge taken ought to be either done publicly or otherwise circulated among one's social group. This is a point we shall return to below.

Closely related to the restoration of self-esteem is the equalization of power. As Frijda describes it, when one individual deliberately harms another, they manifestly have the power to do so. What revenge does is reverse this new power inequality.⁵⁰ Roman writers were well aware of the power dynamics of ven-

⁴² WILLIAMS 2010, 191–214, 221–22 discusses the stereotyping and stigma attached to those who were penetrated.

⁴³ Deterrence was one of the main reasons Roman writers give for punishment. See for example, Cic. *fin.* 2,53; Sen. *clem.* 1,22,1–3; Tac. *ann.* 1,45; 14,45; Dig. 48,19,28,15 (Callistratus).

⁴⁴ FRIJDA 1994, 279–80.

⁴⁵ FRIJDA 1994, 276–79.

⁴⁶ Ancient Rome as an honour society, LONDON 1997; BARTON 2001; VERVAET 2017; COHEN 1991, who specifically explores Roman honour as it relates to the control of female sexuality in light of twentieth century studies on the so-called "Mediterranean honour".

⁴⁷ MILLER 2006, xii, 1–16.

⁴⁸ Ibid. x, 57.

⁴⁹ MANWELL 2007, 113–16, esp. 115; GLEASON 1995, 55–81; SKINNER 2005, 195–97.

⁵⁰ FRIJDA 1994, 275–76.

geance and the ability to take revenge was considered to be a distinct marker of a powerful individual. Similarly, those who could not or failed to take revenge could be seen as powerless and treated contemptuously by others.⁵¹ Quintilian describes well how those unfortunate to remain unavenged must endure “escaping the citizen body, yielding his possessions, enduring everything his enemy does to him (*fugiendum de civitate, cedendum bonis, aut omnia quaecumque inimicus fecerit perferenda*).”⁵²

As a form of power equalization, sexual violence in ancient Rome appears as an ideal form of revenge and numerous scholars have shown how intertwined Roman ideas about sexuality were with other forms of social hierarchy. As Monserrat notes, Roman gender was not compatible simply with biological sex, rather it was “produced at a place where anatomical sex is intersected by social relations, *especially power relations*.”⁵³ Roman gender was a performance rather than an anatomical given and a Roman man should embody a certain set of characteristics which were combined into the concept of *virtus* as embodied by the Roman *vir*.⁵⁴ Its antithesis, *mollitia*, effeminacy, was instead associated with women, children and slaves, and notions of subservience. In an ideally balanced world *virtus* controlled *mollitia* in all its forms.⁵⁵ These ideal qualities of manliness could be paired off with their antithetical qualities associated with effeminacy: moderation and excess, hardness and softness, courage and timidity, strength and weakness, activity and passivity, penetrating and penetrated, and, above all, domination and submission.⁵⁶ As far as Roman authors were concerned a real man, an ideal *vir*, was in control of his own desires, as well as his dependents, whereas an effeminate man cedes control and is dominated by his desires and by others; when it came to sex, penetrating others was definitively powerful and definitively masculine.⁵⁷

Unsurprisingly these sentiments surrounding sexuality gave rise to a culture in which insults about an opponent’s sexual proclivities were commonplace. One particularly notable example of this is Cicero’s accusation that Mark Antony had been in a sexual relationship with Gaius Curio, in which Antony had played the part of Curio’s wife (i.e. he had assumed the receptive role in sex).⁵⁸ Yet, as Edwards points out, these insults are not to be taken as any real basis for an individual’s sexual preferences. Instead, she notes that: “Accusations of certain forms of sexual misbehaviour made by Romans can be read as claims to dominance by the accuser over the accused.” And even more revealingly: “Accusations of effeminacy may be seen as diluted threats of rape.”⁵⁹ It is clear that the social dynamics present in these serious insults are the same as those explored by Richlin in her work on Roman sexual humour. When it comes to revenge, clearly the use of rape or sexual violence captures well the equalization or reversal of power dynamics.

Along with the restoration of self-esteem and the equalization of power imbalances, the final gain Frijda discusses is the alleviation of the avenger’s suffering or the restoration of the balance of suffering. To explore how vengeance does this, Frijda outlines the emotional significance of being subject to insult or affront. Whilst one obvious outcome of being subject to insult is a sense of harm or loss, also important is the belief that one’s harm or loss is caused by someone and that that person remains unscathed or even profits

⁵¹ Cic. *Verr.* II 5, 149; Sen. *dial.* 4,33,1; 5,4,4; Sen. *clem.* 1,7,3–4; Plin. *epist.* 1,23,2; Gell. 7,14,3; Plaut. *Trin.* 1173, *Poen.* 1280.

⁵² Quint. *inst.* 6,1,19.

⁵³ MONTSERRAT 1999, 152, my emphasis. See n. 49 above.

⁵⁴ WILLIAMS 2010, 148; WALTERS 1998, 32.

⁵⁵ WILLIAMS 2010, 145–51.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.* 156.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.* 155, 170.

⁵⁸ Cic. *Phil.* 2, 44.

⁵⁹ EDWARDS 1993, 75. Cf. LEVIN-RICHARDSON’S 2019, 100–09, comments about the sexual graffiti and social competition in Pompeii.

from it. Thus, along with his or her own sense of loss, the victim’s appraisal of the insult includes an awareness of the offender’s experience, too. This appraisal is linked to what Frijda calls “the Law of Comparative Feeling”, in which we compare our circumstances to those of others, a past version of ourselves, or even an idea of what could have been. He states: “My awareness includes his glory in having inflicted suffering upon me (...) all that contrasts with my own situation. *He walks in pleasure and I in suffering.*”⁶⁰ We can see this process at work in a discussion Cicero reportedly had in exile with an acquaintance, Philiscus. Philiscus had apparently questioned whether circumstances were as dire as Cicero might make them out to have been. In reply to which, Cicero asks whether Philiscus saw no shame in “wandering about with the name of exile, *causing laughter to your enemies*” (καὶ ἀλάσθαι, φυγάδα προσαγευόμενον, καὶ γέλωτα μὲν τοῖς ἐχθροῖς [...] παρέχοντα).⁶¹ As far as Cicero was concerned, his loss was his enemies’ gain. Even worse, they took pleasure from it. Conversely we might add that revenge, in reversing this situation, not only removes some (although perhaps not always all) of the offender’s gains but can also be expected to be a source of pleasure.⁶²

Whilst any form of revenge, allowing one to indulge and satisfy their vindictive emotions, removing some of the pain caused by offence and restoring one’s self esteem, contributes to that sense of pleasure, the concept of talion, making another suffer exactly as you have, holds a special place. There is a certain poetic justice in eye for an eye punishment. Or, as Miller puts it: “You had me down, and now it is *my* turn to have *you* down, to witness and *delight in your humiliation as you delighted in mine.*”⁶³ Whilst the joy of a well taken revenge might reasonably apply to any type of vengeance, the sexual gratification of the avenger plays an important role in many of above-mentioned texts, especially those involving adultery. This feature is clearly depicted in the first example we began with, the miller’s tale, in which the narrator describes the miller’s revenge as *gratissima*. The point is emphasised by the narrator’s description of the young boy as still being attractive to older men (*adulteros ipse delectans*).⁶⁴ The same assumptions appear to underlie the parallel instances in Martial. For instance, in epigram 2,47, addressed to Gallus, the poet questions whether he should put so much faith in the attractiveness of his buttocks in order to avoid a more violent punishment at the hands of an angry husband.⁶⁵ In Catullus *c.* 16, the poet captures well the joyous and triumphant aspects of revenge as he threatens to orally and anally rape those who had impugned his masculinity. But whilst the pleasure of the avenger can be assumed, there is another dimension to these texts. As noted earlier, in honour societies a good revenge ought to be a public revenge so others can witness and assess the avenger’s actions. Alternatively, an account of a well-taken revenge may be circulated around one’s social group. We can here point to the various letters of Cicero and Pliny advertising their triumphant revenges to their friends.⁶⁶ In the above-mentioned examples, therefore, clearly the audience has a part to play.

In Richlin’s study on Roman sexual humour she utilises some Freudian theory about what makes jokes work. She highlights the “A, B, C model” in which A (the teller) tells a joke about B (the target) to C (the audience), in which B is ridiculed. Because B is not usually present at the joke telling, this model allows jokes greater offence than perhaps they normally would have. Providing A and C hold similar sentiments

⁶⁰ FRIJDA 1994, 274.

⁶¹ Cass. Dio. 38,23,1. Cf. Cic. *ad Q. Fr.* 1,3,5–6.

⁶² On the pleasure of revenge see, McCLELLAND 2010 who connects the pleasure of revenge to narcissistic repair connected to self-esteem often mediated through the concept of honour. SEIP et al. 2014 note similarities between revenge and Schadenfreude. Cf. Arist. *Rh.* 2,2,1378a 31–b10; Arist. *Eth. Nic.* 3,8,1117a 5–7.

⁶³ MILLER 2006, 17.

⁶⁴ Apul. *met.* 9,22.

⁶⁵ The name Gallus carries connotations of the castrated priests of Magna Mater and thus effeminacy. Cf. Catull. 63.

⁶⁶ E.g., Cic. *ad Att.* 1,16(16),8–10; Plin. *epist.* 9,13.

and values, the resulting effect of this is that a camaraderie is created among the Cs who relate to what A is doing or saying. In turn, A may be rewarded with power and status.⁶⁷ This same dynamic has been pointed to by Elster in relation to honour and revenge. He suggests that honour is a “triadic” rather than “dyadic” relation; A gains honour by humiliating B in the presence of C.⁶⁸ As Frijda points out, when it comes to honour and self-esteem revenge can also add to them above and beyond simple restoration.⁶⁹

If we apply these dynamics to the episodes of rape revenge, clearly the audience plays a key part in them. Their role as witnesses and the laughter provoked by the more expressly comedic examples further humiliates the target of the revenge, and, in honour societies in which honour is conferred (or taken away) by public opinion, this plays an important role in restoring self-esteem and reversing the balance of suffering. Or, as Walters describes it, these individuals are effectively put on show in front of the community and forced to act out their humiliation.⁷⁰ The audience becomes judge and jury of who redeems honour and who loses it, who is successfully avenged and who deserves their contempt. Further pleasure is created as the audience feels free to indulge in Schadenfreude at the downfall of the identified target. Even when the target is not a “real” or specifically identifiable person, in these episodes revenge is taken against a certain *type* of person (B), an outsider, one that is seen as somehow threatening to the social order (the Cs in the room) be it thieves or adulterers or obnoxious freedmen.

The idea of a communal revenge being taken against outsiders in order to protect and defend the social order recalls the public the executions in the arena, which could often resemble theatrical performances. These executions that could, as in the example above, be designed to imitate mythological scenes have been described by Kathleen Coleman as “fatal charades.” Coleman argues that a key element of these public executions was the humiliation of the convict as “to alienate him from his entire social context, so that the spectators, regardless of class, were united in a feeling of moral superiority as they ridiculed the miscreant.”⁷¹ A degree of this superiority is created by the inherent prejudice a Roman audience had towards those marked out as outsiders or threats to the social order, and seeing them get what they (apparently) deserve.⁷² The often zero-sum nature of honour is often noted by scholars; one person’s loss is another’s gain. Yet whilst this is the case for dyadic interactions, as Coleman points out, it can also be the case in settings with much larger groups of people. It was suggested above that some of the pleasure of revenge comes from humiliating an opponent as to cause laughter and ridicule at their expense. This is linked to another theory of laughter that not only elevates the avenger but also the audience. Most often associated with Hobbes but going back as far as Aristotle, the laughter of superiority plays an important role in communal revenge.

A variation on this type of laughter is the concept of Herabsetzung, described by Richlin as it appears in Freud’s work. In short, it entails the degradation of a victim who is in some way superior to the joker or audience. However, this superiority need not be about social hierarchy or power *per se* but can include those who are, for example, very beautiful. Laughter is provoked when this person is somehow degraded or stained in some way. Yet the laughter in this instance does not just come from witnessing this degradation. “The audience’s pleasure in this is a definite glee in wickedness, in imaging their most pompous enemy or the most coveted beauty subjected to the most disgusting punishment or the most summary rape, and *in*

⁶⁷ RICHLIN 1992, 60–61.

⁶⁸ ELSTER 1990, 884.

⁶⁹ FRIJDA 1994, 278.

⁷⁰ WALTERS 1998, 361.

⁷¹ COLEMAN 1990, 47.

⁷² FAGAN 2011b, 155–88.

handling the filth themselves or imagining themselves as rapists.”⁷³ As in the arena, in these jokes there is a participatory element for the audience. As such we can see it is distinctive from Schadenfreude in which the joy is derived from simply witnessing the degradation. Like revenge, Herabsetzung involves participating in the actual act.⁷⁴

The revenges that involve young boys specifically described as attractive provide fodder for this type of communal and enjoyable revenge, in which the audience indulges its own fantasies about how *they* would like to punish such boys.⁷⁵ Or as Stevens describes it: “We seem to overhear a speaking subject threaten sexual violence; we are therefore positioned as voyeurs or, more properly, *écouteurs*: we desire to listen.” Alternatively, we read the text and assume the poet’s position.⁷⁶ This is particularly evident in Catullus *c.* 16 in which the poet’s use of the first-person results in the reader adapting his words as his or her own, *pedicabo ego vos et irrumabo*. Another example mentioned above is the case of the young maiden, who is to be sold off to the brothel to provide a gang of robbers with revenge. We may ask here who derives pleasure from this imagined revenge, the robbers themselves, the reader, or both?

Importantly, as Frijda points out, not every act of vengeance will contain all five gains in equal measure. The perceived gain of the offender in committing a certain act or to what extent certain types of revenge eliminate this is reflected in cultural norms and sentiments.⁷⁷ As has been argued above, rape and sexual violence in ancient Rome could yield all five of Frijda’s gains, whether as real-life revenges or as literary pieces in which the author seeks to capture the emotional aspects of a well-taken revenge. An important feature of the latter especially is the relationship between author and audience. Either the audience plays an observant role contributing to the avenger’s revenge by consenting to his actions with their laughter and enhancing the humiliation of the target of the vengeance, or, as in the arena, it participates by seizing moral superiority over the disgraced victim or by imaging themselves carrying out the act itself and deriving pleasure from their own well taken revenge. The fact that many of the above-mentioned examples are jokes, or involve figures such as Priapus that are ostensibly ridiculous, does not suggest that they are not to be taken as serious examples of attitudes towards the use of sexual violence and rape as a form of payback. Instead, it suggests that the comedy and ridiculousness are central features of how authors depicted the pleasure an avenger ought to feel in relieving the feeling of pain that results from being subject to insult, affront or offence.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have approached these texts predominantly as examples of the sentiments surrounding a culture of aggression that placed a premium on revenge which could be well-captured by the use of sexual violence, real or imagined. On the other hand, there is another reading of some of these texts that understands them as a critique of such sentiments rather than an endorsement. James Uden, for example, has argued in relation to Catullus’ Priapic poems that: “Priapus’ hypersexuality represented not sexual liberation

⁷³ RICHLIN 1992, 62.

⁷⁴ SEIP et al. 2014.

⁷⁵ This aspect of erotic subject matter has been picked upon by scholars, and in particular in relation to Catullus. See, FITZGERALD 1995, 34–55; SELDEN 2007/1992, 528–29, rather luridly states that: “The erotic subject matter of the pieces not only puts the reader into heat, but tantalizes him with the picture of a virile and sexually aggressive poet.” This aspect of fantasy is reflected in fantasies of vengeance which far outweigh actual acts of vengeance, FRIJDA 1994, 264.

⁷⁶ STEVENS 2013, 79.

⁷⁷ FRIJDA 1994, 282, 286.

for Catullus but a model of sexuality that, in its single-minded and overexaggerated emphasis on penetration and submission, seemed farcically boorish and unsophisticated.”⁷⁸ Similarly, Edwards notes how to appear too severe and harsh could be interpreted as being uncouth or rustic rather than urbane.⁷⁹ Does this reading change how we might understand sexual violence and the emotions of revenge? In short, no. Rather it can be seen to complement the above approach and confirm the impression that rape and sexual violence fulfilled many of the emotional criteria for a well-taken revenge in an honour society. It may, however, be understood as a critique of the use of such punishment as the aristocracy turned away from violent interpersonal revenge in favour of alternative methods.⁸⁰

In a culture in which power and honour are intimately tied to both the ability to take revenge for insults and a dominant ideology of male sexuality, clearly the use of rape and sexual violence as a form of revenge will hold a special place. Here it has been argued that the use of rape as a means of revenge or punishment provided a paradigm for certain intertwined sentiments surrounding honour, social competition, and masculinity. This is demonstrably the case in both episodes that are ostensibly real and those written as comedic entertainment. It was suggested that, due to the nature of the texts, it is difficult to know to what extent the latter reflect the regularity of rape as a form of interpersonal revenge. Instead, an approach was taken that prioritised the cultural and emotional aspects of vengeance. In her work on Roman comedy, Richlin notes how “cultures where rape is a joke are cultures that foster rape.”⁸¹ The debate over how influential comedy is on “real life” remains as important as when Richlin published her second edition thirty years ago.⁸² A common defence of controversial humour is that “it’s only a joke” designed to make people laugh rather than an endorsement or encouragement of the subject of the joke. In relation to Roman texts, in which the use of rape and sexual violence as a form of revenge is deployed for humorous purposes, it has been argued that rather than diffuse the situation, the expected laughter of the audience plays an active and important role. This is either through the humiliation of the target, thereby enhancing the avenger’s vengeance, or through the inclusion of the audience so that they too can participate and experience the pleasure of revenge, nurturing their own sense of personal power. As we have seen, the ideal adult Roman male was expected to embody certain characteristics that were evidence of the powerful position he occupied at the centre of Roman society and thought. This involved not only a normative expectation of assuming the penetrative role in all sexual encounters, but also the ability to defend his own, his family’s, or his social group’s honour in the face of insult or affront. Every elite Roman male saw himself as both a penetrator and an avenger, and when these two roles were combined, as having the choice to use sexual violence at will.

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⁷⁸ UDEN 2007, 2.

⁷⁹ EDWARDS 1993, 96. Cf. Sen. *benef.* 1,9,3–4.

⁸⁰ LONDON 2011, 376–87, regarding the *Lex Julia* on adultery. Cf. n. 23.

⁸¹ RICHLIN 1992, xviii.

⁸² PÉREZ – GREENE 2016; MEIER – MEDJESKY 2018.

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IMPERIAL IDEOLOGY AND COLONIAL DISCOURSES

The Sexual Exploitation of African Males in Roman Material Culture

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Introduction

African¹ males appear frequently in Roman material culture from the early Imperial period. Geographically widespread and diverse in iconography, these artefacts show men and boys as slaves, athletes, warriors and entertainers. These images have regularly been the subject of research,² but scholarship tends to focus on the construction and implication of their race or ethnicity, while further research has been neglected. This paper will explore three repeated image types of African males from early Imperial Rome, focusing on the sexual undertones of the iconography rather than exclusively ethnicity as a first step towards expanding the understanding of these objects and the perception of African males in the Roman imagination.

Before this analysis can commence, it must be stressed that these objects did not exist within a vacuum. In fact, as other papers in this publication will illustrate, the early Roman empire can be considered a “rape culture”. Though the *Lex Iulia de vi publica* effectively outlawed the rape of freeborn men, women, and children, no such protection was permitted for non-citizens or slaves, who could have been subjected to sexual violence and, in the case of slaves, it was often even expected.³ Contemporary material culture reflects this reality, as images of sexual assault, both literal and implied, appear frequently. The corpus of artefacts depicting African males is certainly no exception, and the three repeated iconographies at the centre of this analysis reveal the extent of the sexual exploitation of their image. Iconographic analysis and historical contextualisation of these image types will demonstrate how different forms of sexual exploitation may be found in each. Firstly, a group of bronze statuettes depicting nude African boys will be compared with descriptions of *pueri delicati*, who were the targets of lust for various contemporary poets. This comparison will shed light on this unusual artistic trend and the potential for sexual gratification gained by observers through voyeurism. A more graphic form of assault is to be found in a collection of oil lamps depicting the oral penetration of young African males. Such penetration, as will be discussed, may have been both an extension of the sexualisation of young African boys and a simultaneous condemnation of these boys to passivity and effeminacy. Finally, a group of Pompeian mosaics depicting ithyphallic Africans will consider the implications of these men being portrayed in an active sexual state. This paper aims to bring these seemingly

¹ The term “African” has been used in this paper to mean “Aethiopian”, denoting those who are from the land of “Aethiopia”, which is a region which stretches from the First to the Sixth Nile Cataracts. This term has been chosen to avoid confusion with the modern “Ethiopian”, denoting a person from the modern country of Ethiopia, and to remain accessible to non-specialist modern readers. Other scholars prefer to use the term Ethiopian, or black/Black. For a note on nomenclature, cf. DERBEW 2022, xiii–xv, who prefers “black”.

² The flaws of existing research, including scholarship cited in this paper, must be noted here, namely the use of racist language and abhorrent stereotypes. Such citation is not a condonation of this racism, but rather an attempt to give readers an overview of existing scholarship in this subject area, and to highlight the progress that still needs to be made.

³ STRONG 2021, 179–80.

disparate pieces of evidence together to shine a new light on the extent of sexual exploitation of African males in early Roman imperial art.

Voyeurism

Nudity appears frequently in images of African males from the Roman world. Figures of crouching or sleeping boys are exposed to the elements, while grotesque paintings of defecating men from Pompeii⁴ are strikingly macrophallic. Artists and viewers were fascinated with the African male body in various states of being, though there were often no explicitly sexual undertones. Viewers were simply viewers, concerned more with the artistic commentary on humanity than the potential for eroticism as a result of nudity. This is not the case, however, for a group of bronze sculptures depicting young servant-boys.

This image type of the young African boy-slave first emerges in the Hellenistic period, with a terracotta statuette discovered in Myrina⁵ reflecting characteristics seen in later iconography. This example depicts an older teenaged boy with long, curled hair, wearing a small loincloth. He carries a plate in his left hand, his right held behind his lower back, and he has a jug fastened at his waist. Despite general lack of detail on this object, the intricacies of musculature can still be seen on this boy's torso and legs, a feature which the artist had obviously prioritised in its creation. Other examples from the Hellenistic period include images of boys as musicians, including a basalt example from Alexandria.⁶ Again, careful attention has been paid by the artist to draw the viewers' eyes to a certain area of the body, in this case the penis which is considerably larger than most other examples.⁷ The prioritisation of superficial aesthetic qualities over, for instance, structural design highlights a desire for visual satisfaction which only grows in the following centuries.

Taste for images like this continues to be reflected across the early Roman Empire. A series of bronzes depict nude servant-boys, aged from approximately five-years-old, as in an almost life-size example from Tarragona,⁸ to teenaged, a more common iconography. An example from Reims⁹ epitomises this adolescent type (**Fig. 1**). Attached to its original base, this statuette is mostly complete, though missing its right arm. Depicted is a boy aged in his early teenage years. He stands in *contrapposto*, a posture shared by all examples of this type. His body twists at the waist which, in conjunction with his stance, acts as a counterbalance for the (now missing) object(s) that would have been carried in his raised hands. The missing object(s) has naturally been subject to speculation, but it is likely to have been a flat serving dish or tray.¹⁰ His raised

⁴ Wall paintings from the Casa della Scultore (VIII.7.24), Pompeii, Italy. MAIURI 1957, 73–74, 78; PUGLIESE CARRATELLI 1998, 721; CLARKE 2007a, 91–96, Figs 38–40.

⁵ Terracotta statuette from Myrina, Greece. Height 16,7 cm. Louvre, Paris: Myrina 130 (Myr 335). POTTIER – REINACH 1887, 473–74; BEARDSLEY 1929, 86; MOLLARD-BESQUES 1963, 144, pl. 176F.

⁶ Basalt statuette from Alexandria, Egypt. Height 40 cm. Εθνικό Αρχαιολογικό Μουσείο, Athens: Egyptian Collection 22. PUCHSTEIN 1882, 15–16; SCHREIBER 1885, 383–85; POTTIER – REINACH 1887, 473–74; BEARDSLEY 1929, 101–02; REINACH 1931, 561; HAUSMANN 1962, 261–62; ADRIANI 1978, 119–24, 128–30; ROLLEY 1979, 16–17; SNOWDEN 2010, 205, Figs 256–58.

⁷ ADRIANI 1978, 120–21 describes the genitals as sagging, suggesting that this was to highlight realism.

⁸ Bronze sculpture from the ancient settlement of Tarraco, now Tarragona, Spain. Height 81 cm. Museu Nacional Arquelògic, Tarragona: MNAT 527. HERNÁNDEZ SANAHUJA 1894, 54–55; BEARDSLEY 1929, 100; POULSEN 1933, 58, pl. LVIII Fig. 90–92; GARCÍA Y BELLIDO 1949, 442–43; ARCE 1990, 279; TRILLMICH – HAUSCHILD – BLECH – NIEMEYER – NÜNNERICH-ASMUS – KREILINGER 1993, 378, Taf. 171; CLAVERÍA NADAL – KOPPEL GUGGENHEIM 2007, 268; SNOWDEN 2010, 229, Fig. 290, 303; LENSKI 2013, 143–44; BELL 2022, 442–43.

⁹ Bronze sculpture from the ancient settlement of Durocortorum, now Reims, France. Height 16 cm. Musée d'Archéologie nationale, Saint-Germain-en-Laye: MAN818. REINACH 1894, 211–12; REINACH 1931, 561; BRAEMER 1963, 109; SNOWDEN 1970, 187, Fig. 112; ROLLEY 1979, 16; DAUMAS 1993, 197, 199; BOLLA 1998, 18; SNOWDEN 2010, 229, Fig. 295–96; LENSKI 2013, 143–44; BELL 2022, 438.

¹⁰ LENSKI 2013, 144.



Fig. 1.

hands provide no cover for his body, completely exposing his torso and genitalia to the viewer. Despite the oxidised surface of the bronze, the boy's musculature is still pronounced. His head tilts to the left and his gaze glances over the lost item carried in his left hand. His facial features are typical of contemporary depictions of African boys, with high cheekbones, full lips, and a short nose.¹¹ His hair is rendered in elongated spheres with incised spiral details, creating the impression of tight curls. More examples of this type include a remarkably similar funerary statuette from Aquincum,¹² a macrophallic boy acquired in Egypt,¹³ and a rougher example now kept in Toulouse.¹⁴ Again, these boys are all nude, with certain elements of their body such as muscles and, in the case of the example from Egypt, genitalia deliberately enhanced. The iconography is comparable to the *lampadarii* type,¹⁵ bronze statues of teenaged boys carrying trays or lamps which have been discovered across the Roman empire.¹⁶ However, it is important to note that these *lampadarii* figures conform to the Classical Greek ideals of depictions of ἔφηβοι and would have primarily served as allusions to Greek art and culture, though the sexual undertones should not be understated.¹⁷ The *lampadarii* type is the closest surviving parallel to the images of African slave-boys at hand. There are no known images of boys of other ethnicities depicted in this way;

this particular iconography appears to have been reserved exclusively for African youths.¹⁸

The repeated iconography of these images – nudity, youth, highlighted musculature – as well as the macrophallism of the example from Egypt, is certainly reminiscent of the language used to describe *pueri delicati*, or “beautiful slave-boys”, in contemporary literature. In a role specifically reserved for male children, *pueri delicati* were kept in wealthy households to serve guests and act as a subject of sexual fantasy and, sometimes, abuse.¹⁹ As the name would suggest, this role was reserved for male children. While there

¹¹ BELL 2022, 429–34 for repeated physical characteristics of African males.

¹² Bronze statuette from the ancient settlement of Aquincum, now Budapest, Hungary. Height 15 cm. Aquincumi Múzeum, Budapest: 51344. SNOWDEN 1970, Fig. 111; BOLLA 1998, 18; BOLLA 2013, 25; BOLLA 2015, 142–43; LENSKI 2013, 143; BELL 2022, 438, 442.

¹³ Bronze statuette, acquired in Egypt. Most likely Egyptian provenance (BOLLA 1998, 7). Height 12,1 cm. Civico Museo Archeologico, Milan. BOLLA 1998, 17–20.

¹⁴ Bronze statuette of unknown provenance. Musée Saint-Raymond, Toulouse. REINACH 1931, 561; ADRIANI 1978, 126–27; BOLLA 1998, 18.

¹⁵ E.g., bronze sculpture of a young tray-bearer, from Porta del Vesuvio, Pompeii, Italy. Height: 124 cm. Museo Archeologico Nazionale, Naples: 125348. GRAEFS 1988, 27–32; CANTILENA 1989, 146, no. 251; BIELFELDT 2018, 428–30.

¹⁶ See LENSKI 2013, 139, table 1.

¹⁷ For an in-depth analysis of these depictions of Greek boys in a Roman context, see BIELFELDT 2018.

¹⁸ BELL 2023 gives a really interesting insight into the work that continues to be done on these figures. He has drawn the same conclusion that this iconography is unique to African boys.

¹⁹ For discussions of *pueri delicati*, see RICHLIN 1992, 34–44; POLLINI 2002, 149–58; HUOMOELLER 2016, 205–50. For a discussion of sexual abuse of children, particularly slaves, see ROTH 2021.

were no formal age restrictions for this position, literary references tend to prefer younger boys.²⁰ More important than actual age, however, was the appearance of youth and prepubescence,²¹ with hairlessness seemingly the most desirable characteristic.²² Authors highlight that the appeal of smooth boys was as a direct result of their attraction to youth, and artificial depilation is often not satisfactory, as Martial makes clear: *Sit nobis aetate puer, non pumice levis*.²³ These references to age and hairlessness give a good basis for an initial comparison to the statuettes in question. These boys, most of whom appear to be in their early teenage years, are certainly of the correct age to be *pueri delicati*. Despite the fact that real boys around this age may be beginning puberty, and therefore developing facial and body hair, these boys are deliberately portrayed as smooth,²⁴ therefore meeting one of the physical criteria desired by owners of *pueri delicati*. Although not a feature regularly outlined in texts, the highlighted musculature of these boys is an indication of physical fitness, a further characteristic which may be associated with youth and attractiveness in the eyes of viewers.²⁵

Another point of comparison is the role which *pueri delicati* were expected to play within the household. The expectations of a *puer delicatus* were threefold: to serve guests at banquets,²⁶ to provide visual stimulation and enjoyment for both masters and guests,²⁷ and, often, to be subject to sexual abuse by their masters.²⁸ The boys in these statuettes are clearly fulfilling the first expectation, as each would have been portrayed as carrying an object for service. The Tarragona bronze solidifies this interpretation. The size of the figure and the tray that he carries would have been entirely functional, extending beyond the simple visualisation of a *puer*'s service and pushing the boundaries between art and life.²⁹ The third function of *pueri delicati*, that of physical sexual abuse, is difficult to apply to these objects, as no physical abuse is visualised in any example. However, the size of these figurines allows for the handling of a youthful African body, pushing the limits of voyeurism beyond the visual and into the physical, though there were of course limits to this physical sexual activity. Their second function, however, is certainly applicable to these boys, and is testament to a different, but still serious, type of sexual exploitation.

The depiction of the Reims boy, with an open posture, slender and youthful figure, with subtly enhanced musculature and exposed genitalia, would have certainly appealed to those viewers who desired young slave boys. The exposure and, in certain cases, enhancement of genitalia³⁰ makes clear the sexual intent of these images, particularly when set against the backdrop of a culture which glorified the sexual abuse of slaves. This factor pushes the purpose of these images beyond that of the visual pleasure provided by any piece of art, and into the realm of a particular type of sexual gratification known as voyeurism. View-

²⁰ E.g., *anth. pal.* (Strato) 12,4; cf. HUEMOELLER 2016: 217–18.

²¹ HUEMOELLER 2016, 207–08 explains how the desirability of a *puer* was entirely constructed, and how this *appearance* of youth, over the biological reality of age, as well as other elements of their physical desirability were “aspirational ideal[s] corresponding to a particular Roman fetish.”

²² Catull. 61,134–36; Mart. 1,31; 5, 8,7–8; Sen. *epist.* 47,7; cf. WILLIAMS 1999, 72–73; HUEMOELLER 2016: 216–17.

²³ Mart. 14,205: “Let me have a boy made smooth by youth, not pumice stone” (tr. SHACKLETON BAILEY 1993b, 317).

²⁴ In contrast to a similar example of an African youth from Perugia, who has been given pubic hair. Bronze statuette (lampstand) from Perugia, Italy. Height 23,2 cm without base. The British Museum, London: 1908,0515.1. MARSHALL 1909, 163–64; WALTERS 1915, Pl. LXVIII and commentary; BEARDSLEY 1929, 112; SNOWDEN 1970, Fig. 66; BAILEY 1996, 99 (Q3908); LENSKI 2013, 144.

²⁵ Multiple sources outline the importance of aesthetic, including the implementation of cosmetics and procedures to increase attractiveness, e.g., Gal. *MM* 14,999; Mart. 10,98; Philo, *de vita contemplativa* 51; Plin. *nat.* 32,47.

²⁶ E.g., Philo *de vita contemplativa* 50–52; cf. HUEMOELLER 2016, 237–38.

²⁷ E.g., Philo *de vita contemplativa* 50; cf. HUEMOELLER 2016, 237–38.

²⁸ E.g., Cic. *phil.* 2, 45; Petron. 74, 8–9; cf. RICHLIN 1992, 34–44; POLLINI 2002, 149–50; HUEMOELLER 2016, 240–43.

²⁹ LENSKI 2013, 143–44.

³⁰ As in the Egypt bronze, cf. n. 13.

ers of this piece are witnessing the literal objectification of young African boys for the purpose of visual sexual pleasure.

These boys can therefore be seen as delivering two of the main functions of *pueri delicati* – serving (particularly in the case of functional objects) and looking desirable – without some of the usual limits of owning such a slave. The owners of these statuettes could flaunt a beautiful young “exotic” (and therefore luxurious³¹) boy without paying to maintain a real child. It could even be argued that they are more desirable in some ways than real *pueri delicati*, as they will never blemish, resist abuse, or reach adulthood, the biggest fears faced by owners of such slaves in poetry. A particularly pertinent example of this can be found in a Greek poem about a boy named Nikandros, who the author had glorified as being one of the “immortals” until he came under the threat of aging and growing hair, forcing the lamenting author to face the reality of his beloved’s mortality.³² This poem summarises one of the most crucial points for understanding these bronze statuettes: these boys are immortalised, an impossibility for real boys.

It is certainly a strong possibility that these statuettes depict African *pueri delicati*, given the juxtaposition of their servile status and “desirable” appearance. Once again, it must be stressed that, as far as is possible to determine from surviving material culture, depictions of this kind seem to be reserved for African youths. However, there is little evidence to suggest a reality of such a preference for African *pueri delicati*. Rather, it seems that something about the African ethnicity made these boys the perfect subject for voyeuristic fantasy in the Roman imagination.

Penetration

An image type which may be far more explicit in its depiction of sexual exploitation can be found in a group of small oil lamps. These lamps are made of various materials, including metals, alloys, and clays, and have been discovered across the Roman world (although many are of unknown provenance). Despite this, these lamps share a common iconography. They are each in the shape of the head of a young African male with no body, and are all shown with open mouths, a common iconographic characteristic in Roman portrayals of Africans. The distinction from usual depictions, however, is that the mouths of these males are open in an uncomfortable fashion. A head-lamp from Timgad,³³ with an outstretched chin and an unnaturally O-shaped mouth, exemplifies this. It is likely that the forced position of this boy’s mouth would have originally been formed around a now-missing spout,³⁴ a detail present in most examples. It is important to note here that, though this iconography is shared across other groups, such as Syrians³⁵ and satyrs,³⁶ depictions of African males are most common.

An example kept in the British Museum (**Fig. 2**)³⁷ typifies this spouted type. This miniature bronze lamp is again in the shape of a boy’s head, probably a young teenager like the bronze statuettes discussed

³¹ For the link between African slaves and luxury, see Ath. 4,147e–48b; Petron. 34,4; Ter. *eun.* 165–69; 470–71; Theophr. *char.* 21.

³² *anth. pal.* 12,39; cf. RICHLIN 1992, 34.

³³ Bronze lamp from the ancient settlement of Thamugadi, now Timgad, Algeria. Height 7 cm. Louvre, Paris: Br 3097.1 (MNC 2227). DE RIDDER 1915, 145, Pl. 109. Cf. The Egyptian Museum, Cairo: CG26496.

³⁴ Cf. Copper alloy lamp from Mardin, Turkey. Height unknown (length 7,6 cm). The British Museum, London: 1838,0908.17. BAILEY 1996, 16 (Q3578). This example has had the original spout removed.

³⁵ E.g., Louvre, Paris: Br 3096. FENTRESS 2011, 70 n. 33.

³⁶ E.g., Louvre, Paris: Br 3095.

³⁷ Bronze lamp of unknown provenance. Height 4,5 cm. The British Museum, London: 1824,0454.17. BAILEY 1996, 17 (Q3581); FENTRESS 2011, Pl. 8. Cf. The British Museum, London: 1814,0704.209, 1841,0726.17; Louvre, Paris: Br 3098; Museu Nacional Arqueològic, Tarragona: MNAT 2865; Thorvaldsens Museum, Copenhagen: H2305.

above. His facial features and tightly curled ringlets of hair make his ethnicity clear, despite his disembodiment. The lid and handle of the lamp are camouflaged as hair. His mouth is, again, wide open, with his bottom lip protruding to fit around a thick, curved, cylindrical spout. An aerial view of the vessel makes clear the strain that this boy is under to fit such a large object in his mouth; his cheeks are sucked inwards, making them appear hollow, while his lips are stretched outwards around the spout.

While the practical function of the spout in an oil lamp is clear, its consistent placement in the mouth has led to dispute amongst scholars as to its visual purpose. It has been proposed that the oral installation is a hint that these were supposed to be fire-breathers or eaters, a representation of real performers who would have provided entertainment for guests at banquets.³⁸ Certainly, some of the examples appear somewhat festive. An example from Tarragona,³⁹ for instance, has an opening for oil on top of the head, which is decorated with a palmette pattern, creating the appearance of a headdress.⁴⁰ It must be noted, however, that references to fire-performance are rare in the textual sources and seemingly non-existent elsewhere in contemporary art. An alternative interpretation is that these may be images of oral penetration.⁴¹ While it is impossible to know for certain how a viewer would have seen these images, the possibility of a double-entendre should be considered. I argue that, even though these boys may have been recognisable as entertainers, particularly while the lamps were alight, the imagery of a young boy with a phallic-shaped object in his mouth must have been perceived as sexual by some viewers, again, particularly given the contemporary beliefs regarding slavery and rape.

Further analysis of the image reveals that the sexual act shown in this lamp may not have been consensual. *Irrumatio*, translated by Kamen and Levin-Richardson as “face-fucking”,⁴² denotes an act of oral sex where the penetrated recipient is the passive partner, and the penetrator is the active partner. The passivity of the recipient, or *irrumatus* (“face-fucked”⁴³), means that this is often used to refer to non-consensual and frequently violent oral rape. This is distinct from the act of *fellatio*, where the penetrated recipient is seen as the active partner, and which is generally considered as mutually agreeable. Considering the lamp in question, the contortions of this boy’s face around the phallic spout, which is forced inside deeply and does not fit comfortably in his mouth, gives the impression that this boy was the subject of *irrumatio* rather than a consensual participant in the act of *fellatio*.

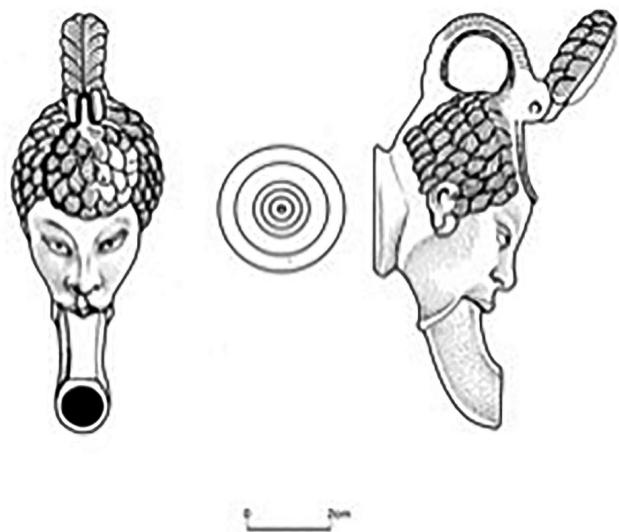


Fig. 2.

³⁸ GRANDJOUAN 1961, 33; BERG 2020, 207; BERG 2022, 56. For fire performance, see Ath. 1,19e; 4,129d.

³⁹ Bronze lamp from the ancient settlement of Tarraco, now Tarragona, Spain. Height 8,5 cm. Museu Nacional Arqueològic, Tarragona: MNAT 2865. BERNAL CASASOLA 1993, LÓPEZ VILAR 2020, 82, no. 54.

⁴⁰ BERG 2022, 56 describes another lamp with a similar appearance.

⁴¹ FENTRESS 2011, 67.

⁴² KAMEN – LEVIN-RICHARDSON 2015, 450–51. Cf. KRENKEL 1980, 77; RICHLIN 1981; ADAMS 1982, 125–30; WILLIAMS 1999, 161–62.

⁴³ KAMEN – LEVIN-RICHARDSON 2015, 450–51.

It is striking that the age of these boys depicted in these lamps is comparable to that of the *pueri delicati* discussed above. Furthermore, they consistently display the same youthful qualities that were so desirable in those bronze statuettes, for instance beardlessness. It is not inconceivable, then, that these lamps are graphic visual allusions to the third expectation of a *puer delicatus*: to be physically sexually abused by their master.⁴⁴ Unlike the previous examples, which had beautiful boys serving wine and visually entertaining, these disembodied heads are capable of nothing but sexual service. Not only this, but they are unable to resist advances. Rejection was another fear of Roman poets, who would write of boys unfairly denying them sex: *Cur, here quod dederas, hodie, puer Hylle, negasti, durus tam subito, qui modo mitis eras?*⁴⁵ The boys in these lamps will never refuse and are therefore a visualisation of the fantastical sexual desires aimed at young boys, particularly *pueri delicati*.

While it may be the case that these images portray sexual exploitation, the question of who penetrates these boys remains. If one imagines a small lamp such as this placed on a table, perhaps in a banquet setting with people constantly moving around, it is easy to think that it would be overlooked. However, if a person was to catch a glimpse of the lamp as they moved past it or stood over it, the perpetrator is suddenly clear. In each of these examples the head is tilted upwards in order to sit on a flat base, so the direction of the gaze is naturally lifted towards a frontal viewer. Still, some of these artists have made more of a conscious effort to direct the gaze through the addition of incised eyes. The lamp from the British Museum exemplifies this with his piercing stare. The curved spout enters the boy's mouth from the same upwards direction as his gaze. Any viewer who stood in front of this lamp, which could have been placed at around waist height, would have transformed into the perpetrator of the penetration. This subtle illusion may have been considered humorous in a culture which seemingly welcomed the sexual exploitation of child slaves. The owner of this vessel and their guests will have had the opportunity to visualise themselves in the act of irrumating a young boy, as was fantasised about in contemporary literature.⁴⁶ The prevalence of African males in this particular image type is certainly significant. As discussed above, slaves from Africa may have been considered as particularly desirable and luxurious, and so this would give normal men the chance to experience the rare sensation of owning and sexually dominating an African boy, encouraging fantasies about penetrating young African males, even for those Romans who may never even encounter one.

The act of being orally raped was considered particularly humiliating in the sexual ideology of Roman men. Typically, citizen men were imagined to take the role of penetrator, which had innate connotations of domination and sexual activeness, while others were to take the submissive role of penetrated.⁴⁷ For a citizen man to take this passive role, whether through consensual or non-consensual intercourse, carried inherently negative associations with effeminacy.⁴⁸ Oral penetration specifically carried further negative implications, seen as a particularly dirty act due to the inherent uncleanness of genitalia. For poets such as Catullus and Martial, as well as orators such as Cicero, accusations of oral penetration were often used as a form of invective, the implication being that the subject of their insults must have an *os impurum*, or un-

⁴⁴ FENTRESS 2011, 67 alludes to this.

⁴⁵ Mart. 4,7: "Why did you refuse today what you granted yesterday, Hyllus boy, so suddenly cruel who were lately kind?" (transl. SHACKLETON BAILEY 1993a, 265).

⁴⁶ E.g., *anth. pal.* (Strato) 12,208, which sees the poet dreaming of a boy to touch his "βιβλίδιον" (book or scroll, used as a euphemism for penis) with his lips. For general fantasy of rape, see Mart. 5,46.

⁴⁷ WILLIAMS 1999, 163–65.

⁴⁸ HOOPER 1999, 14–15; WILLIAMS 1999, 166–67.

clean mouth.⁴⁹ According to Cicero, the mouth was *sanctissima [...] parte corporis*,⁵⁰ which is unsurprising given the important role it played in day-to-day politics, business, religion and socialisation. To have your mouth, the most sacred part of the body, defiled by genitalia, one of the filthiest, was disgraceful enough. To be forcefully rendered silent through irrumation⁵¹ carried even worse shame. This is made particularly clear by a poem written from the perspective of Priapus: *Percidere puer; moneo, futuere puella. Barbatum furem tertia poena manet*.⁵² In this instance, Priapus has saved the worst, most humiliating punishment for the bearded, therefore adult male, thief, over the less severe punishments for the children. Of course, while this categorisation of oral penetration is mainly seen as an insult against adult males, there was certainly still a negative stigma for female or child recipients.⁵³

Again, this iconography is shared across liminal groups, namely Africans, Syrians, and satyrs; it is vital that a Roman male would not be depicted in this way. As for the particular group in question, the depiction of oral penetration of African boys could relate to the idea that *pueri delicati*, if these images should be viewed as such, were “never viewed as potential adults who will become freedmen”,⁵⁴ and so to depict one as an *irrumatus* would not have further negative implications as it would in a depiction of a Roman boy. Though there is again no evidence that this reflects any real-life practice of irrumating young African boys, their prevalence in this imagery may have created harmful associations between real African males of any age and passivity; they would have been placed within a sub-class of males set outside the norms of hegemonic masculinity. Depicting these boys in the same way as satyrs, artists even went so far as to link these males with beings who were believed to be inherently libidinous, often shown engaging in depraved sexual activity, and therefore enhancing any negative associations between African ethnicity and sexual behaviour.

Fetishization

This sexually exploitative imagery of African males has shown how boys were subject to voyeurism and penetrative fantasies. They were objectified to suit the desires of patrons, which may have had a negative impact on the way their humanity and masculinity were viewed. A series of mosaics gives further insight into beliefs about and even fetishization of African male sexuality in the Roman imagination.

Mosaics depicting African swimmers have been discovered in multiple domestic bath complexes, particularly concentrated in the Vesuvian region of Italy.⁵⁵ These mosaics are contemporary with the emergence of the black-and-white mosaic trend, dating to the late first century BCE or the early first century CE, and depict silhouette figures, sometimes with white or coloured tesserae for additional detail. These figures are distinguishable as African through their hair, which is illustrated with jagged pieces or straight rows of tesserae to depict tight curls. Some mosaics also characterise these figures as African through facial features,

⁴⁹ E.g., Catull. 99; Cic. *dom.* 104; Mart. 7,85. Cf. WILLIAMS 1999, 197–99; RICHLIN 1992, 99; ARENA 2007, 156; WORMAN 2008, 321–24.

⁵⁰ Cic. *red. sen.* 11: “the most sacred part of the body” (WILLIAMS 1999, 198, cf. 198 n. 213).

⁵¹ For forced silence through irrumation, see e.g., Catull. 74.

⁵² Priap. 13: “Girl, watch your cunt; boy, keep your ass from grief. Another threat awaits the bearded thief.” (transl. HOOPER 1999, 56).

⁵³ E.g., Cat. 99: ...*tamquam commictae spurca saliva lupae*. “...as though it were the foul spit of some filthy prostitute.” (transl. adapted from GOOLD 2017, 171).

⁵⁴ RICHLIN 1992, 34.

⁵⁵ The exceptions to this were discovered at Este, Italy (Museo Nazionale Atestino, Este; ALFONSI 1911, 313–15; BLAKE 1930, 80; CLARKE 1982, 669–70; DONDERER 1986, 149–50; AKO-ADOUNVO 1999, 94–96) and Constantine, Algeria (Musée National Cirta, Constantine; BERTHIER 1966, 113–14; PICARD 1980, 185–87; DONDERER 1986, 149–50; AKO-ADOUNVO 1999, 94–96).



Fig. 3.

in the *caldarium* (“hot room”) of the bath complex in the *Casa del Menandro* (Fig. 3).⁵⁷ This mosaic depicts an oceanic scene, filled with sea creatures, an African fisherman, a central tondo of a plant and a bird, and a second silhouette-style figure. This silhouette depicts a second African man, who is swimming on his front, with one arm bent in front of him and the other stretched out behind. His legs kick upwards, creating an impression of weightlessness. He is clearly nude, apparent through enhanced musculature and the exposure of his phallus. The rigidity of his penis, starkly contrasted against his floating limbs, reveals to the viewer that his penis is not just exposed, but is also erect. This striking feature is repeated in each of the two other Pompeian mosaics. The first, from the neighbouring *Casa del Criptoportico*,⁵⁸ is remarkably similar in style.⁵⁹ Again located in a *caldarium*, this mosaic shows two nude males swimming towards a broken vessel. The right-hand male is in the same horizontal position as the previous, exposing his phallus beneath him. The other male is almost vertical with his erect penis protruding perpendicularly from his body. This posture is shared with the two figures depicted in the other Pompeian mosaic, found in the *caldarium* of the *Domus M. Caesi Blandi*,⁶⁰ who are likewise ithyphallic.

Unique to the mosaic from the *Casa del Menandro*, however, is its proximity to a second intriguing mosaic (Fig. 4).⁶¹ Located in the entryway to the *caldarium*, this mosaic is again in the black-and-white

⁵⁶ Mosaic from the *caldarium* of a villa near Bosco de Siervo (Ottaviano), Italy. 283 x 283 cm. Parco Archeologico di Pompei. CICIRELLI 1995–96, 185; CICIRELLI 1998, 345–50.

⁵⁷ Mosaic from the *caldarium* of the Casa del Menandro (I.10.4), Pompeii, Italy. 287 x 232 cm. Parco Archeologico di Pompei. MAIURI 1933, 146; CLARKE 1979, 13–14, 58–62; CLARKE 1982, 666–67; DUNBABIN 1989, 43–44; PUGLIESE CARRATELLI 1990b, 240–41, 382; CLARKE 1998, 122; LING 1998, 40–41; AKO-ADOUNVO 1999, 94–96, 99–101; DUNBABIN 1999, 57–58; LING – LING 2005, 17–18, 59–62; CLARKE 2007b, 328–29.

⁵⁸ Mosaic from the *caldarium* of the Casa del Criptoportico (I.6.2), Pompeii, Italy. 237 x 180 cm. Parco Archeologico di Pompei. PERNICE 1938, 52; PICARD 1980, 185; CLARKE 1982, 669–70; DUNBABIN 1989, 43–44; PUGLIESE CARRATELLI 1990a, 274–77; CLARKE 1998, 122–24, 137–38; AKO-ADOUNVO 1999, 99–101; LING – LING 2005, 17, 60.

⁵⁹ BEYEN 1960, 185; CLARKE 1994, 91–96 suggest that the resemblance between these mosaics points to a shared artist.

⁶⁰ Mosaic from the *caldarium* of the Domus M. Caesi Blandi (VII.1.40), Pompeii, Italy. 255 x 218 cm. Parco Archeologico di Pompei. BLAKE 1930, 80; PERNICE 1938, 54; PICARD 1980, 185–87; CLARKE 1982, 669–70; DUNBABIN 1989, 43–44; PUGLIESE CARRATELLI 1996, 435–36; CLARKE 1998, 121–22; AKO-ADOUNVO 1999, 99–102; LING – LING 2005, 17–18, 62–63.

⁶¹ Mosaic from the entryway to the *caldarium* of the Casa del Menandro (I.10.4), Pompeii, Italy. 107 x 69 cm. Parco Archeologico di Pompei. MAIURI 1933, 146; CLARKE 1979, 13, 61; DUNBABIN 1989, 43–44; AKO-ADOUNVO 1999, 96, 102; DUNBABIN 1999, 57–58; CLARKE 1982, 670; CLARKE 1998, 120–36; CLARKE 2002a, 16–18; LING – LING 2005, 17–18, 62–63; CLARKE 2006, 158; CLARKE 2007a, 75; SNOWDEN 2010, 224–25, Fig. 284.

style with red highlights. The mosaic is in two parts. The bottom depicts four large strigils arranged around an *aryballos* on strings or chains. It has been suggested that the arrangement of these instruments creates an image of a vulva, with the strigils as labia and the *aryballos* as a clitoris.⁶² The top section of the mosaic depicts a black-and-white style figure with accents of red-brown. This person is believed to be African.⁶³ He strides forward, carrying two red *askoi*, indicating his status as a bath attendant. He wears a wreath upon his head and a white loincloth around his waist. This loincloth is so comically short that his genitals are exposed between his wide-open legs. He is macrophallic, and the tip of his penis is depicted in red to catch the viewer's eye. This iconography is unique amongst contemporary art. Two earlier Hellenistic bronzes show African bath attendants in a remarkably similar way,⁶⁴ while one much later pavement depicts a macrophallic African bath attendant in an entirely different artistic style.⁶⁵

Previous analysis of these mosaics has focused on their location in *caldaria* and the potential for an apotropaic, or protective, function. The Evil Eye, a negative force of envy,⁶⁶ was believed to dwell in places like a bath complex where patrons were inherently vulnerable. Nudity would have meant that patrons were naturally exposed to the consequences of *invidia*,⁶⁷ which could sometimes involve physical harm. Such harm was an inevitable risk of the hot environment of a *caldarium*, and warnings against burning were given in the form of sandal mosaics.⁶⁸ To combat these risks, apotropaic images could be placed in areas of greatest vulnerability as a form of protection. Previous analyses of images of African men in Roman baths have concluded that it is their ethnicity which provides protection. It has been suggested that their African features create a kind of protection against evil forces through humour due to their “physical peculiarities”,⁶⁹ including their large, usually erect, phalli, which contrast the somatic norm of most contemporary Mediterranean art. Further, it has been proposed that their black skin, united with the Latin term for sub-Saharan Africans, *Aethiops*,⁷⁰ would have made for an amusing warning about the physical dangers of burning in the



Fig. 4.

⁶² CLARKE 2006, 158.

⁶³ CLARKE 1998, 122; CLARKE 2002a, 16–17; CLARKE 2007a, 75. This has been disputed by some scholars. Cf. AKO-ADOUNVO 1999, 101–02; LING – LING 2005, 62–63.

⁶⁴ Landesmuseum Württemberg, Stuttgart: 3.358; Millesgården Museum, Lidingö: A 107. FRANKEN 2018.

⁶⁵ Mosaic from the north-western baths at Timgad, Algeria. 82 x 70 cm. Musée Archéologique, Timgad: 89. GERMAIN 1969, 94; DUNBABIN 1989, 42–43; AKO-ADOUNVO 1999, 105–07; DESANGES 2010, 272, Fig. 347; PARKER 2021.

⁶⁶ ELLIOTT 2016, 113–18.

⁶⁷ DUNBABIN 1989, 33.

⁶⁸ AKO-ADOUNVO 1999, 109.

⁶⁹ CLARKE 2007a, 66. Cf. LEVI 1941; CLARKE 2002b, 156.

⁷⁰ From the Greek “Αἰθίοψ”, translating as sunburnt face.

caldarium. While certainly a possibility, this interpretation fails to see past the ethnicity of these males, and as a result misses a crucial aspect of this iconography.

One of the most popular apotropaic images throughout the ancient Mediterranean was the phallus.⁷¹ This symbolism appears in the form of innumerable *tintinnabula*,⁷² metal chimes comprised of a large phallus, often possessing legs or wings, and bells to ward off evil. A phallic image from above an oven in Pompeii⁷³ makes this connection between phalli and apotropaism more explicit, as a simple relief of male genitalia is accompanied by the phrase *hic habitat felicitas*, or “here dwells happiness”,⁷⁴ taken to mean happiness through both sexual pleasure and good luck.⁷⁵ Images of phalli have also been discovered at other bath complexes,⁷⁶ such as the mosaic floor of the women’s *tepidarium* at Herculaneum⁷⁷ (which also appears alongside a depiction of a *tintinnabulum*), so the presence of ithyphallic or macrophallic men in these Pompeian *caldaria* is not fundamentally unusual.

While phallic images like these Pompeian mosaics may have provided apotropaic protection through humour, more obvious is the possibility for protection through sexual uncontrollability. The phallus of the bath attendant at the *Casa del Menandro* is clumsily exposed under his loincloth, a humorous joke created by the artist at the servant’s expense. The use of colour on his penis, as well as its exaggerated size, catches a viewer’s eye and creates a sexual undertone to this image. As with the images of *pueri delicati*, this male would have been subject to constant voyeurism, highlighting the sinister reality of his sexual exploitation. Sexual power would have been held by the viewer and stripped from the servant, whose lack of bodily autonomy has been taken advantage of for the pleasure of viewers. However, as this viewer would have moved through the bath complex of the *Casa del Menandro*, these roles would have been suddenly reversed. The swimmer in the *caldarium* mosaic is in a deliberate state of nudity and permanently aroused. His erect phallus, which acts as a defence against voyeurs, indicates sexual activeness rather than passivity, which suggests that this male would have been perceived as a penetrator. The seemingly secure roles of active citizen versus unwilling and passive African male (slave) seen previously are here completely inverted, a humorous twist in the norms of erotic art. The permanent sexual activeness of the ithyphallic swimmer casts a threat upon all viewers, including both the Evil Eye and naked patrons of the bath.

The male in this image, unlike those previously encountered, is forced into an active role by the artist and his viewers. Depicted as over-sexed and out of control, his sexuality is completely in the hands of others, despite appearing as theoretically sexually dominant. This lack of autonomy is reflected in each and every one of these images of African men, whose sexuality was clearly the subject of fascination and fantasy, leading to their fetishization for the erotic enjoyment of others. Such speculation about African sexuality can similarly be found in literary sources, as in this extract by Ptolemy: πολυγύνατοι δὲ καὶ πολὺάνδρῳ καὶ καταφερεῖς καὶ ταῖς ἀδελφαῖς συναρμοζόμενοι, καὶ πολὺσποροὶ μὲν οἱ ἄνδρες, εὐσύλληπτοι δὲ αἱ γυναῖκες ἀκολούθως τῇ τῆς χώρας γονίμῳ... πολλοὶ δὲ καὶ τῶν ἀρρένων σαθροὶ καὶ τεθηλυσμένοι ταῖς ψυχαῖς...⁷⁸

⁷¹ On the phallus as an apotropaic symbol, see CLARKE 2007a, 69–73; ELLIOTT 2016, 161–63; PARKER 2021.

⁷² E.g., *Tintinnabulum* from the workshop of Verus the blacksmith (I,6,3), Pompeii, Italy. Parco Archeologico di Pompei: SAP 1260.

⁷³ Stone relief and inscription from an oven in Pompeii (VI,6,18), Italy. Museo Archeologico Nazionale di Napoli, Naples: 27741.

⁷⁴ Tr. CLARKE 2007a, 72.

⁷⁵ CLARKE 2007a, 72–73.

⁷⁶ For images of the phallus in bath complexes, see DUNBABIN 1989, esp. 38.

⁷⁷ Mosaic from the women’s *tepidarium*, Forum bath complex, Herculaneum, Italy. Parco Archeologico di Ercolano.

⁷⁸ Ptol. *Tetr.* 2,3,72: “But they are polygamous and polyandrous and inclined even toward marrying their sisters. The men are very potent, the women extremely fertile, just as the land is fertile [...] Many of the men are unsound and womanly in their souls [...]”

African males clearly had no control over their own sexual narrative in the Roman imagination and were regularly exploited through subtle or overt allusions to sexual behaviour in art. Artists and authors were free to portray them however they pleased, which allowed for the objectification of African men and boys for the pleasure of a primarily non-African audience. The bronzes of *pueri delicati* were subject to erotic fantasy, the disembodied boys were condemned to be eternally penetrated, while the macrophallic bath attendant has been exposed and his penis engorged, not through his own carelessness as the image would have you believe, but due to the power of the artist and for the humorous and erotic enjoyment of the viewer. The ithyphallic swimmers have similarly been objectified, but as sexually active rather than passive, placing them in the role of penetrator and perhaps even aggressor. Of course, this should not be taken as evidence for the real sexual experiences of African males in Imperial Rome, especially since these artefacts were almost certainly designed by and for Romans. Rather, an analysis of the repeated allusions to sex and consideration of contemporary sexual beliefs and behaviours gives an interesting initial perspective on the place of African males in the Roman sexual imagination. African ethnicity seems to have almost acted as an open invitation for Roman sexual fantasy about the token exotic “Other”, and their constructed image was open to sexual exploitation in a way that is unparalleled amongst other non-Graeco-Roman groups.

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(transl. KENNEDY – SYDNOR ROY – GOLDMAN 2013, 108). Cf. BALSDON 1979, 218: “Ethiopians were naturally thought to share the common African quality of being over sexed and [...] to have a sinister fascination for women.”

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Boudica's Daughters: Conquest and Rape in the Ancient Roman Discourse

ANTTI LAMPINEN

Introduction

It is well known that several of the stories told by the Romans about the earliest history of their polity pivoted on rape and sexual violence – both collectively, as in the case of the *raptio* of the Sabine Women, and individually, as in the case of Lucretia's rape. Especially in Livy's representation of the early Roman history rape is the catalyst for significant political upheavals.¹ Issues of predestined rise to power, autocratic hubris, gendered virtue, and even "Roman" identity were all intertwined in these stories of male sexual violence. What is rather less frequently commented on, however, is the ethnic axis of the Roman narratives of conquest-as-rape and rape-as-conquest. To give but a single example, the topics of chapters in one collected volume from almost three decades ago jump straight from Livy to Byzantine princesses.² The obvious omission of most of Roman history is striking. A recent volume on the strategy of the Roman Empire mentions "rape" only in the context of the Visigothic Sack of Rome.³ The image of Roman conquest as free of the sort of sexual violence and humiliation that we unfortunately still see in modern-day conflicts is strikingly sanitized. The connections between Roman imperialism, ethnic *imaginaire* and sexual violence are also relatively underexplored.⁴

Historiographers and rhetors had always had the possibility of using descriptions of the rape of in-group women by invading outgroup members – often barbarians – to create instances of heightened emotion, pathos and outrage in their passages.⁵ *Hybris*, a quality very frequently associated with barbarians, could in these cases have the meaning of a rape: its intrinsic link with notions of violation and transgression made the word fit well with the imagery of sexual violence.⁶ Funerary epitaphs, too, evoke the tragedy of young maidens who have met their death either at the hands of invaders, or through a suicide at the face of rape.⁷ Kathy L. Gaca has pointed out that protection of the ingroup females of all age groups from rape was

¹ Mars' rape of Rhea Silvia (Liv. 1,1,8: *vi compressa*) initiates Roman history, and the rape of the Sabine women (1,13) is fundamental for establishing the Roman citizenry; cf. also the story of Verginia in 3,44. See ARIETI 1997, 210–16; DENCH 2005, 15–25; TAYLOR 2022a, 136; also STRUNK 2014 for Tacitus' Livian models.

² DEACY & PIERCE (eds.) 1997. Newer studies, such as GACA 2014, recognize very well the 'multi-ethnic', universal nature of phenomena such as 'populace-ravaging warfare', which in practice would have perpetrated cultures of rape among ancient population groups. TAYLOR 2022a, a very relevant new study, focuses on the late Republic and earliest imperial decades, and emphasises the discontinuities with the Middle Republic (129–30).

³ LACEY 2022, 340; 'sexual violence' and 'abduction' go undiscussed. See the comments on the nature of the modern military histories of Rome by GACA 2015, 278.

⁴ Although see MATTINGLY 2011, 99–121; for the basic parameters of the field (without the ethnicized angle); GACA 2015, 278–80.

⁵ Cf. Diod. Sic. 13,62; 13,89; 16,19; Dio *or.* 11,29, expressing his disappointment that Homer did not use the pathos-inducing potential of describing the fate of Trojan female captives, being led to slavery and shame.

⁶ GACA 2015, 288 and n. 50; also PARADISO 1995.

⁷ Individual exemplars discussed in e.g. KAYGUSUZ 1984; PALUMBO STRACCA 1997; late antique cases in VIHREVALLI 2022.

an easily recognisable but also emotionally charged topos in ancient sources. The protection of the women – as well as children – of the household and family group could be scaled up to an outrage about possible outgroup (especially barbarian) threat to the monopoly of violence which the men of the ingroup already wielded on “their” women.⁸ Technically, “rape” could only happen to citizens, which had the potential of creating different associations between sexual violence directed at the women of the citizen ingroup, and the enslavement (andrapodizing) and rape – in our modern terms – of outgroup members.⁹

It may be revealing to examine the contexts in which this basic template was – as an exception to the ethnocentricity and exceptionalism of most Roman discourse on rape – turned to furnish criticism of Roman imperialism, such as in the stories that Livy and Plutarch told about the fate of the Galatian noblewoman Chiomara, which will be discussed below. The period of the early Empire also saw clearly articulated criticism of Roman imperialism.¹⁰ Occasionally this veers close to acknowledging its analogies with rape: Tacitus’ narrative of Boudica’s revolt and its origins in rape is an important example of this, but when compared with Cassius Dio’s account of the same events, significant differences can be seen.

The ancient language of plundering and devastation often subsumes or elides the kinds of violence done to conquered communities.¹¹ In addition to the semantic permutations of *violo*, *rapio*, *eripio* etc., these linguistic underpinnings extend to the Roman gendered perceptions of the violence of conquest: regions were generally named in the feminine form and personified as females.¹² Caitlin Gillespie has noted how the “idea of female bodies as sacred symbols of the safety of the city runs parallel to the violation of non-Roman female bodies that often accompanied the sacking of a city”.¹³ Foreign women – often serving as focalizers of barbarism in conquest texts, as Tina Saavedra argued in a comparative study – form thus a particularly apt metaphor for conquest of their foreign lands.¹⁴ This is not to say that male inhabitants of conquered provinces would not have had to experience rape and other forms of sexual violence at the hands of their conquerors. As we shall see, sculptural examples of the dynamics at play include a pair of marble frieze panels from the Sebasteion at Aphrodisias, depicting the heroically nude emperor Claudius violently subjugating the female personification of *Britannia* and Nero handling the limp and passive *Armenia* – the latter scene even with some mythological flourishes from the Epic Cycle.

This chapter will explore the intersection of the ethnic and the gendered in sources ranging from the later Republic to the late second century CE. The “embodied knowledge” of the ethnic other, when intersecting with imperial language of triumphalism, would often produce a distinct way of inscribing conquest on the foreign female body. I will discuss the intertwining of Roman ideology and “pornography” of conquest, ethnically framed sexual violence (from the point of view of either the victims or, in some cases, the perpetrators), and the way in which outgroup perceptions participated in the Imperial-era “rape culture”.¹⁵

⁸ GACA 2014, *passim*, but cf. e.g. 320–21, 335, 345; also GACA 2015, 280–81, 291–92 and ÁLVAREZ PÉREZ-SOSTOA 2024, 130. On domestic violence in antiquity, see DOSSEY 2008.

⁹ See e.g. NGUYEN 2006, 85; GACA 2010; MATTINGLY 2011, 95 fn. 4; JAMES 2020, *OCD* s.v. ‘rape’.

¹⁰ See for instance ALONSO-NÚÑEZ 1982; GRIFFIN 2008; MATTINGLY 2011; LAVAN 2011.

¹¹ Cf. LAVAN 2020, 201: “even if it [exceptional violence] was normally sanitized through the use of more abstract language”, writing of the killing of women rather than the rape, but the same point applies.

¹² Cf. VOUT 2007, 214. The most important exception is *Aegyptus*.

¹³ GILLESPIE 2018, 107; see also BELLEI in this volume.

¹⁴ SAAVEDRA 1999. See also CRISTEA 2023, though looking more broadly at all kinds of late Republican literature.

¹⁵ For “rape culture” as a cultural and/or societal normalization of sexual violence and the applicability of this term to antiquity, see the discussion by PYY in the Introduction to this volume and the chapter by LYNCH; also NGUYEN 2006 on the Roman legislation and RABINOWITZ 2011 on the Greek evidence.

Ethnic gaze and the rape of the barbarian

Amazons could perhaps be cited as a group of prominently female barbarians who were actively imagined as reversing the sexual dynamics and setting strict boundaries to male power – even if their depictions in the Greek and Roman culture were always dictated by the male gaze, exoticizing and eroticizing.¹⁶ Matriarchal societies, as Saavedra has noted, were frequently imagined to hold sway among the barbarians.¹⁷ Occasionally, other women among the northerners seem to be depicted in ways that borrow elements or otherwise echo the “Amazon paradigm”. A well-known case is Ammianus Marcellinus’ vivid though probably imaginary description of a Gallic wife joining a fistfight between her husband and some undefined foreigners. Stronger by far than her husband, with flashing eyes, gnashing teeth and “huge white arms”, she lets the “entire band of foreigners” get a sample of her kicks and catapult-like punches.¹⁸ Overall, she encapsulates fully the qualities of Gauls that Ammianus includes in his ethnographic description – and does so in a largely admiring way. Though in Ammianus’ telling it is the Gallic wife who joins her husband in the fray, and thus was not presented as originally participating in whatever dispute triggered the tussle, the episode itself can serve as a reminder to the way in which Roman soldiers – if indeed these are the “foreigners” of the description – were a constant source for tension, harassment and risk especially in the frontier zones where people relied on the army for their livelihoods. David Mattingly reminds us that “native women in the frontier zone would also have been targets of amorous desire, harassment, and rape”.¹⁹ Ammianus’ palpable enjoyment of a feisty Gallic lady who dares to fight back could quite as conceivably have resulted from a conflict where she herself was the first target of the Romans’ attention.

As a reflection of the ethnicized/gendered gaze directed at “hard-primitive” groups of barbarian women, we are not surprised to see that just as their men are portrayed as eager for battle and heedless of death, their women are likewise active and brave when faced with the threat of rape. Strabo gives a list of such courageous suicides by Cantabrians of all ages and both genders, but makes the observation that such actions are common among both men and women in Celtic, Thracian and Scythian societies.²⁰ It needs to be noted, however, that Saavedra read Strabo erroneously as telling of a woman self-immolating herself rather than being raped; what we have is the detail of a captive woman slaying her fellow captives.²¹ In any case, the threat of sexual violence is implicit in the scenario, and one can certainly see how the female mentality here is designed to highlight the general ethnic characteristics of Strabo’s Iberians: bravery in the face of death and toughness bordering on the abject. For many enslaved foreigners, the first – and often, the final – destination after their loss of freedom was to serve as sex slaves to the Roman soldiers.²²

The columnar monuments of the adoptive emperors offer some pictorial evidence for the imagery of gendered violence as an unquestioned part of the narratives of Roman conquest. Trajan’s column’s Scene

¹⁶ HARDWICK 1990; MAYOR 2014, *passim*; CRISTEA 2023, 486–94; on the erotics of gaze, see GOLDHILL 2002; the ethnic angle has been studied recently by BESSONE 2021, though in poetry.

¹⁷ SAAVEDRA 1999, 59. On strong Gallic women, see Diod. 5,32,2; Parth. *narr.* 30; Anon. *tract. de mul.* (*Onomaris*).

¹⁸ Amm. Marc. 15,12,1: *Nec enim eorum quemquam adhibita uxore rixantem, multo fortiore et glauca, peregrinorum ferre poterit globus, tum maxime cum illa inflata cervice suffrendens ponderansque niveas ulnas et vastas admixtis calcibus emittere coeperit pugnos ut catapultas tortilibus nervis excussas.*

¹⁹ MATTINGLY 2011, 117.

²⁰ Str. 3,4,17. Northern women participating in war or inspiring battles: Sall. *hist.* 2,92; Val. Max. 6,1e,3; Tac. *Germ.* 7, *ann.* 14,30; App. *Hisp.* 72. In contrast, the British women in Tacitus’ description of Boudica’s rebellion are just bystanders: GILLESPIE 2018, 93.

²¹ SAAVEDRA 1999, 64. Cf. App. *Hisp.* 72 on the suicides and infanticides of the captured women of the Bracari.

²² See MATTINGLY 2011, 114–16.

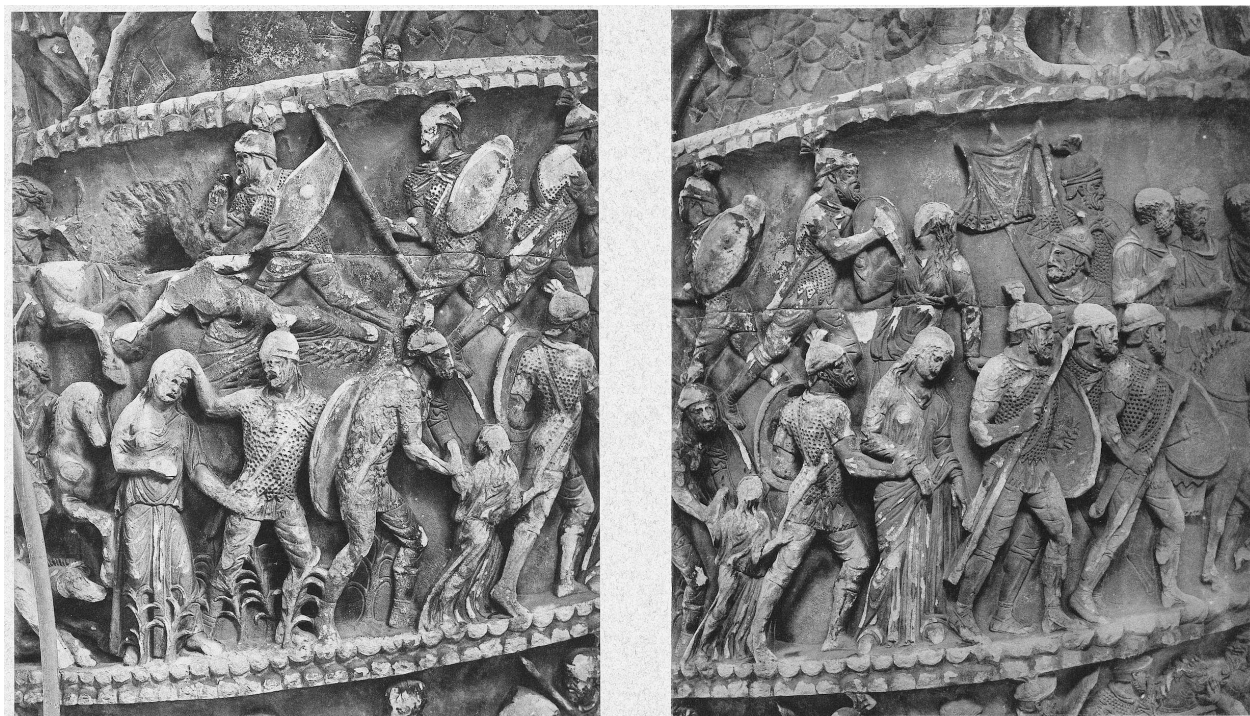


Fig. 1. Scenes XCVII-XCVIII of the Column of Marcus Aurelius. Romans leading way individual women and girls as captives. Source: PETERSEN & al. 1896, plate 106; public domain.

XXIX depicts the seizure of Dacian women, who supplicate their captors with the traditional, though clearly ineffective gestures.²³ Explicit rape, however, is not depicted at this stage. With the Column of Antoninus Pius destroyed in the Renaissance, we have no way of telling whether that might have contained similar scenes. But the most notable – and differing – points of comparison to the relatively detached Trajanic iconography come from the Column of Marcus Aurelius, with, for example, the Scenes XX, XCVII-XCVIII and CIV depicting “German [...] bare-breasted women being grabbed by their hair in preparation for rape”, and both grown-up women and a little girl being abducted.²⁴ Scene CIV shows a Roman soldier dragging a young, childless woman apart from a crowd of female and child captives – one scholar commented overly decorously that “her imminent fate is uncertain”, when in fact it seems quite easy to guess.²⁵

Comparing the iconographies of the Columns of Trajan and Marcus Aurelius, Myles Lavan has observed that the Column of Marcus Aurelius is much more explicit in depicting the violence of Roman devastation than that of Trajan.²⁶ Perhaps this reflects the more protracted, evenly matched and thus more savage and traumatic warfare of Marcus’ campaigns, which in turn foregrounded the need to offer a pictorial narrative of almost unhindered Roman domination.²⁷

²³ See LAVAN 2020, 185–86.

²⁴ MATTINGLY 2011, 117. For the Scene XX, see PIRSON 1996, 142–47, 156–57, 165, 167–68 (also analyzing Scene CIV; cf. BECKMANN 2011, 114). The dragging by the hair may have been behind even the very earliest Greek terminology of rape (e.g. “dragging along”: ἑρπύειν, ἔλκειν, etc.): cf. GACA 2015, 287; FERRIS 2000, 93–95.

²⁵ FERRIS 2000, 95.

²⁶ LAVAN 2020, 183–88 (185). On the increasing debasement of barbarians around the time of Marcus Aurelius, see also FERRIS 2000, 89–96.

²⁷ The same experience may be behind Marcus’ severe approach to the Iazyges in Dio 72(71),13,1; 72(71),16,1; see LAVAN 2020, 197; cf. PIRSON 1996, 158–68, noting the amount of scenes “dealing with [Roman] violence out of the context of actual fighting” (165); BECKMANN 2011, 194, 198; FERRIS 2000, 91 “almost a sense of panic and frantic endeavour”.

From the point of view of the Romans, even sexual slavery could be presented as a road to civilization. This attitude remained unchanged in some late antique authors. Ausonius' creation of Bissula as a sexualized "child of nature" originally taken as *bellica praeda* – spoil of war – from Germania, "knowing the sources of the Danube" (*conscia nascentis Bissula Danuvii*), is one example of objectifying a non-Roman female through an explicitly ethnic gaze.²⁸ Whether a real person or not, Bissula's trajectory is clear in Ausonius' poetic cycle. From a captive she seems to have become an *alumna*, a foster-child, and then clearly something overtly sexualized in the eyes of Ausonius' poetic self.²⁹ Power reversal is to a degree described, with Bissula gaining dominance over her master, but this is a very old poetic *topos* that saw no diminished popularity in late antiquity.³⁰ Like Ammianus' Gallic Amazon, Bissula's description is ethnicized and lingers on her foreign beauty.³¹ In Ausonius' telling, Bissula has been civilized and Romanized (*sic Latii mutata bonis*), but without losing her alluring ethnic appeal (*Germana maneret*); she is an *ambigua puella* with Latin language but Germanic *forma*.³²

In the context of Roman taking of cities and subjugation of communities, much of the sexual violence that almost certainly must have taken place is in the literary sources subsumed into the general language of rightful vengeance, conquest, slave-taking and dividing of spoils.³³ If noble barbarian women are more visible as victims of rape, this is largely because their value as hostages and captives was thought to be higher than that of common folk. In narrative sources, captivity almost always seems to carry the potential of rape, especially when women and children are described in this powerless position.³⁴ Social factors often intermesh with ethnicized ones. In the higher visibility of noble barbarian women when compared with commoners, there is a similarity with ingroup narratives, partly because of the infringement of elite women's bodily integrity was, in a patriarchal context, a direct attack on their value as hostages.³⁵ When Tacitus discusses the best way of binding any German group into acquiescence, he is in no doubt that this is to take "high-born young women" (or "girls") (*puellae [...] nobiles*) as hostages: he notes that the Germans fear more than anything the horrors that captivity would bring to their women. Here, the Roman practices of conquest are the obvious source of such dread.³⁶ The Germans were commonly perceived as "hypermasculine", but the threat of rape of "their women" by the Roman soldiers seems to have been thought of as one powerful way of overcoming the disparity in physical prowess between the barbarian enemies and Romans.³⁷

The stories of Chiomara and Boudica are good examples of this. The anecdote of the Galatian noble lady Chiomara probably originated with Polybius, but found its way to Livy, Valerius Maximus, and Plutarch.³⁸ At any rate, Plutarch explains that Polybius had himself conversed with Chiomara at Sardis, and

²⁸ Auson. *carm.* 9,3,2.

²⁹ On Bissula in Ausonius, see KAHLOS 2020.

³⁰ KAHLOS 2020, 182–83; cf. GACA 2014, 343, citing, among others, the example of Paul the Silentiary.

³¹ Auson. *carm.* 9,3,9–10. Cf. KAHLOS 2020, 186.

³² Auson. *carm.* 9,3,9; 9,3,11. See KAHLOS 2020, 185.

³³ Cf. LAVAN 2020, 201–02. On the language of justifying mass violence: TAYLOR 2022b, 325–28.

³⁴ Cf. GACA 2014, esp. 306; cf. GILLESPIE 2018, 94 on Tacitus' description (*Germ.* 8) of the German women inspiring their men to fight harder by emulating (by exposing their breasts) the threat of captivity, servitude and – in an obvious implication – rape. CRISTEA 2023, 495 on Caes. *Gall.* 1,50–51 depicting Germanic women panicking at the prospect of their menfolk losing a battle. Generally, see ÁLVAREZ PÉREZ-SOSTOA 2024.

³⁵ SAAVEDRA 1999, 64.

³⁶ Tac. *Germ.* 8: *captivitate, quam longe impatientius feminarum suarum nomine timent, adeo ut efficacius obligentur animi civitatum, quibus inter obsides puellae quoque nobiles imperantur.*

³⁷ On the Germanic 'hypermasculinity', see EVANS 2023.

³⁸ Plb. 21 F 38 *ap.* Plut. *de mul. virt.* 22; Liv. 38,24 (cf. Flor. *epit.* 1,27,6); Val. Max. 6,1e,2.

on the basis of this had confessed his admiration of her spiritedness and intelligence. In Plutarch's telling Chiomara, the wife of the Galatian Ortiagon, was taken captive "along with the rest of the women" (of whom we hear nothing, but presumably many of them ended up being raped or in sexual slavery) when Gnaeus Manlius Vulso waged war against them (189 BCE). A Roman officer (ταξίαρχος), said to have been "naturally an ignorant man with self-control neither in matters of pleasure or money" (ἦν δ' ἄρα καὶ πρὸς ἡδονὴν καὶ ἀργύριον ἀμαθὴς καὶ ἀκρατὴς ἄνθρωπος), "used his good luck in a soldier's fashion" (ἐχρήσατο τῇ τύχῃ στρατιωτικῶς), and raped (κατήσχυεν) Chiomara. The Roman officer's greed proved his undoing, as he agrees to hand her back to her relatives in exchange for a very large sum of gold; the swap is arranged to take place at a river crossing – a symbolic boundary par excellence. As soon as the Chiomara is back with her kinfolk, and with the Roman avariciously counting his gold, she gives a nod to her male relative, who beheads the Roman. Chiomara wraps the severed head into the folds of her dress and returns home; when presenting it to Ortiagon, she responds to his comment "Fidelity is a praiseworthy thing", with a proud "Yes, but even more so is that there should be only one man living who has lain with me".³⁹

Plutarch's version may be fairly faithful to Polybius' one; at any rate, Livy's account differs from that of Plutarch in some details, while not mentioning Polybius as the source. Chiomara is left anonymous by Livy and her husband is called Orgiagio, while the rank of the Roman soldier is defined more exactly as a centurion. Livy offers other details, however, which may represent literary and dramatic involution. The scene is defined as the Roman military camp near Ancyra, very much during Vulso's campaign. Both Livy's and Plutarch's version mention fortune (τύχη, *fortuna*), which emphasizes the powerlessness of Chiomara, and the consequent way in which her virtue is kept intact. The rapist centurion in Livy's version of Chiomara's story seems like an unambiguous admission of moral failure from a member of the ingroup. Typical for many of Livy's rape descriptions, a Roman male – not the *ideal* male perhaps, but nonetheless one that is often invoked in a variety of narratives – proceeds from a failed seduction to the act of rape.⁴⁰ Next, the rapist dangles in front of Chiomara the hope of returning her, "but even this he did not offer for free, as a lover would have done" (*et ne quidem, ut amans, gratuitam*).⁴¹ What in Livy comes across as the centurion's fatal error is to avoid involving another Roman in the exchange: he allows Chiomara to send a messenger to her kin, and she chooses one of her own slaves, who was similarly captured by the Romans. The specific explanation of the go-betweens and arrangements for the ransoming are a detail that Plutarch's version is missing, but on which Livy focuses quite a bit – perhaps in order to build vividness, but also possibly because this sort of practicalities was part of the way the Roman audience thought about ransoming as a process. The centurion's fate is the same, in any case: Chiomara orders the members of her household (or kinsmen: *necessarii*) to execute the Roman. The ending of the story is slightly different, too. Baffled as to the identity of the severed head she has rolled to his feet, Orgiagio comments on the "unwomanly" (*quod id*

³⁹ Plut. *de mul. virt.* 22: ἐκείνου θαυμάσαντος καὶ εἰπόντος 'ὦ γύναι, καλὸν ἢ πίστις,' 'ναί' εἶπεν 'ἀλλὰ κάλλιον ἓνα μόνον ζῆν ἐμοὶ συγγεγεννημένον.' On women in Plutarch, see NIKOLAIDIS 1997; WALCOT 1999; and Gallic/Galatian heroines in particular, see BRENK 2005; DELATTRE 2021.

⁴⁰ Liv. 38,24,1–11 (Chiomara): "at first he tried to seduce her but, seeing that consensual sex was abhorrent to her, he assaulted her person, which fortune had made his slave" (*is primo animum temptavit; quem cum abhorrentem a voluntario vieret stupor; corpori, quod servum fortuna erat, vim fecit*). Cf. 3,44,4 (Verginia), 8,28,3–4 (Publilius); in the case of Lucretia, the aim is secured by threats: 1,58,2–3. The Roman male ideal of sexual continence, especially when serving in a command role, is explored by TAYLOR 2022a, pointing out that sexual exertion was thought to weaken the body and the mind (128, 139), while the sexual self-control of the elite male – enjoying increasing access to control over the "bodies in imperial space" – came under increased scrutiny in the Middle Republic (129); the story of Chiomara is studied on page 140.

⁴¹ Liv. 38,24,4.

facinus haudquaquam mulieris esset) nature of this deed, leading Chiomara to confess “both the injury to her body and the revenge taken for the forcefully violated chastity”.⁴²

Typical for descriptions of barbarian women, the variants of Chiomara's story are also interspersed with ethnicizing gestures, such as the proverbially “Celtic” detail of decapitation, the wealth in gold that the Celts can dispose of, and their gnomic, aphoristic way of speaking.⁴³ James Arieti has pointed out that the admiring tone of the anecdote and the fame Chiomara is said to have won through her dignified action are at least partly explicable through her obviously higher social standing than that of the Roman soldier.⁴⁴ It is difficult to see how a Roman matron would have been portrayed taking the life of her rapist; Orgiagio's comment on the unwomanliness of such a deed, as well as Livy's comment on how Chiomara preserved the “matronly seemliness” (*matronalis decus*)⁴⁵ to the end of her life, just reinforces this normativity. Chiomara is, in other words, a typically active and “manly” Celtic woman, even if she does not wield the sword herself. Yet a rape in the barbarian lands is also curiously inert politically, as Arieti noted: no change is initiated and “no kingdom toppled”.⁴⁶ Despite the references to luck or fate, the story only tells about personal (and possibly ethnic) incorruptibility. In its details and set-up, the Chiomara story does, however, offer good insights into the dynamics of conquest, enslavement, rape, and ransoming that the Roman subjugation of local groups would have routinely entailed.

The second case that seems very pertinent to the topic of this chapter is the representation of Boudica, her daughters, and violence in Tacitus' and Cassius Dio's descriptions of the Icenian revolt.⁴⁷ The Livian pattern of rape leading to a crisis in legitimacy and an (attempted) change in power relations seems to linger in the Tacitean story of Boudica, too.⁴⁸ Prasutagus, king of the Iceni, had made the emperor his heir alongside his two daughters, hoping that this would safeguard his kingdom and dynasty. The events that follow cause the Roman rule to lose almost all legitimacy among the Iceni and many other Britons. As in Livy's anecdote about Chiomara, centurions are singled out among the guilty parties: they “plundered his kingdom”, while “slaves” (probably imperial ones) plunder his house “as if it was war booty”.⁴⁹ The greatest outrage with the Roman behaviour at this stage seems to be that they treat an allied realm as if it was a conquered land. Heading the litany of grievances is the way in which Boudica, the king's widow, was whipped and her daughters raped (*Boudica verberibus adfecta et filiae stupro violatae sunt*).⁵⁰ The other assaults on the Iceni are listed as the despoiling their aristocrats of their holdings and the king's clansmen being made slaves. The neighbouring Trinovantes join the Iceni, with the rebels hating the Roman veterans, settled in Camulodunum, with particular passion: the veterans had ejected Britons from their homes, “called them captives

⁴² Liv. 38,24,10: *mirantique cuiusnam id caput hominis aut quod id facinus haudquaquam mulieris esset, et iniuriam corporis et ultionem violatae per vim pudicitiae confessa viro est aliaque, ut traditur, sanctitate et gravitate vitae huius matronalis facinoris decus ad ultimum conservavit*.

⁴³ For decapitation, see e.g. Claud. Quadr. *FRHist* 24 F 6 *ap.* Gell. 9,13,19; Pos. F 274 (Edelstein & Kidd) *ap.* Str. 4,4,5; Diod. Sic. 14,115,5; Just. 24,5,6; for gold, see Pos. F 272 *ap.* Str. 7,2,1–2; Diod. Sic. 5,27,4; for gnomic speech, see Cato F 94 (Peter); Diod. Sic. 5,31,1; Diog. Laer. 1,6.

⁴⁴ ARIETI 1997, 217.

⁴⁵ Liv. 38, 24, 11.

⁴⁶ ARIETI *loc. cit.*

⁴⁷ For the reception of Boudica's figure, see GILLESPIE 2018, 133–41; JOHNSON 2023.

⁴⁸ Cf. Tac. *ann.* 14,35 with Boudica's daughters; Livy 1,59 with Lucretia.

⁴⁹ Tac. *ann.* 14,31: *adeo ut regnum per centuriones, domus per servos velut capta vastarentur*. See ADLER 2008, 176 on the Roman view about the legality of such appropriations in the wake of a client king's death; GILLESPIE 2018, 28–32 on the background and progress of the revolt.

⁵⁰ Tac. *ann.* 14,31.

and slaves” (*captivos, servos appellando*),⁵¹ and in doing all of this inspired still-serving Roman soldiers to emulate them.

The cultural background, explained by Tacitus in both *Agricola* and *Annales*, is the British indifference to the gender of their leaders.⁵² Boudica’s ability to motivate her compatriots to the uprising is undeniably tied to her own personal sense of injury, and is metonymy for what was in store for Britain. In some ways, Boudica and her daughters are in Tacitus the personified exemplar of the “devastation that is called peace”, that in *Agricola* gets put into the mouth of Calgacus, the war-leader of the Caledonii.⁵³ Particularly noteworthy is Boudica’s condemnation of *Romanorum cupidines*.⁵⁴ This works as another demonstration of Saavedra’s argument about the importance of women as focalizers in conquest texts.⁵⁵ This metonymy and its imaginative potential again becomes clear before the principal battle against Suetonius’ legionaries, as Boudica rides her chariot to each tribe in the British host in turn, and shows her daughters as the embodied evidence of the Roman ravages. She argues that her noble ancestry is immaterial to the outrage her family has suffered, and her lost freedom, flogged body, and raped daughters bind her to the experience of the rest: “The Roman lust has gone so far that not even our persons, not even age or virginity, are left unpolluted”.⁵⁶

In response to the atrocities committed by the rebels, the Roman mass slaughter of the British at the closure of Boudica’s rebellion is indiscriminate, with soldiers killing women and even baggage-animals.⁵⁷ The two groups are singled out as exceptional types of casualty, possibly, in part, because in a normal situation both would be just forced to serve the victors with their bodies. Earlier, Tacitus had noted that the British rebels had aimed purely at plundering, not at “taking prisoners and selling them, or any of the barter of war” – which essentially confirms the Roman soldiers’ habit of taking hostages and selling them back.⁵⁸ In texts that worry about the loss of Roman legitimacy due to the unscrupulousness of the empire’s representatives – or, as often in the case of Tacitus, the more general moral degeneration of the Roman society – the revolt of Boudica was a stark warning. To Tacitus, Boudica’s leadership could represent a more positive exemplar than the imperial rule in Rome. In a Livian fashion, the rape of Boudica’s daughters initiates a serious challenge to the *status quo*, and the theme of autocracy as the enabling factor of such affront is close to the surface, too.⁵⁹

In Cassius Dio, writing as he does in the early 200s, the Boudica story has both similarities and departures from Tacitus’ account. One commonality is the shame brought onto the Romans by the rebellion,

⁵¹ Tac. *loc. cit.*

⁵² Tac. *Agr.* 16,1 (see CLARKE 2001, 99); *ann.* 14,35. See also GILLESPIE 2015, 426–27.

⁵³ Tac. *Agr.* 30,5: *atque ubi solitudinem faciunt, pacem appellant*; in the same speech (32), Calgacus also casts fighting-spirit to his Britons by reminding them that unlike themselves, the Romans do not have “wives to kindle their courage” during the battle of Mons Graupius. This conforms with the Roman pattern of imagining northern enemies fighting all the more fiercely due to their fear of what will befall their womenfolk.

⁵⁴ Tac. *ann.* 14,35 See ADLER 2011; LAVAN 2020; also see below.

⁵⁵ SAAVEDRA 1999.

⁵⁶ Tac. *ann.* 14,35: *non ut tantis maioribus ortam regnum et opes, verum ut unam e vulgo libertatem amissam, confectum verberibus corpus, contrectatam filiarum pudicitiam ulcisci. eo proventus Romanorum cupidines ut non corpora, ne senectam quidem aut virginitatem impollutam relinquant*. See ADLER 2008, 179–84; GILLESPIE 2018, 64.

⁵⁷ Tac. *ann.* 14,37,1–2. On the way in which Boudica’s rebels turn the violence of conquest back at the Roman women of the *coloniae*: GILLESPIE 2018, 107.

⁵⁸ Tac. *ann.* 14,33: *neque enim capere aut venundare aliudve quod belli commercium, sed caedes patibula ignes cruces [...] festinabant*.

⁵⁹ STRUNK 2014 has studied the way in which a change from *libertas* to *servitium* in Tacitus can be portrayed through tolerance of abduction, much like in Livy *libertas* is achieved when rapes are not tolerated (e.g. p. 146). Cf. GILLESPIE 2018, 64–65.

which forms one of the initial crucial points in Dio's narrative.⁶⁰ Dio also foregrounds the description of Boudica's (or Bouduika's, as Dio calls her) authority, intelligence ("greater than often belongs to women"), great height and terrifying, exoticized looks ("a gaze most fierce and a harsh voice, a great mass of the tawniest hair falling to her buttocks") and stereotypically northern outfit ("round her neck was a golden torque, and she wore a tunic of diverse colours with a thick mantle fastened with a brooch over it").⁶¹ In Boudica's rousing speech to the gathered Britons, one of her accusations towards the Roman rule is that besides the herding and agriculture that the Britons now only conduct for the benefit of the Romans, they "pay a yearly tribute from our very bodies" (τῶν σωμάτων αὐτῶν δασμὸν ἐτήσιον φέρομεν).⁶² This is an ambiguous statement. It could be an oblique reference to the rape of Boudica's daughters, but since she goes on to discuss the extortionate taxes that the Romans had enforced on the locals, this may be the main thrust of the argument. But notably there is no explicit mention of rape. Instead, Dio has expanded on the earlier descriptions of the rebels' savage reprisals against the Romans in a way that strongly links bloodshed and sexualization.⁶³ Captive Roman noblewomen are hung up naked, their breasts cut off and sewed onto their mouths, and then they are impaled on pikes – all of this accompanied by sacrifices and banquets. The rape accusation has clearly been turned around to point back at the "barbarians".⁶⁴

Pornography of conquest in the early Roman Empire

Based on the discussion of the previous section, it seems uncontroversial to say that martial rape was a ubiquitous part of ancient warfare, especially in cases where the captives had no value as hostages.⁶⁵ Michael Taylor has recently examined very usefully the rhetoric of sexual restraint that was sometimes present in representations of Roman legionary life, but I would argue that this may still be more ideological and prescriptive than a reflection of realities.⁶⁶ In this section I will examine some examples where the Roman conquest of peoples, regions and provinces approaches some of the iconography, ideology or dynamics of rape. In his important 2011 study, David Mattingly explored the ideology of Roman conquest as a masculine, penetrative force. He emphasizes that sexual exploitation of those seen as marginal or inferior to the ingroup was in antiquity viewed through a different set of values than that directed at "core membership". According to him, agency and structure – body and power – cannot be studied in isolation from each other in an inherently unequal system such as the Roman Empire.⁶⁷ Mattingly's contribution was also important in highlighting the exploitation and violence that characterized Roman colonial sexuality: the sexual "op-

⁶⁰ Dio 62,1: "and all this was brought upon them by a woman, which in itself caused them great shame" (καὶ ταῦτα μέντοι πάντα ὑπὸ γυναικὸς αὐτοῖς συνήνεχθη, ὥστε καὶ κατὰ τοῦτο πλείστην αὐτοῖς αἰσχύνην συμβῆναι).

⁶¹ Dio 62,2: μεῖζον ἢ κατὰ γυναῖκα φρόνημα ἔχουσα [...] ἦν δὲ καὶ τὸ σῶμα μεγίστη καὶ τὸ εἶδος βλοσυρωτάτη τό τε βλέμμα δριμυτάτη, καὶ τὸ φθέγμα τραχὺ εἶχε, τὴν τε κόμην πλείστην τε καὶ ξανθοτάτην οὖσαν μέχρι τῶν γλουτῶν καθεῖτο, καὶ στρεπτόν μέγαν χρυσοῦν ἐφόρει, χιτῶνά τε παμποίκιον ἐνεκεκόλωτο, καὶ χλαμύδα ἐπ' αὐτῷ παχεῖαν ἐνεπεπόρητο. See GILLESPIE 2015, 420; cf. GILLESPIE 2018, 87–90 (and cf. ADLER 2008, 189–90) on Dio's Boudica as a representation of an "Amazon queen". Note also the similarly Romano-centrally expressed ethnic stereotypes about "burden-bearing Egyptians" and "trafficking Assyrians" in Boudica's own speech: Dio 62,6. Northern hair had a distinctive exotic and erotic charge among the Romans: Ov. *Amor.* 1,14, 45–50; Mart. 5,68 (cf. Juv. 6,120) refer to the blonde Germanic hair from captives traded to Rome in order to furnish fashionable wigs for Roman elite women.

⁶² Dio 62,3.

⁶³ Dio 62,7; cf. Tac. *ann.* 14,33. Religion is part of the equation, too: see GILLESPIE 2018, 110–13.

⁶⁴ Cf. ADLER 2008, 189, noting how Dio stresses the "monstrous, barbarian features" of Boudica's character.

⁶⁵ GACA 2014, 306–09; TAYLOR 2022a, 140.

⁶⁶ TAYLOR 2022a, especially 129–31, 139–40.

⁶⁷ MATTINGLY 2011, 95–96.

portunities of empire” which may partly explain the chronological correlation between the developing ideology of sexual domination and submission, and the growth of Rome’s empire.⁶⁸ As the conquest of outside societies is one of the starkest settings of unequal power relations, there are good reasons to look at the ways in which the Roman conquerors and the conquering masculine gaze might have created out of the violence and subjugation of a foreign society a sort of “pornography of conquest”.⁶⁹

From at least Herodotus onwards, the assumption was sometimes made that a woman could not be abducted – the verb is ἀρπάζειν, the meaning of which often covers rape, too – without being willing.⁷⁰ Conquered peoples and individuals did not get to express their consent – only to surrender and hope for leniency – much like the individuals being targeted within unequal sexual power relations (in peace and war alike).⁷¹ The analogous wielding of male conquering power by the Roman hegemony on the female personifications of the provinces would have appeared to need justification in only exceptional circumstances. In such a setting of structural violence, trauma would have become a prominent unifying experience of the generation alive during the hinge of the conquest.⁷² Enslavement would have removed some percentage of the populations, but enough survivors would usually have been left in the conquered lands to form an emotional community of sorts, linked by their experience of surviving the collective and sometimes individual violence of the Roman conquest. The experience of conquest also no doubt shaped the victors. As Mattingly has observed, “the dominant [Roman] male view of sexuality was profoundly affected by the experience of imperial success”.⁷³

Neither Greek nor Roman perceptions were completely unresponsive to the basic mirroring act of seeing in the defeated individuals the very fundamental human reactions to bereavement, loss and violation. We will see just below how occasionally the ingroup (Greek or Roman) rape of outgroup (barbarian) non-combatants is picked up by writers to offer a suitable source for a set-piece description of collective suffering in a non-individualized way, unlike in the cases we examined in the previous section. Some pictorial depictions demonstrate this willingness to project feelings of violation – sexual or otherwise – to the vanquished outgroup members, though the exact tone struck is hardly one of compassion or sympathy. This is the case with one of the early examples of a conquered barbarian as the victim of sexual violence: the Eurymedon vase. This classical red-figure *oinokhoë* has been debated extensively not only as a prominent piece of evidence for the Greek image of the “Orient”, but also as an early example for the analogy between rape and warlike victory (in this case, the battle of the Eurymedon River, where the Delian League defeated the Persians).⁷⁴ The Persian – or according to others, a Scythian – depicted in the vase is clearly terrified by the impending rape, but his portrayal is untypically frontal and not particularly sympathetic; his gesture is that of unmanly supplication, implying his lack of honour.⁷⁵

⁶⁸ Ibid. 98, 104–05, 118–21.

⁶⁹ The term is that of FERRIS 2000, 55–62; see also ROY 2024, more generally.

⁷⁰ Hdt. 1.4. On Herodotus’ portrayal of non-Greek peoples’ sexualities, WENGHOFER 2014.

⁷¹ Cf. the definition of “martial rape” by GACA 2014, 306: “openly performed martial acts of sexually penetrative aggression in which girls and young women wanted alive are subjected to mores of generally survivable rape, whereas female captives not wanted alive or used as vehicles of vengeance and interrogative torture are subjected to gang rape and other practices that are often lethal in effect and, to a degree, in intent”. See also HARRIS 2015.

⁷² Cf. GACA 2014, 307–08, 345–46; GACA 2015, 280. This is comparable to the way in which trauma may have been a common – perhaps to a degree also unifying – experience to the Roman soldiers, too: VAN LOMMEL 2013. Cf. also KOTROSITS 2018, 355.

⁷³ MATTINGLY 2011, 108.

⁷⁴ SCHAUENBURG 1975; HALL 1993; KILMER 1997, 135–38; SMITH 1999; McNIVEN 2000; ISAAC 2004, 566 fig. 2a–b; LLEWELLYN-JONES 2017.

⁷⁵ McNIVEN 2000, 83–94; for the interpretations of the passive figure as a Scythian, see SMITH 1999, 137–39.

Literary evidence may offer better chances for expressing sympathy for the fate of the raped. In a passage discussed by Gaca, for instance, Athenaeus of Naucratis attributes to Clearchus of Soli a very emotional and dramatic description of the mass rape of the Iapygian town of Carbina.⁷⁶ Here, the emphasis on Greek savagery is a tool designed to delegitimize the moral failure of the degenerate Tarentines who perpetrate the impious act – the mass rape is conducted in the shrines of the city – and receive the divine punishment for their crimes, though it is worth noting that an immediately following fragment shows that Clearchus had also envisioned the originally Cretan Iapyges to have degenerated from their Hellenic “well-ordered life” and become effeminate in dress and luxury.⁷⁷ Gendered, ethnic and moralizing aspects are intertwined already in the set-up of the set-piece.

Moving closer to the chronological focus of this chapter, we can note the most famous case of a barbarian spokesperson uttering condemnations of the Romans’ greed and ravages in a metaphoric way: the pre-battle exhortation given in Tacitus’ *Agricola* by Calgacus. The language of the Roman lust for conquest (*raptores orbis [...] quos non Oriens, non Occidens satiaverit*), and the way in which the speech describes the Romans as raping the earth (*auferre trucidare rapere falsis nominibus imperium, atque ubi solitudinem faciunt, pacem appellant*) and despoiling the rich and poor peoples alike (*si locuples hostis est, avari, si pauper, ambitiosi [...] opes atque inopiam pari adfectu concupiscunt*), is worthy of note for how close to the language of sex acts and sexual yearnings it cleaves.⁷⁸ The main themes of the speech are freedom and slavery, but the gendered angle is constantly present. The British should avoid the fate of the Gauls, who lost all their *virtus* (literally “manliness”, though encompassing a host of other associations) together with their freedom, as Tacitus notes at an earlier passage in *Agricola*.⁷⁹ The enslavement of the British has not been completed (*iam domiti ut pareant, nondum ut serviant*: 13,1), and as the Romans under Agricola penetrate to the furthest reaches of their island, Calgacus exhorts the Caledonians to push against the final act of domination.⁸⁰ He also condemns the Romans for raping the wives and sisters of Britons under the guise of friendship and hospitality every bit as badly as they would through “an enemy’s lust” (*coniuges sororesque etiam si hostilem libidinem effugerunt nomine amicorum atque hospitum polluantur*).⁸¹ As in the case of Boudica’s daughters, the condemnation of Roman *cupidines* is very much present, and the feeling of violation stokes the flames of resistance.

From the Sebasteion of Aphrodisias, in Asia Minor, we have some potentially quite significant iconographical representations of the gendered violence of the conquest that – although they do not depict rape, strictly speaking – may well be important in this context.⁸² The two Julio-Claudian reliefs, together with a third one portraying the “Nike of the *Sebastoi*”, forms a local triumphalist celebration of Claudius’ conquest of Britain (43 CE) and Nero’s subjugation of Armenia (58 CE). Though some scholars choose to emphasize the way in which, respectively, Claudius is about to deliver the killing blow to Britannia and Nero is handling the already-slumped Armenia, the abject postures and the clothing torn away from the breasts of

⁷⁶ Clearch. Sol. F 46 (Dorandi & White) *ap.* Ath. 12,23 (522d–f). See GACA 2014, 324–28; also cf. HARRIS 2023 on general expressions of sympathy, though only within the ingroup.

⁷⁷ Clearch. Sol. F 47 (Dorandi & White) *ap.* Ath. 12,24 (522f–523b).

⁷⁸ Tac. *Agr.* 30,4–6. On Calgacus, see RUTLEDGE 2000; CLARKE 2001, 100–05; ADLER 2011, 20, 117, 124, 127, 131; also LAVAN 2020, 201, fn. 103.

⁷⁹ Tac. *Agr.* 11,4.

⁸⁰ See LAVAN 2011, 299–300.

⁸¹ Tac. *Agr.* 31,1; see ADLER 2011, 131. On the sexualized violence in this type of Tacitean speeches, see O’GORMAN 2014, especially 176–84.

⁸² For the Sebasteion reliefs more generally, SMITH 2013.

the dominated female personifications – not to mention the sheer look of anguish and pain on the face of Britain – make the association with rape quite likely.⁸³ In the case of Claudius, he straddles the still struggling Britannia in a posture that seems to be exerting pressure on the small of her back, and pinning her thigh down with his other leg, as observed by Iain Ferris, who was among the first to read the piece as a reflection of “Roman male violence towards a non-Roman or barbarian woman”.⁸⁴

It seems to me that Ferris’ reading of the relief’s iconography as a “prelude to a sexual assault [...] and to a rape”, especially when considering the violent pulling of the hair and the very forceful pinning-down of the struggling female figure, is quite justified.⁸⁵ The base of the marble relief of Claudius and Britannia bears a smiling head of a young satyr, which has been interpreted to indicate the rustic character of Britain, but could certainly also have led the viewer to expect sexual connotations, considering how commonly satyrs harass and rape nymphs in Greek iconography.⁸⁶ On symbolical level, too, rape seems more apt than a slaughter. Killing a conquered province outright

would seem like a rather strange message to send – as Bert Smith has noted – so it makes more sense to read the composition as indicating the themes of utter humiliation, enslavement and sexual violence.⁸⁷ From the Roman point of view, these might conceivably give way to incorporation, acculturation, breeding and fruitfulness – in short: the most typical process whereby barbarian women were either destroyed or appropriated into the Roman system. This imperial conception of rape almost echoes the mythographical register, where all the rapes invariably result in offspring.⁸⁸ When combined with the unequal power relations and the ethnic gaze inherent in the Roman conquest, it also reminds us of Caroline Vout’s comment about the autocrat as the ultimate inseminator.⁸⁹ In some overt cases of genocidal mass violence, such as Caesar’s Gallic Wars, we are most commonly seeing the perpetration of a “gendercide”, as Tristan S. Taylor has recently pointed out.⁹⁰ The combination of killing the men and enslaving the women accomplishes a genocidal end result.



Fig. 2. Claudius and *Britannia* from the Sebasteion of Aphrodisias. Source Wikimedia Commons (CC 4.0 International).

⁸³ SMITH 2013, C12 and C-base 12; 142f., 145–47; cf. 146 “Claudius ... pulls her head back by the hair for the death blow”, but also cf. 147. LAVAN 2020, 185 also prefers to see death as Britannia’s imminent fate. In the case of Armenia, perhaps, this is a valid point. On the expression on Britannia’s face, FERRIS 2000, 56. See also ERIM 1982, 279ff.; STEWART 1995.

⁸⁴ FERRIS 2000, 56–57.

⁸⁵ Ibid. 58.

⁸⁶ SMITH 2013, 145: “Britannia is a rustic place”.

⁸⁷ Ibid. 147.

⁸⁸ As noted by ARIETI 1997, 219.

⁸⁹ VOUT 2007, 20.

⁹⁰ TAYLOR 2022b, 313; see also ÁLVAREZ PÉREZ-SOSTOA 2024, 130–32; CRISTEA 2023, 484–85, 495–98.



Fig. 3. Nero and Armenia from the Sebasteion of Aphrodisias. Source Wikimedia Commons CC 4.0 International).

In such a pattern of eradicated violence towards the conquered, the forced breeding of captured women – irrespective of whether they were enslaved or returned against ransom – was a real phenomenon that also lent itself to blunt symbolism.

In terms of Nero's victory over Armenia, we are more clearly dealing with a dying barbarian, though one who in death is clearly presented to the male gaze as an erotic object. No longer a threat, Armenia – “defeated and highly desirable” – is held between his legs by her upper arms.⁹¹ The identification of the region is secure on the basis of an inscribed label, while the Phrygian cap localizes the iconography in the Eastern sphere.⁹² As Smith has noted, the design as a whole is based on compositions depicting Achilles and Penthesileia at the moment of the Amazon queen's death.⁹³ Nero's eroticized quelling of Armenia may, in addition to the episode in the *Aethiopis* of the Epic Cycle, be also connected to local traditions in Aphrodisias. The legendary Assyrian king Ninos had become cited at Aphrodisias as their founder – giving the city impeccably ancient and imperial roots – and in this sense it is intriguing that in the possibly late 1st century CE *Ninos Romance* the

great conqueror mounts a dramatic campaign against Armenians.⁹⁴ Though the dating of the *Romance* is not secure, and it may be later than the Julio-Claudian Sebasteion sculptures, this apparent parallel is rather interesting – especially if the conquest of Armenia was already part of Ninos' legend around the time the sculptor cast Nero in the role of the new conqueror of Armenia.

Depictions in the triumphalist mode would understandably focalize the conquering and sexualized potency on the figure of the emperor,⁹⁵ but one could also look at the dynamics of conquest-as-rape from the point of view of the collective of its actual perpetrators. Indeed, it could even be asked if the Roman conquest of a region or a people can be seen as a metaphorical gang rape. Such acts of sexual violence have been noted to be acts of “establishing bonds between men via the domination and subjugation of a woman”.⁹⁶ This theme comes up already in the – admittedly less aggressive – Herodotean anecdote about the Lydian king Candaules, who clearly intended to stage a voyeuristic opportunity for the benefit of his bodyguard Gyges,

⁹¹ SMITH 2013, 142.

⁹² As do the quiver and bow, depicted at the background: MARKARYAN 2019, 193.

⁹³ SMITH 2013, 142; in fact both reliefs, Claudius' and Nero's, are variants of Hellenistic Amazonomachies: MARKARYAN 2019, 193–94.

⁹⁴ *Ninos* (Zimmermann) F B2. On the role of Ninos in Aphrodisias, see YILDIRIM 2004, 25–26, 29, 44; on the *Ninos Romance*, see YILDIRIM 2004, 43–44.

⁹⁵ Cf. LAVAN 2020, 194–95; also ROSSO CAPONIO 2020.

⁹⁶ MARTIN ALCOFF 1996, 24; see HUBBARD 2022, e.g. 48 (where the sex may be forced).

whom he wanted to ogle at his queen's naked body.⁹⁷ Though Gyges is portrayed as revolted by such an act of besmirching the honour of the queen, and Candaules' act leads to the demise of himself and his dynasty (foreshadowing the changes that Livian rape narratives often lead to), this story – as well as Herodotus' way of leaving the queen unnamed – nonetheless tells about the possibility of using the shared male gaze directed at a non-consenting female body as a potential source for male solidarity. In the extremely phallogentric Roman culture, it is not at all inconceivable that the legions marching into a region, named in a feminine form – *Armenia*, *Britannia*, *Gallia* and so on – could be seen as a penetrative force in its own right.⁹⁸ The terminology for sexual intercourse, as other scholars have already noted, is full of analogies with typical soldiers' tasks of “striking, cutting, wounding, penetrating, digging, triumphing, dominating”.⁹⁹

Conclusion: inscribing the Roman domination on the barbarian body

It seems that the range of concrete, imagined, and metaphoric connections between the Roman subjugation of regions and peoples, the rape of individual humans, and the imperial language of triumph and conquest well justify the term “culture of rape”.¹⁰⁰ Adult male armed conflict was only part of the practicalities of conquest, and similarly the representations of the Roman takeover of regions made use of the symbolism that female bodies – sometimes through metonymy with regions – offered. In so doing, the ethnic gaze is revealed as an active force shaping the narratives of the horizon of conquest. The Roman audiences in the second century CE, in particular, seem to have become increasingly desensitized to depictions of barbarian suffering, as Gillespie observes.¹⁰¹ The development of this tendency is, however, visible already in the reliefs of the Sebasteion of Aphrodisias, where the utter subjugation of the female personifications of Britain and Armenia by Claudius and Nero comes very close to the iconography of rape.¹⁰²

The emperor is the metonymic sexual despoiler in the Aphrodisias reliefs and Marcus Aurelius stoically presides over both the execution and the abduction of German captives, but the actual rapists of the conquered peoples would have been the soldiers and officers of the Roman army, the early administrators, their middlemen (both native and Roman), and the owners of the freshly enslaved captives. *Centuriones* are among the culprits in both Chiomara's story in Livy and Boudica's story in Tacitus, although in the latter it is not explicitly said that they raped the queen's daughters. While the sample is too small to draw firm conclusions, one may speculate as to why this might be. Presumably the division of female captives was done according to the rank. Considering their relatively high position within a legion, centurions may have ended up with some of the noble captives who were not only valuable enough to be ransomed, but – if raped – would have been worth of notice due to their social status. This seems possible at least in the case of Chiomara. The rank of the rapists of Boudica's daughters is, on the other hand, impossible to identify. In any case, the rape of the barbarian became worth mentioning only when it had triggered a serious revolt or allowed for a particularly striking anecdote.

Challenging the right of Rome (or the Roman male) to rape non-Romans is, overall, not very common in our sources, though occasionally the topic is taken up in endogenous criticism of Roman imperialism,

⁹⁷ Hdt. 1,8–12. For the episode, see HARRISON 1997, 193–95.

⁹⁸ On the phallogentricity of Roman society, MATTINGLY 2011, 106.

⁹⁹ ADAMS 1982, 145–49; MATTINGLY 2011, 106.

¹⁰⁰ Cf. GACA 2015, 280.

¹⁰¹ GILLESPIE 2018, 77.

¹⁰² Also seen, for instance, in the strongly classicizing Amazonomachy friezes currently in the Piraeus Archaeological Museum.

either as a metaphor or through concrete acts. The cases I have examined more closely in this chapter have mostly dealt with northern women, which may well have formed a somewhat distinctive class of barbarians in the minds of the Early Imperial Roman male writers. Much as in the late antique account by Ammianus Marcellinus, these women were portrayed in a highly eroticized fashion, but also often understood to be “manly”, active, temperamental and independent. Even so, foreign individuals were not admitted as fully possessing Roman-style *honos* or *castitas*: a non-citizen could not be raped.¹⁰³ Even freedmen were to a certain degree still tarnished by the assumed sexual submission that they would have undergone as slaves.¹⁰⁴ Inflicting the dishonour of *stuprum* on the raped person was not an association that the “taking possession” of conquered foreign bodies would have evoked. The horizon of conquest made barbarians mere objects in a multitude of ways, and as newly made slaves they would not have had any *honos* to lose. Free barbarian women – especially their elites – seem to have been, at least occasionally, another matter, as the case of Chiomara shows, but any condemnation was articulated from the point of view of morals, not law. Ethnic elements are frequently foregrounded – physical traits in particular – so as to introduce both authenticating details and exotic sources for titillation: the northern women’s stature, skin and hair seem like particularly often-repeated elements. While it would be too rash to conclude that the Roman “pornography of conquest” had an ethnic kink, it seems that the conquering masculine gaze – influenced by and, in turn, perpetuating the ancient Roman culture of rape – was frequently fixed on ethnically framed details.

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¹⁰³ NGUYEN 2006, 85–86.

¹⁰⁴ *Sen. contr.* 4,10, as discussed by MATTINGLY 2011, 109, 119.

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Donna or domina? Manipulating Italia's gender from ancient Rome to 19th-century Italian colonialism

FRANCESCA BELLEI

Introduction

What kind of woman is Italy? This is a question that men have been trying to settle for centuries. In his lament over the decadence of Italy, Dante famously – or rather, infamously – does *not* mince his words: *Ahi serva Italia, di dolore ostello, | nave senza nocchiere in gran tempesta | non donna di province ma bordello!* (“Ah slavish Italy, the home of grief, ship without pilot caught in a raging storm, no **queen of provinces** – whorehouse of shame!” *Purg.* 6,76–8).¹ The contrast Dante means to present here is transparently sexist. In the past, Italy was a *donna*, meaning a *domina provinciarum*, the term used by medieval scholars to indicate Italy’s superior status over all other provinces of the Roman empire: a powerful, fertile yet chaste matron.² Now, however, Italy has gone from being the dominatrix of the Mediterranean basin to Dante calling her a “whore” by metonymy.³ Given Dante’s almost immediate elevation to the very top of the Italian literary canon, these verses set the tone for talking about Italy’s ever-present state of decadence for the next few centuries.

The nineteenth-century poet and philologist Giacomo Leopardi’s 1818 “Ode to Italy” comes to mind: *fosti donna, or sei povera ancilla*. (“You, who were a queen, are now a humble **servant**,” 24).⁴ In the case of both Dante and Leopardi’s texts, the starkness of the dichotomy between *domina* (“woman enslaver, mistress”) and *serva/ancilla* (“enslaved woman, servant”) is only fully accessible to readers with a knowledge of Latin. This is not a coincidence, but the result of centuries and centuries of holding the imperial past of Rome as the unquestioned standard for Italy to live up to – no matter its human cost. It is the loss of hegemonic status, rather than the oppression by foreign powers, that Leopardi frames as something that Italy is *entitled* to weep over: *Piangi, ché ben hai donde, Italia mia, | le genti a vincer nata* (“weep, my Italy, the nations born to vanquish, for you have every reason,” 18–19).

Behind Leopardi’s verses we hear the echo of Virgil’s Anchises, whose job it is to communicate to Aeneas the plan for global domination the gods cooked up for Rome: *tu regere imperio populos, Romane, memento; | hae tibi erunt artes; pacisque imponere morem, | parcere subiectis, et debellare superbos* (“You, Roman, make sure to dominate the nations with your power; these will be your arts: to impose the rule of

¹ I use Mark MUSA’s translation of the *Purgatory* throughout. See MUSA 1981. Edition for the original Italian is SERMONTI 1990.

² The most complete account of the history of this formula can be found in RACCAGNI 2013, 596: it originates with the medieval Italian scholar Boncompagno da Signa (1165/75–1204), who was the first to encapsulate the idea of “Italian privileges” under Rome “with the aphorism ‘*Italia non est provincia, sed domina provinciarum*.’” It was then picked up by jurists (see, for instance, Accursius’ *Glossa Ordinaria* and Odofredus’s *Lectura super Codice*) and enjoyed a long-lasting fortune throughout the Middle Ages and up to the Renaissance, as evidenced by Dante’s words cited here and Lorenzo Valla’s writings on the donation of Constantine.

³ SERMONTI 1990, 92.

⁴ The edition used is DONATI [1831] 1917. Translations from the Italian are my own unless otherwise specified.

peace, spare the conquered and vanquish the proud” *Aen.* 6,851–53).⁵ But unlike Dante, who uses *donna* on the one hand and *bordello* on the other to distinguish the past and present condition of Italy, Leopardi uses the term *donna* to refer both to her past as a matronly enslaver (*fosti donna*, 24) and her present state of effeminate decadence. Italy, or so the cliché goes, is a *formosissima donna* (“most beautiful woman,” 10), whose vulnerability and “fallen” state are revealed through her nakedness: *nuda la fronte e nudo il petto mostri* (“you expose your naked brow, your bare chest,” 7).

By focusing solely on the image of Italy as a beautiful but “fallen” woman, we might be tempted to agree with Carroll Smith-Rosenberg’s axiom that “figurations of gender, themselves asymmetrical, mark asymmetrical flows of power. Power is associated with virility, its absence with emasculation and the feminine.”⁶ But the collapse of the Latin meaning of *domina* into *donna* (the modern Italian word for woman) in Leopardi’s poem should give us pause. If Smith-Rosenberg’s axiom is really all there is to it, why are Italy’s allegorical representations as *donna* associated not only with the absence of power, as might be expected in a patriarchal society, but also with absolute power, the inhumane kind that a *domina* might exercise? Answering this question will be the central concern of this article, which argues that this two-faced, feminized representation of Italy lies at the very heart of the project of national unification, and that its emotional appeal is so powerful because of its ancient origins and its many resignifications throughout time.

The one individual whose line of thought best represents this is Vincenzo Gioberti. Gioberti was many things: a Catholic priest, a philosopher, and a politician, who became the President of the Piedmontese Chamber of Deputies in 1847 but ceased all political activities only two years later, after falling afoul of King Victor Emmanuel II. His role as one of the most ardent advocates of Italian freedom from foreign oppression was cemented by the rather delusionally-entitled treatise *Del Primato Morale e Civile Degli Italiani* (“On the Moral and Civil Primacy of Italians,”) written in 1843. Gioberti’s representation of Italy as an “ancient and loving mother” (*L’Italia, antica ed amorosa madre*, 52) was a heart-stirrer in its time, and turned the book into an instant bestseller.⁷

This makes a strange sort of sense, as historian Giovanni Belardelli recently argued: “the motherland could only ever be a woman, because she is the object of a feeling (the love for the motherland) which involves the entire population but is required above all from its male component, which must be ready to fight in order to defend the nation”.⁸ Naturally, Italy is far from being alone in this – the importance of the idea of the “motherland” is well-attested in most studies of nineteenth-century European nationalisms.⁹ Looking at it from the analyst’s chair, the idea of the motherland works because positing the mother as first erotic object enables the construction of cis straight men as normative subjects and citizens. But this fact should not lead us to undervalue the importance of the “ancient” in Gioberti’s description; on the contrary, the notion of Italy’s antiquity is inseparable from its imagined gender.

What is more, the seemingly innocuous image of Italy as a mother is evoked to pursue, soften and aestheticize ideological aims far beyond self-determination, as is clear from the global thrust of Gioberti’s argument. He writes: *L’Italia è la sola nazione che possa ricostruire l’unità del genere umano [...] Le varie nazioni non possono essere sorelle se una non è madre* (“Italy is the only nation who can rebuild the unity

⁵ The text is from MYNORS 1969. Translations from the Latin are my own unless otherwise specified.

⁶ SMITH-ROSENBERG 2000, 271. The author focuses on the American Republic, rather than Italy – but the pattern she names (power : virility = absence of power : femininity) and its deconstruction are also at the heart of my analysis of Italy.

⁷ COPENHAVER – COPENHAVER 2012, 37. For the enormous success of Gioberti’s *magnum opus* see also PATRIARCA 2010, 244.

⁸ BELARDELLI 2020, 12.

⁹ Cf. YILDIZ 2012 for Germany; RAMASWAMY 2010 for the case of India and BARON 2005 for Egypt.

of humankind,” since “distinct nations cannot be sisters if one of them is not the mother,” [1843] 1920, xxxv). What Gioberti calls “unity” here is, in other parts of his work, more explicitly named as hegemony; a hegemony which – unsurprisingly, given Gioberti’s status as one of Italy’s foremost clergymen – identifies Catholicism with “civilization” itself: *Ora siccome il centro di questa [la Chiesa cattolica] è l’Italia ne segue che l’Italia è il vero capo della civiltà e che Roma è la metropoli ideale del mondo* (“Now, since the center of this [the Catholic Church] is Italy it follows that Italy is the real head of civilization and Rome is the ideal metropolis of the world,” [1843] 1920, xxxiv-xxxv).

This is not an idea that originates with the Catholic Church, of course, but is already intrinsic in the ancient Roman construction of Rome as the capital of a “global” empire,¹⁰ as encapsulated in Ovid’s verse: *Romanae spatium est urbis et orbis idem* (“The space of the city of Rome is coextensive with the world,” *fast.* 2,684).¹¹ It hardly bears repeating that this is factually untrue: even at its largest expanse under Trajan, who ruled from 98 to 117 CE, the Roman empire occupied 5 million square kilometers out of a total 58 million square kilometers of land on Earth. But perhaps this *does* bear repeating, given how much space the hyperbolic idea of Rome as the “Capital of the World” occupies in centuries of rhetoric about the city. In Gioberti’s prose, while the global reach of Rome’s empire(s) is only imagined, the still unbearably vast reach of its actual violence is disguised as a motherly embrace – complicating Smith-Rosenberg’s axiom that associates power with virility and its absence with the feminine.

Evidently, gender alone is not a capacious or specific enough category to understand the true import of Italy’s allegorical feminization. In an important study on this topic, historian Alberto Mario Banti argued that the trope of Italy as a mother serves the intertwined purposes of reinforcing a strict gender binary and shaping the nation as a “biopolitical community of descent”.¹² But even Banti’s interpretation doesn’t really go beyond the abstract understanding of “descent,” “lineage,” or “blood” – with the result that the question of race,¹³ which has been and is still being scrutinized for all or most other European nationalisms, has been severely overlooked in the case of Italy. And yet, it is precisely Italy’s placement within a white, heteronormative framework that grants the “mother” power by disguising its reach.

While not yet in the majority, the number of scholars who foreground the issue of race in the Risorgimento is constantly growing, and this cannot be called an entirely “new” movement: Cristina Lombardi-Diop and Caterina Romeo’s pioneering volume *Postcolonial Italy*, which dates back to 2012, made a strong case for no longer overlooking the importance of colonialism to the project of Italian unification.¹⁴ Maria Sophia Quine studied how the emergence of an Italian school of anthropology during the Risorgimento affected processes of racialization in Italy.¹⁵ In his most recent book, *At the Roots of Italian Identity*, Edoardo

¹⁰ Ancient Rome was not the only model that Risorgimento nationalists appealed to. Several leading thinkers of the era (e.g. Gioberti himself, Carlo Cattaneo, Giuseppe Ferrari, Pietro Calà Ulloa, Vincenzo d’Errico) pushed for a federalist model either with-in or as an alternative to the unification project, inspired by Italy’s medieval communes, but also by nineteenth-century Switzerland and the US. It was Giuseppe Mazzini’s model of a newly unified Italy as a “Third Rome,” however, that won out in the end, and even Gioberti and d’Errico, proponents of a unified confederation of states headed by the Pope (a movement known as Neo-Guelphism), still saw Rome’s past as central to Italy’s “mission” in the world.

¹¹ For the edition cf. FRAZER – GOOLD 1989.

¹² BANTI 2011, 15.

¹³ ILLUZZI 2018, 427 highlights the importance of framing Italian blood as *Roman* specifically. For the role of blood in Italian constructions of race see WELCH 2016.

¹⁴ LOMBARDI-DIOP – ROMEO 2012.

¹⁵ See QUINE 2013. The well-known concept of racialization was advanced by Michael Omi and Howard Winant in 1986 in *Racial Formation in the United States*, now in its third edition. Despite the uniqueness of the US context, their abstract definition of racialization as “the extension of racial meaning to a previously racially unclassified relationship, social practice, or group” (OMI – WINANT 2015, 13) is a valuable one for other geographical and chronological contexts as well.

Barsotti moves the timeline further back still, to the early Napoleonic age.¹⁶ It is by appealing to these scholars' work, and that of many others throughout, that this article aims to complicate the discourse of Italy's feminization as corresponding to a "subordinate" position.

To begin with, I will provide a very brief introductory survey on the idea of the city as a woman, which first appears in ancient Near Eastern literature and art, and continues to be associated with the East in ancient Greece, from the metaphorical representations of Troy in the *Iliad* to widespread Hellenistic representations of goddesses presiding over cities. The first section will explore how this basic idea is manipulated in service of ideologies of domination in ancient Rome: putting a spin on the Homeric blueprint, which had imagined Troy as a city-woman to be conquered, the Roman empire constructs entire countries and other empires (e.g., Phrygia, Carthage, Italy) as women to be conquered and/or as maternal figures. This takes interdependent yet different forms in the case of each specific region: notably, the Carthaginians are violently othered by Rome in a way that Italians are not.¹⁷ The same can be said for the Phrygians, who are associated with the Orientalizing tropes of despotism, effeminacy, and luxury, even as Aeneas and the Trojans are claimed as Rome's ancestors.¹⁸ But underlying these multifarious power dynamics is the same basic pattern: an alternation between identification and distancing which has long been recognized as central to the formation of Roman identity as masculine and hegemonic.

This is evident in the adoption of the cult of the Phrygian goddess Cybele, whom the Romans called *Magna Mater Idaea*, underlining, with the mention of Mount Ida, her Trojan origins, and who was first introduced to Rome during the Punic Wars. But the face-off with Carthage also gives rise to the idea of Italy as a unified entity; one whose "material" boundary, the Alps, is created through the violation that breaks it: Hannibal's crossing in 218 BCE. Through a comparative reading of passages from Livy, Virgil, Silius Italicus and Servius, I will argue that, although the conflict with Carthage is the precipitating event through which *Italia* comes into being as a "woman," it is during and immediately after the Social War between Rome and its Italian allies (91–87 BCE) that this "woman" comes to be identified as a "mother." This allows Rome to incorporate the whole of "Italy" as a subordinate yet intimately familiar entity, and to aestheticize and naturalize the exploitation of its human and natural resources; as "spontaneously" offered to the Romans as maternal nourishment is to an infant.

It is important to note, here, that the myth of maternal generosity is a convenient one, but it is just that: a myth. Biologically speaking, from the time a fetus forms in the womb, it *takes* what it needs from the gestator's body, with often devastating consequences. This occurs because human pregnancies happen through a specific kind of placenta, called "hemochorial": "Rather than ... contenting itself with freely proffered secretions, this placenta 'digests' its way into its host's arteries, securing full access into most tissues".¹⁹ After that, the embryo "enlarges and paralyzes the wider arterial system supplying it, while at the same time elevating (hormonally) the blood pressure and sugar supply".²⁰ Quite a far cry from "the miracle

¹⁶ BARSOTTI 2021.

¹⁷ Actual Roman violence towards the Carthaginians went as far as dismembering animals after all the humans had already been slaughtered, as Polybius testifies (Polyb. 10,15,4–5). As Dan-el Padilla Peralta called it, this is "Roman violence in its most uncompromisingly genocidal manifestation" (PADILLA PERALTA 2020, 160). For Carthage's role as the "prime antagonist of Rome in song and story" see GRUEN 2011, 135.

¹⁸ While the Phrygians and the Trojans were described as distinct ethnic groups in the *Iliad*, the habit of "barbarizing" the Trojans by identifying them with the Phrygians is not a Roman invention, but it is already an established narrative in fifth-century BCE Greece. HALL 1988 conjectures that it may date back as far as Alcaeus.

¹⁹ LEWIS 2019, 8.

²⁰ Ibid. 9.

of life” narratives that have been built around pregnancy: but of course, it is by idealizing pregnant people as endlessly generous (to the point of risking their own lives) that the parasitic nature of pregnancy is so effectively concealed.

In the second section, I will analyze how the contradictions inherent to Rome's construction of Italy inform Italian literature and identity from Dante to the Risorgimento and beyond. As a “woman” or *donna* in a patriarchal society she is imagined as subordinate and vilified. However, its having been incorporated by Rome as *domina provinciarum* is also the source of a perennially frustrated sense of entitlement that finds its ultimate expression in Italy's early colonial enterprises. During colonialism, the image of Italy as feminine and maternal is deployed to sanitize colonial violence on the one hand and glorify it through the myth of the Roman empire on the other. These twin aims are only apparently in contradiction with each other, and their interconnectedness cannot be understood without knowledge of how the image of *Italia* was fabricated in ancient Rome. Finally, I will conclude by re-iterating why I think this work matters and is worth doing.

Before diving into my argument, however, I would like to add a statement about the premise which subtends the whole of it: namely, that what I analyze is the discursive *construction* of identities, and it is precisely because I believe in the existence and *importance* of people's material lives and bodily experiences that I refuse to partake in bio-essentialism. When I speak of the construction of Italy as a white woman and mother there is no doubt in my mind that one does not imply the other, and that it is specifically through such nationalistic, racializing discourses that the identities “white,” “woman,” and “mother” are projected as “biological” truths. Omi and Winant wrote that while “there is a crucial corporeal dimension to the race-concept” this is “not because of any biologically based or essential difference among human beings across such phonemic variables as ‘color’ or ‘hair texture,’ but because such sociohistorical practices as conquest and enslavement classified human bodies for purposes of domination,” which is what *racialization* is.²¹ When I think about the collapsing of the categories “woman” and “mother” into one another, I am thinking about it through a transfeminist or trans-inclusive lens: not all women are or can be mothers and not all pregnant or potentially pregnant people are women.²² Nor are the categories of gender and race formed separately from one another, as intersectionality teaches us.²³ To quote Omi and Winant once again, it is by “hold[ing] these truths of intersectional analysis to be self-evident”²⁴ that a critique of the gendering and racializing allegorical representations of *Italia* can fully be entered into.

The mural crown: genesis of a metaphor

The representation of Italy as a woman in her prime wearing a mural crown, known as *Italia turrita* is one of Italy's most enduring and widespread national symbols (**Fig. 1**).

It was first codified by the sixteenth-century iconographer Cesare Ripa²⁵ and has never since declined in popularity, appearing on *lira* coins, stamps, passports and in statuary form all across the peninsula. Representations of this kind find their earliest textual and material ancestors in the ancient Near East, though their exact origins are disputed. Archaeologist Francesco Marcattili argues that the cosmos-evoking circularity of the crown was meant to signal the protection of a divinity over a city or even an entire kingdom, citing a

²¹ OMI – WINANT 2015, 13.

²² LEWIS 2019, 32.

²³ CRENSHAW 1989.

²⁴ OMI – WINANT 2015, 106.

²⁵ BAZZANO 2011, 89.

Babylonian inscription as evidence.²⁶ In this inscription, the center of the city of Borsippa is identified with the crown of the god Marduk: “your throne is Babylon, and Borsippa your crown.”²⁷ But a famous representation of the goddess Hapat, possibly wearing one such crown, on the walls of the Hittite temple of Yazilikaya in ancient Anatolia (1250–20 BCE) indicates the iconography could be older still. Others are more skeptical of the Anatolian hypothesis, like Frances Pinnock, who is: “convinced that to give this ornament the shape of a town wall was a specifically Assyrian habit” was exclusively associated with Assyrian queens.²⁸ The mural crown also appears in the Hebrew Bible: the prophet Isaiah describes Zion as “a magnificent crown in the hand of God”²⁹ and in the *Song of Songs*, the body of the beloved is erotically described as a city: “I am a wall, and my breasts are like towers.”³⁰

In ancient Greece, the iconography of the mural crown is explicitly associated with Asia from the fourth century BCE: in poetry, Troy is known for her crown of towers, and in painting, Asia personified appears enthroned with a crown of towers as in the fourth-century BCE Darius Vase (**Fig. 2 and 3**).

As Fabian Horn noted in a recent article, the *Iliad* provides us with a constellation of metaphors whose governing principle is the idea of the city as a woman: in book 5, the Greek hero Tlepolemus describes his father’s Heracles previous sack of Troy as a “widowing” of the city: “but he sacked the city of Ilium and made widows of its streets” (Ἰλίου ἐξαλάπαξε πόλιν, χήρωσε δ’ ἀγνιάς, 5,642).³¹ In book 16, Achilles wishes that he and Patroclus alone could take Troy by tearing down its κρήδεμνον, a metaphor which equates the city’s walls with a woman’s sacred headdress, and in so doing frames the conquest of Troy as an act of violation that anticipates the rape and enslavement of the Trojan women: “so that we alone could tear down the sacred headdress of Troy” (ὄφρ’ οἷοι Τροίης ἱερὰ κρήδεμνα λύωμεν, 16,100).

This metaphor also foreshadows one of highest emotional peaks of the poem, when Andromache runs to the walls of Troy in book 22, to see Achilles drag Hector’s dead body around the city, and tears off the κρήδεμνον from her head as she loses her senses: “Far from her head she flung ... the headdress that golden Aphrodite had given her on the day when Hector of the flashing helmet took her as his bride” (τῆλε δ’ ἀπὸ κρατὸς βάλε [...] κρήδεμνόν θ’, ὃ ῥά οἱ δῶκε χρυσέη Ἀφροδίτῃ | ἥματι τῷ ὅτε μιν κορυθαίολος ἠλάγεθ’ Ἑκτωρ, 22,468–71). The divine headdress that was once taken off by Hector on his and Andromache’s wedding night, when they willingly made love to one another, is the same object which she tears off her head when Hector dies; his body desecrated in front of her very eyes, just like her body will soon be desecrated by



Fig. 1. Francesco Liberti, Italia Turrita (1861). Palazzo Reale, Naples. Image is in the public domain.

²⁶ MARCATTILI 2020, 41.

²⁷ Translated from Italian, quotation included.

²⁸ PINNOCK 2018, 743.

²⁹ Isaiah 62: 3, as quoted in MARCATTILI 202, 42.

³⁰ *Song of Songs* 8:10. Transl. Robert Alter.

³¹ ALLEN – MONRO 1920 is the edition used for the *Iliad*. Translations from the Greek are my own, based on HORN 2020.



Fig. 2. The Darius Vase (340-320 BCE). Archaeological Museum, Naples. Ph. Carlo Raso (License: CC BY-SA 2.0. Source: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Darius_vase_Napoli_Museum_without_background.jpg).

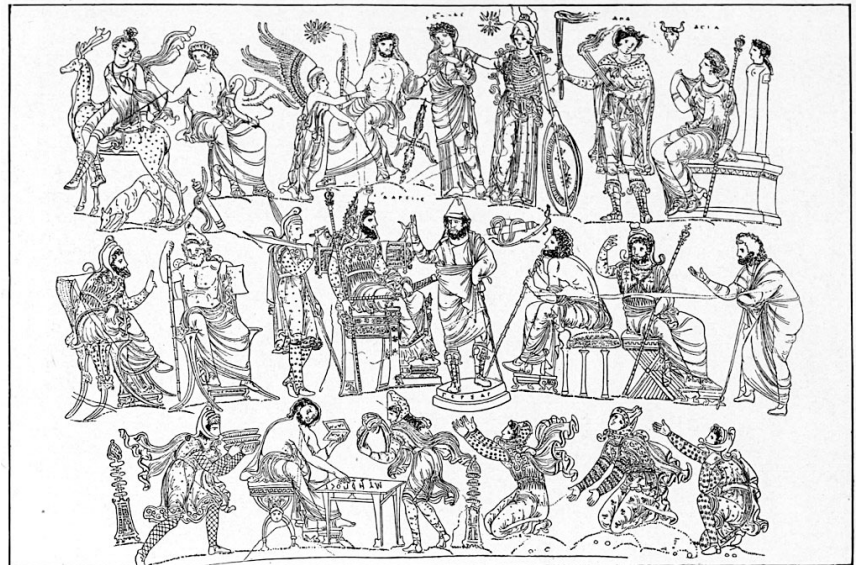


Fig. 3. The three tiers of the Darius Vase, drawing, first published in 1899 (Asia in the top righthand corner). Image is in the public domain.

rape. What was once the symbol of love becomes for Andromache the symbol of enslavement, the violation of her bodily boundaries, and the loss of her (and Troy's) right to life: because of the Greeks' violent "widowing," the identification of Troy with Andromache (the city with a woman) is now devastatingly complete.

But the metaphorical significance of the mural crown is much too complex and multifaceted to only ever be a symbol of dispossession. In later centuries, it also becomes – or rather, becomes again – that symbol of powerful divine protection it once was in ancient Mesopotamia: Eastern goddesses presiding over cities, such as Cyprian Aphrodite, Ephesian Artemis, and Phrygian Cybele are all represented wearing a mural crown. Sculptures of the goddess Tyche, crowned with towers, preside over several cities throughout the Hellenistic world (**Fig. 4**).

As the fortifying walls of the major urban centers of Alexander's empire become more and more intricately ornate, the iconography of the mural crown intertwines with the Orientalizing myth of eastern splendor, or *luxuria Asiatica*, and maintains that association even when it eventually spreads to Italy via Sicily through countless replicas.³²

In Rome, her ties with the East do not lose any of its original force; if anything, they emerge stronger than ever in the figure of *turriger* ("tower-bearing") Cybele, known in Rome as *Magna Mater* (**Fig. 5**). Livy reports that the goddess was brought to Rome from Asia Minor in 204 BCE., towards the close of the Second Punic War (218-201 BCE). The *Magna Mater* was installed in the very heart of the city, on the Palatine hill, where a temple was first dedicated to her in 191 BCE³³ and restored by Augustus, during whose rule the cult of Cybele at Rome reaches its peak.³⁴

³² MARCATTILI 2020, 44.

³³ Liv. 29,10–14. Cf. BEARD 2012, 326.

³⁴ BAZZANO 2011, 27.



Fig. 4. The Tyche of Antioch (marble Roman copy of Greek bronze original, ca. 300 BCE.). The Vatican Museums, Rome. Image is in the public domain.



Fig. 5. Statue of a Seated Cybele with the Portrait Head of her Priestess (ca. 50 CE). Getty Museum. Digital image courtesy of the Getty's Open Content Program.

As Mary Beard argued, out of all the foreign deities and cults that were incorporated into Rome, Cybele stood out: firstly, because of her priests, the *galli*, whose long flowing hair and loose silken robes already marked them out as both ethnically different and “effeminate.” Their ecstatic worship rituals, which progressed from dancing to self-flagellation, and ended with ritual self-castration, constituted the ultimate horror for the Roman *vir*, whose masculinity depended on his corporeal inviolability.³⁵ Always the penetrator; never the penetrated (regardless of the gender of his sexual partners), let alone the castrated. At the same time, Cybele’s Trojan origins made her not a foreign deity, but an ancestral one, as Augustan propaganda would have it.³⁶ This constant tension between the marking out of the *Magna Mater* and her rituals as something dangerously alien and her incorporation into the highest levels of state religion is nothing truly out of the ordinary, in ancient Rome: the same tension between mirroring and distancing is a fundamental mechanism in the construction of Roman identity, and we can see it operating in Rome’s relationship with Greece, Egypt and, of course, Carthage.³⁷

³⁵ FREDERICK 2002, 258.

³⁶ Horn 2020, 12 points to Homeric metaphors of Troy’s Mount Ida as “mother and nurse”: “when pointing out the mountain’s capacity to nurture and bring forth life as a ‘mother’ in the formulaic epithet ‘mother of wild beasts’ in *Iliad* 8, 47; 14, 283; 15, 151; Hom. *Hymn Aph.* 5, 68: “Ἰδην ... μητέρα θηρῶν.”

³⁷ On the development of this discourse under Augustus, see GIUSTI 2018.

For instance, Silius Italicus' (26–101 CE) epic *Punica* represents both Rome and its enemy, Carthage, as crowned with towers, which is significant because there are almost no other visual or textual representations of Rome like it. These are the relevant passages:

quo fugitis? quae spes victis? Alpesne petemus?
ipsam turrihero portantem vertice muros
credite summissas Romam nunc tendere palmas
 (Sil. *Pun.* 4,407–09)

Where are you fleeing to? What hope is there if we lose? Shall we run to the Alps? Believe that Rome herself, with her walls and her head crowned with towers, is now stretching out her hands in supplication.³⁸

... si nunc existeret alma
Carthago ante oculos, turrita celsa figura,
quas abitus, miles, causas, illaese, dedisses?
 (Sil. *Pun.* 13,12–14)

If mother Carthage appeared before your very eyes right now, her high head crowned with towers, what excuse could you give, soldiers, for retreating with no wounds to show?

In these mirroring speeches, Scipio and Hannibal invoke the personification of Rome and Carthage respectively as women crowned with towers. More intriguingly still, Rome is imagined to be the victim, and visualized as a suppliant, whereas Carthage is specifically hailed as *alma*, the maternal source of nourishment. The victimized woman and the all-powerful mother, like Carthage and Rome, Scipio and Hannibal, are mirror images of one another.

The reference to the Alps too is deserving of attention. Servius reports that both Cato and Livy speak of the Alps as the fortifying walls of Italy: *Ipsas Alpes, quas patefecit non sibi tantum sed omnibus gentibus, quae secundum Catonem et Livium muri vice tuebantur Italiam* (“the Alps themselves, which lay open not so much for him [Hannibal], but for anyone, and which, according to Cato and Livy, protected Italy like walls,” Serv. 10,13). The Carthaginian enemy's power on Roman self-definition is such as to bring Servius to argue (incorrectly) that the Pennine Alps (*Alpes Poeninae*) get their name from *Poenus*, “Punic,” to mark the exact location of Hannibal's breakthrough: *denique loca ipsa quae rupit, Poeninae Alpes vocantur* “hence the very places through which he penetrated are called the Pennine Alps” (10,13).

Servius is here commenting on Jupiter's prophecy of Hannibal's crossing in Virgil's *Aeneid*: *cum fera Karthago Romanis arcibus olim | exitium magnum atque Alpes immittet apertas* (“when savage Carthage, thronging through the fracture in the Alps, shall bring great devastation to the towers of Rome,” 10,12–13). But the “towers of Rome” are also the Alps themselves, because Rome extends to all of Italy, in Virgil as in Livy, who has Hannibal himself define the Alps as: *moeniaque [...] non Italiae modo, sed etiam urbis Romanae* (“the walls non just of Italy, but also of the city of Rome,” 21,35,8).³⁹ It is precisely in the context of Rome's self-definition against Carthage that something crucial happens to the image of Italy: Hannibal's

³⁸ Translation from the Latin is based on DUFF 1934 with minor edits of my own.

³⁹ Edition is BRISCOE 2016.



Fig. 6. Serrate Denarius of Q. Fufius Calenus and P. Mucius Scaevola, c. 70 BCE. Harvard Art Museums, Cambridge, MA. Photo © President and Fellows of Harvard College.”

crossing of the Alps in 218 BCE is constructed as the violation that invents the boundary, and consequently, the entity which it delimits: Italy as a territorial unit. This is why the Roman construction of Italy and Carthage are interdependent: because the eventual *incorporation* of Italy is inextricable from the eventual *annihilation* of Carthage.

The first known personification of Italy as *Italia* emerges right after the Social War (91–88 BCE). Despite what Virgil and Livy’s words retroactively project, before this time Rome did not, in fact, extend to all of Italy. The Social War represents the culmination of a centuries-long cultural, political and military takeover which was met with both fierce resistance⁴⁰ and desire for incorporation⁴¹ on the part of different Italic peoples. The importance of imagining of Italy as a feminine, fertile presence is clearly spelled out in this coin (**Fig. 6**) minted by the consul Quintus Fufius Calenus in 70 BCE.⁴²

Roma and *Italia*, both personified as women, are facing one another as they clasp hands. *Roma* holds the *fascies* and presses her right foot over the globe, both unmistakable symbols of military and political dominance, while *Italia* is portrayed with a winged *caduceus* (“herald’s staff”) behind her, as she offers a *cornucopia* to *Roma*. The *caduceus* represented the diplomatic protection afforded to its carrier while conducting out peace negotiations,⁴³ while the *cornucopia* is still widespread as a symbol of abundance and prosperity, and a near-omnipresent element of the iconography of Italy later on. Both are unmistakable symbols of ancient Italy’s peaceful surrender to Rome.

Another, perhaps more famous, but more uncertain representation of *Italia* may be found on the panel on the East Wall of the *Ara Pacis Augustae* (**Fig. 7**), where a matronly deity sits, everywhere surrounded by crops and livestock, fruits spilling over her lap, gently holding two newborns who tug at her diaphanous garment, which reveals her breasts.

The identification with *Italia* is not the only one that has been proposed. As Paul Zanker observed, “Tellus, Venus, Italia and Pax can all be supported with appropriate passages from Augustan poetry”.⁴⁴ But

⁴⁰ See MOURITSEN 1998. Cf. BRADLEY 2002 and HERRING – LOMAS 2000 for the question of whether the allies’ quest for rights and citizenship was fully and at all times incompatible with anti-Roman sentiment.

⁴¹ Cf. T. Mommsen’s influential work on the “Italian Question” (in *Römische Geschichte*, 1845–46), chiefly based on Appian: “The alleged quest for Roman citizenship appeared as plausible to a provincial of the high empire as it did to a nineteenth-century liberal academic” (MOURITSEN 1998, 23). FREEMAN 1997 traces the influence of nineteenth-century German scholarship on Romanization in Britain. For an assessment of the debate as a whole, cf. DENCH 2005, 126.

⁴² This is the dating suggested by CRAWFORD 1974, in occasion of the first *census* following the enfranchisement of the Italian allies. For a more in-depth discussion of the coin and its dating, see DENCH 2005, 188–89.

⁴³ Cf. Liv. 31,38–39; 32,32; 33,11; 35,38; 37,45.

⁴⁴ ZANKER 1988, 175.

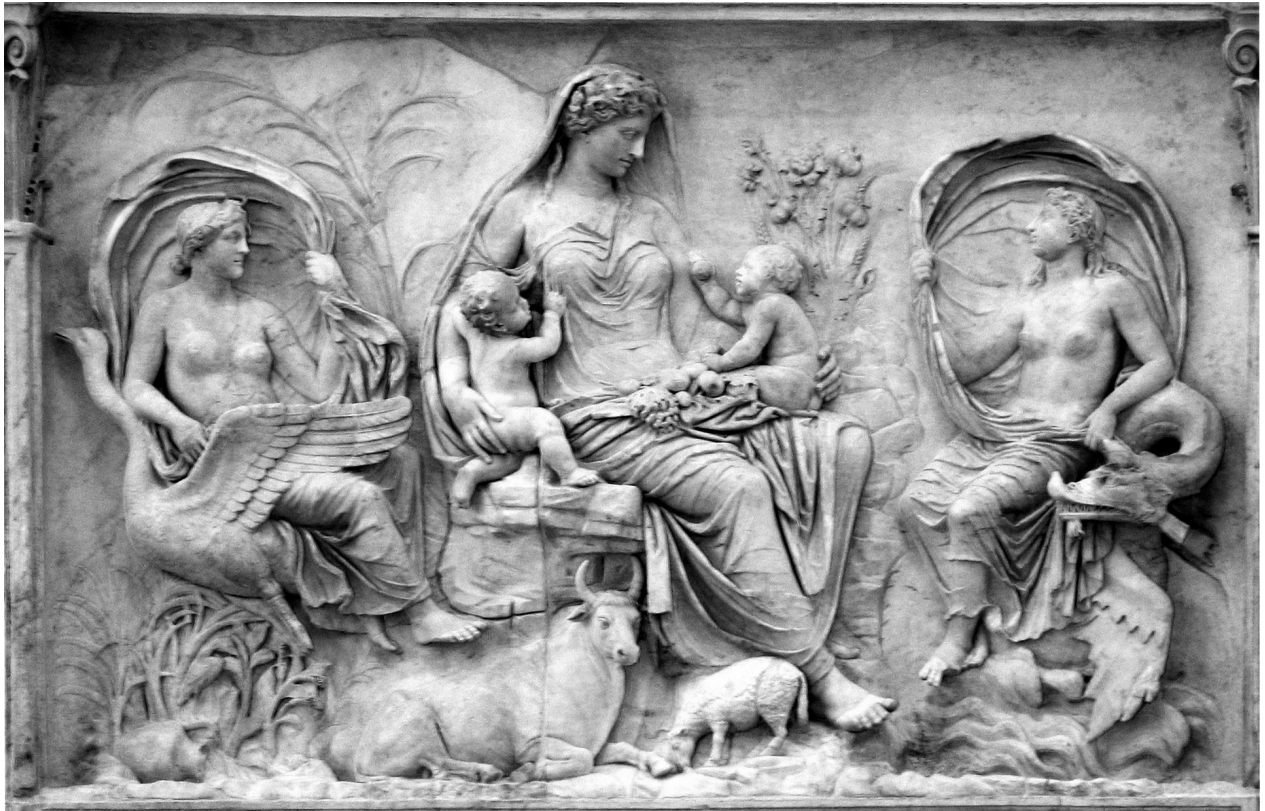


Fig. 7. Ara Pacis Augustae, East Panel (13-9 BCE), Rome. Ph. Chris Nas (License: CC BY-SA 4.0. Source: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Tellus_-_Ara_Pacis.jpg#/media/File:Tellus_-_Ara_Pacis.jpg).

the multifaceted nature of this figure is hardly an obstacle, given how many examples of the idealization of Italy as a mother(ly)-land Augustan literature offers. The *topos* of the *laudes Italiae* was famously elaborated during this time by authors like Varro, Dionysius of Halicarnassus and of course Virgil, who wrote *salve magna parens frugum, Saturnia tellus, | magna virum* (“Hail, land of Saturn, mother of crops and of men”, *georg.* 2,173–74, my emphasis).

These verses encapsulate the extent to which the performance of Roman masculinity relies on the construction of the entities it subdues and incorporates, such as Italy, as “feminine,” maternal presences, whose seemingly flattering and exalted iconography conceals the plunder in the process. It is not by coincidence that Virgil chooses to reprise the Homeric metaphor of the “widowing” of Troy to speak of the Etruscan King Mezentius’ attacks on Pallantium, the future site of the Palatine hill and of Rome in *Aen.* 8: *tam multis viduasset civibus urbem* (“nor widowed the city of so many of its citizens” 8,571).⁴⁵ Reading Virgil in a post-Social War context, when the Alps *do* become, in a sense, the crowning towers of Rome, helps us understand why the *urbs* seeks to establish a fictive kinship with the *Saturnia tellus*: by imaging Italy as its “mother”, Rome makes its citizens into men, which in turn means that only men – including the Italians, and excluding enslaved people – can “truly” be citizens. While nation states do not yet exist, and it is too soon to speak of a gender binary or of race in a nineteenth century sense, I want to conclude this section by highlighting that this particular narrative constellation has an enormous influence in defining Italian identity later on, in a way that is impossible to understand without reference to its Roman permutations.

⁴⁵ It is interesting to note that in the Loeb edition *civibus* is translated with “sons” – which proves the continued hold of this Oedipal reasoning in the formation of hegemonic national identities. See FAIRCLOUGH 1918.

Italy's makeover: from sinner to saint

With Caracalla's edict of 212 CE, which bestowed Roman citizenship to (almost) all those who lived within its empire,⁴⁶ Italy loses its special status as *domina provinciarum*, and is legally equated to all other provinces.⁴⁷ Consequently, after the fall of the Western Roman Empire, representations of *Italia* as a *donna di provincia* become ever rarer. In the intervening millennium between this moment and Dante's *Ahi serva Italia* Italy ceases to be represented as a queen full of nature's blessings; gone are the cornucopia and the mural crown, but the myth of Rome haunts Italy still. In Dante's lament, this rhetorical merging of Italy and Rome is central to his depiction of Italy as "the great victim"⁴⁸ due to the loss of its status as *donna*.

Another example of this theme is a famous poem by Petrarch, whose canonicity rivals Dante's own: *Italia mia, benché 'l parlar sia indarno | a le piaghe mortali | che nel bel corpo tuo sí spesse veggio* ("O, my own Italy, though words be useless | to heal the mortal wounds | I see covering all your lovely body," 1–3).⁴⁹ The body of Italy, invariably "beautiful," is here portrayed as being fatally wounded by a people who were first designated as "barbarians" by the Romans; namely, the Germans: *Ben provide Natura al nostro stato, | quando de l'Alpi schermo | pose fra noi et la tedesca rabbia* ("Nature provided well for our defense, setting the Alps as a shield between us and the Germans' fury," 33–35).⁵⁰ Invoking the Roman image of the Alps as the bodily boundary of Italy ("the shield between us and the Germans' fury") allows Petrarch to resuscitate the construction of those who cross it as "barbarians."⁵¹ The difference between Italians and "barbarians" is not framed as a purely "cultural" binary. It has a biological dimension: Petrarch imagines with horror the "green earth" of Italy stained with the Germans' "barbarous blood" (*perché 'l verde terreno | del barbarico sangue si depinga*, 22–3), which stands in contrast with the Italians' "noble Latin blood" (*Latin sangue gentile*, 74). Long before the nineteenth-century emergence of the nation-state as a "biopolitical community of descent"⁵² Petrarch appeals to the concept of Italy as a "mother," a "cradle," and a source of nourishment – which is made to sound all the more legitimate because of its long history, stretching back to Augustan propaganda:

*Non è questo il mio nido,
Ove nudrito fui sì dolcemente?
Non è questa la patria in ch'io mi fido.
Madre benigna e pia*

(82–85)

Is this not my own nest
in which I found myself so sweetly nourished?
Is this not my own country I have trust in,
kind mother, merciful

⁴⁶ Enslaved people, *dediticii* and Junian Latins were excluded from citizenship, cf. DENCH 2005, 135.

⁴⁷ MARCATILI 2020, 58.

⁴⁸ COSTA-ZALESSOW 1968.

⁴⁹ I use Mark MUSA's translation of Petrarch throughout, unless otherwise specified. See MUSA 1999.

⁵⁰ Here I replaced MUSA's "German madness" with "the Germans' fury," as it seemed more apt to my argument.

⁵¹ Cf. MOE 2002, 14 for how this conceit would last well into the Risorgimento.

⁵² BANTI 2011, 15.

As a metaphorical female body under patriarchy, Italy is conceived of as male property, and the fight over it inevitably takes on the threatening tones of sexual rivalry: it was the “blind desire” (*l’desir cieco*, 36) of the warring princes that led to the hiring of German mercenaries to fight each other, bringing sickness to the previously healthy body of Italy (*ch’al corpo sano à procurato scabbia*, 38). But what upsets Petrarch the most is the fact that Italy is being fought over by the descendants of those same “lawless people” (*seme | ... del popol senza legge*, 43) who had been massacred by Marius and Julius Caesar. There is absolutely no critical distance from Roman blood-spilling, which is instead joyfully claimed by Petrarch as “ours”: *fece l’erbe sanguigne di lor vene, ove l’nostro ferro mise* (“[Julius Caesar] painted the grass crimson with their blood, where he raised our sword” 50–51).

The sense of entitlement to Rome’s legacy of violence which seeps through Petrarch’s words here will gradually solidify in a literary trope that, while it does not “cause” Italian colonialism, will be picked up and spun out to justify it. The pernicious trope of Italy as a “slave of her slaves,” which is inescapable throughout Italian literature from its inception, is a direct result of the Roman construction of Italy as a *donna*, in the double sense of woman and *domina*, woman enslaver, superior to all other provinces. Simultaneously, these delusions of grandeur are narcissistically presented as their opposite: namely, by depicting Italy as a victim, and specifically a female victim.

This trope persists well into the sixteenth century, in the writings of lesser- and better-known poets alike. Speaking as Italy herself, Andrea Salvadori (1588–1634), court poet to the Medici, writes: *alfin son fatta gioco | di chi già vinsi ... | s’io dico d’essere serva, dico poco* (“finally I am outmaneuvered by those I once overpowered ... if I call myself a slave, it is hardly enough”).⁵³ Vincenzo Filicaia (1642–1707), regarded by his contemporaries as one of the best poets of his age, ventriloquizes Italy to remind France that: *L’ombra son di me stessa, e quando ancella | di me tu fosti, allor l’Italia io fui* (“I am the shadow of myself, and when you were my servant, that was when I was Italy,” 13–14),⁵⁴ again referring to Roman times. Filicaia also introduces a new variation on this theme; namely, that Italy’s “gifts” of beauty are the very cause of its ruin: *Italia, Italia, o tu cui feo la sorte | Dono infelice di bellezza, ond’hai | Funesta dote d’infiniti guai* (“Italy, Italy, to whom fate gave the unhappy gift of beauty, whence your dowry of infinite troubles,” *All’Italia*, 1–3). The language employed in Filicaia’s representation of Italy here suggests a voyeuristic gaze: *Dormi, adultera vil, fin che omicida | Spada ultrice ti svegli, e sonnacchiosa | E nuda in braccio al tuo fedel t’uccida* (“Sleep, cowardly adulteress, until the murderous sword of revenge shall awaken you, and kill you languid and naked in the arms of your faithful,” 26–28).⁵⁵

The textbook victim-blaming is worth noting here: the imaginary violation of “naked” and “sleeping” Italy at the hands of the foreign invader is made into the object of the poet’s moral reprobation – of Italy, not of the invader, and certainly not of Italian men – who are still the only politically relevant subjects at this point in time, but whose failures as citizens are conveniently displaced on this feminized allegory of Italy. Going as far back as the *Iliad*, these metaphors have always been haunted by the specter of sexual violence. In the case of Italy too, from the time of the Punic Wars onwards, there exists no conceptualization of Italy that is **not** subtended by rape culture.

⁵³ Cf. CAPONI 1901, 112. The homogeneity of this kind of composition was such that Salvadori’s poem can be found in Caponi’s anthology of Vincenzo Filicaia’s poems, owing to the latter’s fame: “The place they [poems of this kind] occupy in the codex renders their attribution to Filicaia particularly plausible, and I myself might have ended up attributing them to him, if I had not found the name of their authors. The first one is included in a palatine *codex* held at the National Central Library in Florence (1) under the name of Andrea Salvadori” (CAPONI 1901, 113).

⁵⁴ FILICAIA 1864, 80, cf. COSTA-ZALESSOW 1968, 221–26.

⁵⁵ FILICAIA 1864, 77.

The same trope continues to appear well into the following century. The renowned neoclassicist poet, playwright and scholar Vincenzo Monti (1754–1828) (whose translation of the *Iliad* is still studied in schools as of two decades ago), reprises it in his *Inno per la battaglia di Marengo: Tua bellezza, che di pianti | fonte amara ognor ti fu, | di stranieri e crudi amanti | t'avea posta in servitù* (“Your beauty, which always was the source of your bitter tears, placed you at the mercy of crude and foreign lovers,” 5–8).⁵⁶ Although these poets consistently blame Italy’s “beauty,” it must be specified that rape culture only *appears* to make distinctions between the desirable temptress and the chaste matron in order to justify its aggressions. The images of Italy-as-erotic-object and Italy as motherland are never as far away from one another as they seem to be. On the contrary, they consistently overlap, and the mother is also depicted as having fallen into a condition of metaphorical “slavery.” Vittorio Alfieri (1749–1803), the foremost Italian dramatist of the eighteenth century, in his *Rime Varie* (1783), writes about his hopes that “the day will come when I will be able to make amends for the grave mistake of being the free-born son to an enslaved mother” (*Verrà quel dì, ch’io ’l duro fallo amendi | D’esser libero figlio a madre ancella*, 5–6). Only a few lines later, however, he speaks of the pain of leaving Italy as the pain of “leaving the woman I love alone” (*l’amata mia donna lasciar sola*).⁵⁷

Despite the endemic representations of Italy as a victim, the discourse surrounding its “liberation” is only partly based on dismantling its subaltern status with regards to the occupying powers of Austria in the North and Spain in the South, but it hinges significantly on the supposed superiority of its cultural and racial identity. Gioberti’s entire argument relies on turning the trope of Italy as “mother” into Italy’s own claim to global hegemony: *l’Italia, essendo creatrice, conservatrice e redentrice della civiltà europea, destinata ad occupare tutto il mondo e diventare universale, si può meritatamente salutare col titolo di nazione madre del genere umano* (“Italy, being the creator, keeper and saviour of European civilization, destined to occupy the entire world and to become universal, can be deservedly saluted with the title of mother nation of humankind,” 1843, 42).

By making Italy into a “mother” to whom all of humanity is supposedly “indebted,” Gioberti is expressing is not just Eurocentrism, but white supremacy. And this fact is worth naming because, while the tide is slowly turning, the scholarly consensus on Italy before colonialism and Fascism is still one in which the existence of racism is denied, even when it stares us in the face: *gli uomini bianchi sovrastanno per l’eccellenza della facoltà loro, e occupano il primo seggio nella gerarchia fisiologica delle nazioni* (“white men dominate for the excellence of their reason, and occupy the first place in the physiological hierarchy of nations.” 1843, 53). As Edoardo Barsotti argued, although “race and nation did not represent a tangential couplet for Italian nationalism,” the lack of scholarly investigation into this subject is rather abnormal.⁵⁸ Given how much attention racial formation has received in the case of other national identities, the fact that “the élites who presided over the colonial expansion in Africa and the consolidation of Italian statehood were educated during the Risorgimento or even directly partook in the Unification process”,⁵⁹ conveniently goes unmentioned.

Gioberti in particular had an enormous influence on Giustiniano Nicolucci, considered to be the founder of anthropology as a discipline in Italy in the 1870s, who “was the first to import the Aryan idea

⁵⁶ MONTI 1899, 491.

⁵⁷ ALFIERI 1802, 187.

⁵⁸ BARSOTTI 2020, 274.

⁵⁹ Ibid. 274.

into Italy and make 'Aryan man' into an archetype for all Italians".⁶⁰ Nicolucci's more properly "scientific" racism is not coincidental, but causally related to Gioberti's insistence that Italy is the "mother nation of humankind," by which he means that Italians are "the first people" both in a white supremacist sense and a "chronological" sense. In the light of twentieth- and twenty-first-century scientific discoveries that place human origins in East Africa, Gioberti's theories are obviously untenable, but they never actually held up to logical scrutiny, even by the standards of Gioberti's own time-period.

The claim that Italians are "the first people" is made with reference to the indigenous presence of the mythical Pelasgians, an attempt which Copenhaver and Copenhaver define as "crude and a strain on credulity".⁶¹ In fact, Gioberti also claims that the Pelasgians, of which the Italic branch is only a subset, supposedly came out of "primitive [*sic*] Iran" and yet Rome is "the city born with the first men" (1843, 53). What is clear, however, is that the construction of Italy as a mother is so dangerous because it relies on invented claims of indigeneity to naturalize the connection between land and "blood," meant both in the sense of family and of race. The tragic implications of this narrative become explicit in the context of the colonial invasion of Libya in 1911, and it is not just men who are stoking the fire of this particular discourse.

In 1912, Matilde Serao (1856–1927), a pluri-Nobel-nominated writer, co-founder of the daily newspaper *Il Mattino*, and the first woman to ever edit an Italian newspaper (*Il Corriere di Roma*), wrote a speech entitled *Evviva la Guerra! Primavera Italica* ("Long live the war! Italic Spring"). As the title makes abundantly clear, the speech is a celebration of the beginning of Italian colonization in Libya, heralded as a "spring" or rebirth for Italy. The nation state of Italy had existed for only fifty years, so the rebirth Serao refers to is the resurgence of Italy's "ancient glories" – predictably evoked through Petrarch's conceit of the *Latin sanguine gentile* ("noble Latin blood" 1912, 24).⁶²

Sibilla Aleramo, a distinguished feminist and poet, and one of the first women in Italy to write openly about her own homosexual relationships,⁶³ also inserts Italy's invasion of Libya into a "glorious" history of warfare that stretches into the classical past: *Gli uomini ... sono partiti per la guerra d'espansione come già gli avi per la guerra d'indipendenza, per le crociate, per le mitiche odissee* ("Men ... have left for a war of expansion, as their ancestors did for the independence wars, for the crusades, for the mythical odysseys," 1922, 157). In this 1911 essay, "*L'ora virile*" ("A Time for Manliness"), Aleramo makes no distinction between Italy's struggle for self-determination and colonialism, and frames both as points of *genealogical* continuity with a past which, by her own admission, is more "mythical" than factual.

While admitting that war was not invented by women, she believes women's stoic silence and willing sacrifice of all they hold dearest (their men) is women's "manly" contribution to a war which she explicitly frames as a clash not only between different countries, but between different races: *La guerra fra paese e paese, fra nazione e nazione, fra razza e razza ... non è una creazione della donna* ("The war between one country and another, one nation and another, one race and another [...] is not women's creation," 1922, 159). Aleramo concludes by framing Italian women's silence and passive assent to colonialism as the ultimate "abnegation," one which Italy is owed: *La donna, che non sostiene l'idea della guerra, sa però di dover dare alla patria, con abnegazione assoluta, tutto quanto ha di più caro. E tace, in disparte.* ("Women, who

⁶⁰ QUINE 2013, 128.

⁶¹ COPENHAVER – COPENHAVER 2012, 167.

⁶² In her study of Italian colonialism as a performance of white masculinity, ILLUZZI highlights the importance of framing Italian blood as *Roman* specifically. ILLUZZI 2018, 427.

⁶³ Of particular importance is the relationship with Lina Poletti, also a feminist poet, described in the 1919 novel *Il Passaggio* ("The Crossing").

do not support the idea of war, are nonetheless aware that they must give to the motherland, with the utmost abnegation, everything they hold dearest. And they stand silently aside” 1922, 160).

Despite their human “contribution” to the war, Italian women are still supposedly entitled to their “innocence,” insofar as they do not (or cannot) support or actively participate in something they did not invent (war). Aleramo’s self-contradictory argument here cannot be fully deconstructed without understanding how “innocence” has historically been baked into the very definition of white womanhood. Further, as historian Lucia Re wrote, commenting on this very essay, “it was not war *per se* that brought traditionally marginal subjects and reticent Italians into the fold, but rather the imaginary racial identity that subtended it” because it had the capacity to “entice and include even those who (like women [...] Jews, peasants, and Southerners) were [...] excluded or alienated”.⁶⁴

What the allegory of Italy as a woman, a victim, and a mother does, especially in its functioning as a mirror for Italian women themselves, is conceal the true brutality of white supremacy and give mass affective appeal to it.⁶⁵ There could be no clearer example than Giovanni Pascoli’s 1911 speech *La Grande Proletaria si è Mossa* (“The Great Proletarian, She Has Risen”).⁶⁶ Pascoli (1856–1927), one of Italy’s most celebrated turn-of-the-century philologists and poets, frames the invasion of Libya as an act of vengeance for Italy’s “humiliations,” chief among which was the Battle of Adwa in 1896, the first where an African army successfully prevailed over invading Europeans. The Cornell-based Ethiopian scholar Ayele Bekerie wrote that Adwa was as significant as “the Haitian victory over Napoleon’s army in 1803” in that both propelled “pan-African ideas and movements”.⁶⁷ As Raymond Jonas put it, Adwa “gave the lie to the inevitability of European domination – both political and racial,” disproving the idea of “Manifest Destiny”.⁶⁸

Consequently, Italy’s defeat attracted derision and heavy criticism in the press of majority-white, Western countries, which for Pascoli were an intolerable stain on the honor of “our pure, saintly mother, Italy! Even if these words do not reach your shores, we cannot pardon them, oh mother of all humanity, oh mother who is as strong as she is pious!” (*o pura o santa madre nostra Italia! Per quanto elle non giungano all’orlo della tua veste, noi non possiamo perdonare, o madre d’ogni umanità, o madre tanto forte quanto pia!*)⁶⁹ This plays on Gioberti’s riff of the “debt” that “humanity” supposedly owes mother Italy, but also feeds into the construction of Italian masculinity, in ways that do not necessarily move along the gender binary as we might expect but always, predictably, circle back to Rome. On the one hand, colonial aggression is presented as a son’s “rightful” desire to “defend” the good name of his mother, and the invasion of Libya specifically fulfils the ever-present and haunting fantasy of a return to the Roman empire: “Just as in the Motherland, at every turn they will find the vestiges of their great ancestors. There, too, is Rome.”

On the other hand, Pascoli also wants to represent Italians as nurturing and maternal: “the very people that by the grace of Saint Francis [...] rendered even Jesus of Nazareth in a more humane light,” the “sweet artists” who “made the inaccessible heavens into a warm, orderly, earthly home, full of love” (*[il] popolo che con San Francesco rese più umano [...] persino Gesù Nazareno; che coi suoi soavi artisti fece*

⁶⁴ RE 2010, 7.

⁶⁵ On the “branding of Italy as weak and fragmented ... to justify colonial expansion” see BEN-GHIAT – HOM 2016, 4.

⁶⁶ I use Adriana BARANELLO’s edition and translation of this speech throughout. Following BARANELLO 2011, who does not use page numbers, I will not use page numbers when quoting from her edition.

⁶⁷ BEKERIE 1997, 116.

⁶⁸ JONAS 2011, 1 and 5. On Adwa from the perspective of Ethiopian scholars see ZEDWE (1991) 2001, 150–77 and MILKIAS – METAFERIA 2005; see BOTTONI 2008 for a collection of essays by Italian and East African scholars on Adwa.

⁶⁹ PASCOLI 1911, 20.

dell'inaccessibile cielo una buona tiepida raccolta casa terrena piena d'amore).⁷⁰ Pascoli takes the construction of Italy as a mother and runs with it, in a way which only superficially seems to question gender roles, but is deeply invested in the trope of white saviorism: the vignette of a soldier "tak[ing] an Arab baby from amongst the cadavers" (*raccoglie tra i cadaveri una bambina araba*)⁷¹ is supposedly "a symbolic act of heroic and maternal piety" (*un fatto di eroica e materna pietà, che ha virtù di simbolo*)⁷² which takes a horrifying turn: "she is saved: she will be raised Italian, this daughter of war. Is she not barbarism, itself? Not decadent and vile, but virgin and wild? Is she not naked, hungry and abandoned barbarism?" (*Ella è salva: crescerà italiana, la figlia della guerra. O non è ella la barbarie, non decadente e turpe, ma vergine e selvaggia; la barbarie nuda famelica abbandonata?*).⁷³

By voyeuristically underscoring her vulnerability, instead of framing the soldier as a salvific maternal presence, Pascoli betrays his sexually threatening nature. There is something intensely disturbing in the way in which the vocabulary of "mothering" is being used in this text. Samuel Agbamu has argued that Pascoli's poetics of childhood, which framed the poet's inner child as the seat of artistic expression, were connected to colonialism: since ancient Rome – and, more to the point, the Roman construction of Italy – had been the "childhood" of Italy, the return to Africa, to Pascoli, was a return to Italy's past, the only path for self-discovery and self-actualization.⁷⁴ It is in this sense, then, that Deleuze and Guattari claimed that "Oedipus is always colonization pursued by other means":⁷⁵ the incestuous blurring of the boundaries between parent and child, which transforms the male "children" of Italy into predatory mothers hints at the enormous human cost of "prov[ing] that Italians [...] were made" (*prov[are] che sono fatti [...] gl'italiani*)⁷⁶ Pascoli's final words.

Conclusion

I want to conclude here by quoting the words of Gayatri Spivak: "But subaltern became a claim to a certain kind of undifferentiated victimage. I quote always Fredric Jameson's surprising axiom that 'subaltern is anybody who feels inferior.' This is the first part of my answer, the easier part".⁷⁷ I would not have been able to undertake this journey through the construction of Italy as a woman, a mother, and a victim if it had not been for the work of postcolonial critics and feminists of color, who teach us that talking about gender without talking about race is never enough, and that narratives of victimhood are in fact the most pernicious ones. I also think that this particular narrative is incomprehensible without reference to its Roman origins, the subtext of which would not have been visible to me, had it not been for all the work classicists have done to understand mechanisms of identity formation, the construction of alterity, and the suppression of difference in antiquity.

But while enormous strides have been made in the U.S. to bring these two strands of scholarship together, I believe that the recent and contemporary history of Italy has yet to undergo the same rigorous level

⁷⁰ PASCOLI 1911, 20.

⁷¹ PASCOLI 1911, 19.

⁷² PASCOLI 1911, 19.

⁷³ PASCOLI 1911, 19.

⁷⁴ AGBAMU 2019, 67.

⁷⁵ DELEUZE – GUATTARI 2003, 169.

⁷⁶ PASCOLI 1911, 25.

⁷⁷ SPIVAK 2012, 222.

of scrutiny – and that this feminized personification of Italy is particularly untouchable because it comes from ancient Rome. It *still is*, in a sense, the spectre that continues to haunt the house.⁷⁸ This work, then, proceeds from the belief that, as with all hauntings, we must go far back in time to understand *why* it is that the ghost *just will not leave*. Only then can we begin to think if this is a house in which we can live.

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⁷⁸ For Classics as a haunted house, see UMACHANDRAN – WARD 2024.

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REVOLUTIONS OF RAPE CULTURE IN LATE ANTIQUITY

Rape and the Christian Virgin: St. Thekla's Power against Sexual Assault

JUDITH EVANS-GRUBBS

Introduction

Thekla, the legendary virgin martyr and follower of the apostle Paul, was one of the most popular Christian saints of the later Roman Empire. By the end of the fourth century CE, her cult had spread throughout the Mediterranean among Christians in both the east and the west. The source of her fame was her virginity, which she vehemently defended in the face of sexual assault and multiple attempts to shame her. Stories of Thekla's ability to repel rape appear in numerous Greek sources in the centuries after her original appearance in the *Apocryphal Acts of Paul and Thekla* (composed around 200 CE), and she was venerated as a model of sexual chastity for Christian women in the later Roman Empire and in early Byzantium. This chapter explores the meaning that these stories of successful resistance to attacks on her virginity had for Christian women in later antiquity, particularly the fourth through sixth centuries. As will be shown, Thekla had special relevance for women who rejected marriage and pursued an ascetic lifestyle and were particularly at risk for sexual assault because they did not follow the traditional female path of marriage and child-bearing, but instead lived and travelled without male family members.

After narrating the original story of Thekla as found in the *Apocryphal Acts*, I will discuss Thekla's growing reputation as an exemplar of sexual integrity for unmarried Christian women, the development of her cult site in southern Asia Minor, and several late antique additions to her original story which show her successfully resisting rape and punishing men who attempt to assault her. Finally I will relate these fictional stories of rape avoidance to the lives of real Christian women in late antiquity and suggest reasons why Thekla provided a particularly appropriate model to those who embarked on a life of asceticism and pilgrimage.

The Thekla story in the *Acts of Paul and Thekla*

Thekla's story is known through the *Apocryphal Acts of Paul and Thekla*, which formed part of the much longer *Apocryphal Acts of Paul*. The *Apocryphal Acts of the Apostles* (which should not be confused with the New Testament book of *Acts* attributed to Paul's disciple Luke) were narrative cycles of the marvelous adventures and ultimate martyrdom of famous apostles, including not only Paul but also Peter, John, Andrew, and Thomas. They were popular Christian stories, full of miracles performed by the apostles, all of which propagated the ideal of sexual celibacy and renunciation of marriage.¹ In late antiquity the *Apocryphal Acts of the Apostles* in

¹ See KRAEMER 1980 and DAVIES 1980 for early discussions. The bibliography on the *Apocryphal Acts of Paul and Thekla* (hereafter *Acts of Thekla*) is enormous; I am unable to mention many important treatments, but see BREMMER 1996, 191–98 and BARRIER et al. 2017, 379–85 for the most representative.

general were associated with heretical groups, especially the Manicheans, and were not included in the New Testament canon, and they now survive mostly in fragmentary form. But the *Acts of Thekla* continued to be read and copied independently of the rest of the *Acts of Paul*, with translations from the original Greek into Latin, Coptic, Syriac, Ethiopian, Arabic, and Armenian.² The reason for this popularity is clearly the character of Thekla herself, a classic heroine in the tradition of the Greek novel: well-born, beautiful, and willing to defend her sexual integrity to the point of death.³ Like these “pagan” romances, the *Acts of Thekla* is fiction; the scholarly consensus today is that Thekla never existed as a historical figure, either as a follower of Paul or as a martyr. It should be emphasized, however, that for those who read about her and venerated her in the Roman imperial period and beyond, she was quite real, and an exemplar of Christian womanhood.

The *Acts of Thekla* begin with Thekla, a young woman of good family from Iconium in Roman Asia Minor, engaged to be married to a youth named Thamyris.⁴ Then the apostle Paul comes to Iconium to preach and promote the teaching of *enkrateia*, sexual renunciation and an ascetic lifestyle. Thekla is too modest to join the crowds who come to hear him, but she listens, entranced, from her window – “like a spider,” according to her mother Theokleia. Alarmed by her daughter’s behavior, Theokleia sends for Thamyris, who hastens to Thekla, “as if already taking (*lambanon*) her in marriage.”⁵ This is the first suggestion that Thekla’s chastity is threatened, in this case by a fiancé who is overly eager to consummate their relationship.

Thekla’s refusal to turn away from Paul’s words and her rejection of marriage to Thamyris throw the whole household into lamentation. Thamyris denounces Paul to the governor as a sorcerer who does not allow virgins to marry. While Paul is in prison, Thekla visits him (after bribing the guard), sits at his feet, and kisses his chains. The next morning she is found still with him, “bound in some way in affection (*storge*).” The erotic undertones of Thekla’s feelings for Paul have often been noted and may appear discordant in view of the emphasis placed in the *Acts* on sexual abstinence. They may be due in part to the *Acts of Thekla*’s kinship with non-Christian Greek novels, but also reinforce the depiction of Thekla as a young, sexually attractive woman despite her rejection of sex and marriage.⁶

After a trial, the governor expels Paul from Iconium. However, urged on by Theokleia, he sentences Thekla to be burned to death because of her disobedience and disrespect for the civic institution of marriage. (This is a wholly fictitious charge; although Roman law and rulers exhorted all to marry and have children, no one was ever executed for refusing to do so. But it underscores the disruption Thekla’s actions have caused to family and civic life.⁷) Youths and maidens gather wood for her pyre. When Thekla is led out naked into the arena, the governor “wept and marveled at the power (*dynamis*) in her.”⁸

² One indication of the popularity of the *Apocryphal Acts of Paul* is the number of fragments from it found on papyrus or parchment from the third and fourth centuries. See WAYMENT 2013, 12–35 with plates; also HAINES-EITZEN 2007 on the textual tradition. For translations into other languages and the continued popularity of Thekla’s story in later centuries, see the essays in BARRIER et al. 2017 and DABIRI – RUANI 2022.

³ Similarities between the *Apocryphal Acts of the Apostles* and contemporaneous Greek novels have long been noted. See AUBIN 1998 and BURRUS 2005 in particular in regard to the *Acts of Thekla*.

⁴ I am using the Greek text as in LIPSIIUS – BONNET 1891; a new edition by W. RORDORF and J.-D. KAESTLI is to appear in the *Corpus Christianorum: Series Apocryphorum*, but it does not seem to have come out yet. Translation of the Greek text can be found in HENNECKE – SCHNEEMELCHER – WILSON 1965.

⁵ *Acts of Thekla* 7–8 (LIPSIIUS – BONNET 1891, 240–42). All translations from Greek and Latin in this chapter are my own unless otherwise noted. BARRIER 2009 is a recent commentary with discussion of themes.

⁶ *Acts of Thekla* 19 (LIPSIIUS – BONNET 1891, 248). Cf. KRAEMER 1980, 303–04: “[...] this erotic motif also suggests that when women are represented as rejecting their traditional sexual roles in the legends of ascetic Christianity, they are nonetheless still defined in terms of men [...]”

⁷ On which see COOPER 1996.

⁸ *Acts of Thekla* 22. See further below on Thekla’s *dynamis*, a word that suggests almost divine powers.

Having been saved from the fire by a miraculous rain-shower (like Herodotus' Croesus), Thekla leaves her hometown of Iconium, finds Paul, and insists on accompanying him on his journeys. She says that she will cut her hair, apparently so as not to be an object of sexual desire. Paul is not enthusiastic about having Thekla as a companion because, he says, she is beautiful and may have to undergo other trials. This appears to mean that he thinks she may not be able to remain a virgin, because she is vulnerable to seduction or rape. He also refuses her request to be baptized. Nevertheless, they set out together. As soon as they arrive in Antioch, they are approached by a Syrian named Alexander, said to be one of the first among the Antiochenes. Alexander is immediately smitten with desire for Thekla, and he offers Paul money and presents for her, assuming that Paul is Thekla's guardian or perhaps even her pimp. But Paul denies knowing Thekla and disappears. Alexander then "embraces" Thekla out on the street, believing that without a male companion she is a prime target for assault. This enrages Thekla, and she fights back, tearing Alexander's cloak and the ceremonial wreath he is wearing and screaming, "Don't force the stranger! Don't force the slave of God!"⁹

Having been publicly humiliated, Alexander has Thekla arrested and sentenced to be thrown to the beasts in a spectacle he is arranging. Her crime, according to a placard she had been made to wear in a public procession the day before, was *hierosylia* (sacrilege).¹⁰ Thekla asks the governor to keep her "pure" until the beast fight; this is clearly a reference to the probability of rape for a woman in a Roman prison, a probability also acknowledged by a Roman law of 340 which directed that the sexes should be held within separate enclosures in a prison.¹¹ She is therefore put in the care of a wealthy woman named Tryphaina whose own daughter has died. Tryphaina takes her role as protector seriously; when Alexander appears at her house the next day to take Thekla to the amphitheatre, Tryphaina chases him off, no doubt suspecting his intentions even at that point. But Thekla is taken from Tryphaina's hands and again (as before her ordeal at Iconium) stripped naked, although this time she is given a loincloth (*diazostira*). She is then thrown into the midst of lions and bears, but is supported loudly by all the women in the audience and is protected from the male lions and bears by a lioness who lies at her feet.¹² This scene is evoked on sixteen pilgrim flasks (*ampullae*) from the late antique shrine of St. Menas in Egypt, which depict Thekla as naked from the waist up or covered only by a light robe, standing between two beasts (usually bulls).¹³

After the lioness who protects Thekla is killed, more beasts are sent against her. She sees a pool full of man-eating seals and believing she is on the point of death, she throws herself in and baptizes herself. The seals immediately die in a flash of lightning, and Thekla herself is surrounded by a cloud of fire, "so that she is not perceived as naked."¹⁴ For the third time, the reader's attention is drawn to Thekla's nakedness in the arena: even when the audience within the *Acts of Thekla* cannot see her nudity, we (the external audience) do. Alexander then suggests that Thekla be tied up between two bulls who have had hot irons applied to their genitals so as to enrage them.¹⁵ However, Thekla again manages to escape martyrdom when a miraculous flame burns through the ropes tying her. The governor then releases her, giving her clothing (*himatia*) and

⁹ *Acts of Thekla* 26 (LIPSIUS – BONNET 1891, 253–54). The word used to describe Alexander's initial response to Thekla is *eraomai*, often translated as "be in love." Alexander's feelings are purely sexual, however.

¹⁰ *Acts of Thekla* 28 (LIPSIUS – BONNET 1891, 255).

¹¹ *Codex Theodosianus* 9, 3, 3, a law of the emperor Constantius.

¹² *Acts of Thekla* 32–33 (LIPSIUS – BONNET 1891, 259–60).

¹³ On the *ampullae*, which show Menas on one side and Thekla on the reverse, see DAVIS 1998 and DAVIS 2001, 114–20. On the cult of St. Menas in Egypt, which seems to have had connections with a nearby shrine of Thekla, see DRESCHER 1946 and DAVIS 1998 and below.

¹⁴ *Acts of Thekla* 34 (LIPSIUS – BONNET 1891, 261–62).

¹⁵ *Acts of Thekla* 35 (LIPSIUS – BONNET 1891, 262–63). See below on the historicity of such horrific punishments.

telling her, “Put on the clothes.”¹⁶ Once again we are reminded that Thekla has been naked throughout her ordeal. Her sexual attractiveness and virginal vulnerability are an important aspect of her story, and further emphasize her marvelous ability to avoid not only death but also rape and dishonor.

Thekla sets out to find Paul, accompanied by youths and enslaved women of Tryphaina’s household whom she had converted when staying with Tryphaina. Before she does so, however, she sews her *chiton* (tunic) into a robe resembling men’s clothing. Though the author of the *Acts of Thekla* does not explain why she does this, it was evidently in order to avoid any more unwanted attention to her femininity and enable her to travel without harassment.¹⁷ She has progressed from public nakedness to the most protective clothing an ancient woman could have: that of a man.¹⁸ Thekla’s use of male attire has been much discussed by scholars, who have seen it as perhaps the earliest occurrence of the theme of the “transvestite” Christian holy woman who disguises herself as a man, which became a popular hagiographical trope in later accounts of female saints.¹⁹ However, it should be noted that in these later stories, the holy woman maintains her male identity until her death (sometimes even after being falsely accused of rape or seduction by a woman who believes her to be a man), whereas Thekla’s cross-dressing is situational and apparently temporary. Despite her rejection of marriage and her displays of power (and occasionally, violence), Thekla’s character is not “masculinized” and she retains her femininity throughout all her vicissitudes.²⁰ In this she resembles the heroines of contemporaneous Greek (“pagan”) novels, like the protagonist of Achilles Tatius’ *Leukippe and Kleitophon*, who also undergoes multiple assaults on her virginity and her life.²¹

After Thekla finds Paul and informs him that she has now received baptism, he authorizes her to go and preach on her own. She briefly returns to her hometown of Iconium, where she learns that her former fiancé Thamyras has died and urges her mother to convert to Christianity, apparently without success. She then journeys to the city of Seleucia in Isauria where she continues to spread the word of God.²² At this point the original version of the *Acts of Thekla* ended rather abruptly with the words, “having enlightened many with the word of God, she slept with a good sleep,” implying that Thekla died quietly. This was not the end of the legend of Thekla, however; additional stories circulated about her in late antiquity, and her popularity only increased.²³

The date and background of the *Acts of Thekla*

The Christian treatise *de Baptismo* (*On Baptism*) by Tertullian of Carthage, dated to about 200 CE, provides a *terminus ante quem* for the writing of the *Acts of Thekla*. Tertullian was a strict conservative who strongly

¹⁶ *Acts of Thekla* 35–38 (LIPSIUS – BONNET 1891, 261–64).

¹⁷ *Acts of Thekla* 39–40 (LIPSIUS – BONNET 1891, 265–66); DAVIS 2001, 31–34.

¹⁸ Baptism has also given her a new protection, which enables Paul to send her out to preach on her own.

¹⁹ Early treatments of this theme are ANSON 1974 and PATLAGEAN 1976, both of which cite Thekla as the earliest example. DAVIS 2002 provides an intertextual reading, focusing especially on the *Life of Eugenia* (fourth or fifth century), who in some versions is said to have been inspired by reading the *Acts of Thekla*. However, VAN PELT 2022 pushes back on the assumption that Thekla was “the first cross-dresser”, seeing her adoption of masculine-style clothing as symbolizing her “claim for authority and independence” in “an act of masculinization.”

²⁰ Therefore, I disagree with VAN PELT 2022 (see above) and with AUBIN 1996, who sees Thekla as becoming increasingly “masculinized” in the Acts, whereas Paul becomes increasingly “feminized.”

²¹ See BURRUS 2005.

²² *Acts of Thekla* 40–42 (LIPSIUS – BONNET 1891, 266–68). She no longer seems to be in male attire.

²³ *Acts of Thekla* 43 (LIPSIUS – BONNET 1891, 269). In fact, most extant manuscripts of the *Acts of Thekla* extend the story beyond chapter 43. Using 45 manuscripts, KAESTLI – RORDORF 2014 revise and expand Lipsius’ description of the groups of manuscripts of the *Acts of Thekla*, more than half of which have expanded endings; see below.

disapproved of women acting beyond their traditional gender roles, and he was incensed that some women were citing Thekla's example as proof that Paul allowed women to preach and even to baptize. Tertullian claims that the *Acts of Paul* were actually written by a presbyter (Christian priest) from Asia, who was then forced to resign his position. The priest defended himself by saying that he had written the *Acts* "out of love for Paul," apparently to show that Paul was not the misogynist that he appeared to be from the Pauline epistles. To refute the depiction of Thekla's actions in the *Acts of Thekla*, Tertullian repeats Paul's own injunction in the *First Epistle to the Corinthians* (1 Cor. 14:34) that women were not to teach or speak out in Christian meetings.²⁴ However, despite his later reputation as a "father of the Church," in his own time Tertullian spoke for few other Christians, even at Carthage, and we should not assume that his low opinion of the *Acts of Thekla* and its author was shared by his contemporaries.²⁵ If anything, Tertullian's criticism suggests that the story of Thekla was already popular, and that women saw her as an *exemplum* for their own right to teach and to baptize.

In the 1980's, scholars gave increased attention to the role of women in the *Apocryphal Acts* in general, and to Thekla in particular. They recognized that the *Acts of Thekla* offered an image of the apostle Paul that appeared to be in contradiction to the teachings attributed to Paul in the so-called Pastoral Epistles of the New Testament.²⁶ Whereas the Pastoral Epistles (and 1 Corinthians 14:34) exhort women to be submissive and not to preach or teach (and certainly not to baptize) but rather to listen to their husbands, Paul as depicted in the *Apocryphal Acts of Thekla* espouses complete celibacy (*enkrateia*) and ultimately authorizes Thekla to go out and spread the word on her own. Although opinions differ in regard to the relationship between the *Acts of Paul* and the Pastoral Epistles, it is clear that they represent different views of the legacy of the apostle Paul and reveal that there were tensions within the Christian movement about the role of women in the church and about whether women should be spreading the Christian message through itinerant preaching.²⁷

The *Acts of Thekla* is fiction, but aspects of Thekla's story are based firmly in the reality of Roman imperial life. For instance, the horrific highly sexualized punishments to which Thekla is subjected at Antioch actually are consistent with what we know about Roman spectacles, which combined criminal penalties with lurid popular entertainment. Condemnation to the beasts (*ad bestias*) in the arena was a penalty regularly meted out to convicted criminals of the lowest classes and (until 212 CE) to provincials who did

²⁴ TERTULLIAN, *De baptismo* 17,5; Latin text and translation in EVANS 1964, 36. However, the Latin is confused; I accept the reading and explanation of 17,5 by HILHORST 1996. Many scholars now do not think that 1 Cor. 14:34, which Tertullian claims is what the "real" Paul said, was written by Paul himself, but rather inserted by a later follower: see HAINES-EITZEN 2007, 184. Cf. 1 Timothy 2:11–12, assumed in antiquity to be the work of Paul himself, but now attributed to a follower of Paul (see n. 26 below).

²⁵ HYLEN 2015, 102–5. It may seem strange that Thekla's self-baptism *in extremis* would be cause for so much ire on Tertullian's part. But in a later version of Thekla's story, she is said to preach to and baptize others, and it is probable that already in Tertullian's time such stories were circulating orally: see BOVON 2017; TOMMASI MORESCHINI 2017, 74–78. Perhaps the original ending of the *Acts of Thekla* was abridged (thus explaining why it is so abrupt) and reference to Thekla's baptizing of others was omitted: see HILHORST 1996.

²⁶ The Pastoral Epistles include the first and second letters to Timothy and the letter to Titus. Although they appear under Paul's name in the New Testament canon, the majority of New Testament scholars now believe they were written by a follower of Paul, not by the apostle himself, since they clearly arose from a milieu in which the Christian movement was more settled and a church hierarchy had developed. They are generally thought to be products of the early second century or at earliest the late first century CE, and thus earlier than the *Acts of Paul*, which scholars date to the second half of the second century.

²⁷ DAVIES 1980 suggested that the *Apocryphal Acts*, including the *Acts of Paul*, were authored by women, the so-called "widows of the church." MACDONALD 1983 believed that the Pastoral Epistles were written to counteract the image of Paul found in the *Acts of Paul*, especially the Thekla episode. Although the Pastoral Epistles pre-date the *Acts of Paul*, MacDonald argued that women's oral traditions about Paul and Thekla were circulating decades before the *Acts of Paul* actually were written down by the presbyter from Asia whom Tertullian criticized. See also RORDORF 1986 for a summary of early scholarship on Thekla.

not have Roman citizenship, including Christians.²⁸ Public humiliation was an important aspect of this punishment. For women, this would include nudity, as seen in the famous account of the martyrdom of the African Christians Perpetua and Felicitas, who were also stripped before being exposed to a maddened cow in the amphitheatre: when the crowd saw that one (Perpetua) was a “delicate girl” and the other (Felicitas) had just given birth and had milk dripping from her breasts, they were so horrified that those presenting the spectacle called the women back and gave them unbelted tunics to wear. The Christian writer who describes Perpetua’s martyrdom notes that she tried to pull down her tunic even after it was torn so that it would cover her thighs, “thinking more of her modesty than her pain.”²⁹

Since these spectacles also provided entertainment for the populace and popularity for those who presented them (like Alexander in the *Acts of Thekla*), sex and violence were integral aspects also. Sometimes executions in the arena were staged to recall Greek myths, such as that of the Cretan queen Pasiphae, who consummated her lust for a beautiful bull by hiding inside a figure of a cow that had been made by the famous inventor Daedalos. An epistle of St. Clement, bishop of Rome in the late first century, claims that Christian women were martyred as *Dircai*, evidently referring to the myth of Dirce, who was killed by being tied to the horns of bull.³⁰ In the Latin novel *Metamorphoses (The Golden Ass)* by Apuleius, written around the same time as the *Apocryphal Acts of Thekla*, the narrator Lucius, who has been magically transformed into an ass, describes his role in the public execution of a condemned murderess: he is supposed to copulate with her in the arena before she is torn apart by wild beasts.³¹ Thekla’s punishment thus combines the cruelty of Dirce’s death with the sexual sensationalism of the stories of Pasiphae and Lucius.

Thekla’s independence in rejecting marriage with Thamyris and following Paul has been seen as representing a much less restrained and more “transgressive” style of female behavior than that approved by communities (Christian or pagan) in Roman imperial society of the eastern Mediterranean. However, using primarily epigraphic sources, scholars of the last three decades have shown that wealthy women in the cities of Roman Asia Minor had much more visibility in public than used to be thought, and held positions of religious and civic responsibility.³² Drawing on this scholarship, Susan Hylen argues that both Thekla’s independence of action and her consistently modest demeanor (even when faced with public humiliation and death in the arena) are in keeping with contemporary views on feminine modesty and respectable behavior.³³ This is true, although it should be noted that the prominent women known from inscriptions act within the context of family traditions of patronage and euergetism and are lauded for their benefactions and service on behalf of their city. On the other hand, Thekla’s rejection of marriage pits her against her family

²⁸ On the Roman penalty system in the Empire, see GARNSEY 1970. Sometimes Christians who were Roman citizens (like Vibia Perpetua, see below) were subjected to penalties like being thrown *ad bestias*, even though normally they would be exempt from such humiliation due to their status.

²⁹ See MUSURILLO 1972, 105–31 for text and translation of the *Passio Sanctarum Perpetuae et Felicitatis*; quotation is from *Passio Perpetuae* 20 (Musurillo translation). This is considered one of the few genuine martyrdom accounts. The first half of the *Passio* is Perpetua’s own account of her time in prison before her death. Perpetua and her companions were martyred near Carthage in the reign of Septimius Severus, around 207 CE.

³⁰ See COLEMAN 1990, esp. 60–70. She cites Martial, *Lib. Spect.* 5, where the poet refers to the myth of Pasiphae being enacted in the arena, as well as other epigrams referring to the public re-enactments of Greek myths.

³¹ Apul. *met.* 10,23–34. Not long before the show, Lucius is returned to human form by the goddess Isis and so avoids this humiliation; the woman’s fate is unmentioned. On this episode see Finn in this volume.

³² See especially VAN BREMEN 1996, a thorough study of the evidence for the participation of elite women in the cities of Asia Minor in the Hellenistic and Roman periods; also BOATWRIGHT 1991; TREBILCO 1991, 104–26; ROGERS 1992; KEARSLEY 1999 and 2005; cf. THONEMANN 2010. I am talking about the roles and position of women specifically in Asia Minor, where Thekla’s legend originated; for women in Italy and the Western provinces, see e.g., HEMELRIJK 2004 and 2012.

³³ HYLEN 2015.

and she is rejected by both her mother and her hometown of Iconium. Her “transgressiveness” lies not in her independent and publicly visible behavior, but in the fact that this behavior works against the interests of her family and the values of her society.³⁴

Thekla in late antiquity

By the fourth century, Thekla's fame extended well beyond the *Apocryphal Acts*.³⁵ Around the year 300, the theologian Methodius of Olympus (in Lycia, southern Asia Minor) gave her a prominent role in his *Symposium*. This work was modeled on Plato's *Symposium*, but Methodius' symposiasts are female Christian virgins who vie with each other in praising virginity, rather than Athenian men discoursing on *eros*. Thekla (the only participant in the *Symposium* who is mentioned in other sources) is awarded top prize after giving a long and learned speech including an attack against astrology, and then leads the others in an *epithalamium* on the marriage of the virgin to Christ.³⁶ There is no mention here of Thamyras or Alexander the Syrian; in fact no trace remains of the heroic almost-martyr of the *Acts of Thekla* except one line in the *epithalamium*: “Awaiting Thy coming from heaven, I have braved fire and flame and the ravenous assaults of wild beasts.”³⁷ Rather, Methodius' Thekla is an educated and eloquent exponent of virginity, a change of emphasis which reflects the “gentrification” of Christianity from a religion of the non-elite to an intellectually respectable rival of pagan philosophy.

Unlike Tertullian, late antique Christian writers show little anxiety about Thekla's preaching and baptizing, and instead praise her lifelong commitment to virginity and rejection of marriage. Thekla is lauded as the example *par excellence* of holy virginity, second only to Mary the mother of Jesus.³⁸ Moreover, she demonstrates the *power* of virginity, and serves as a model for women who wished to lead a life of Christian celibacy, such as Macrina, older sister of the Cappadocian theologians Basil of Caesarea and Gregory of Nyssa. In his personal biography of Macrina, Gregory recalls that their mother Emmelia had wished not to marry at all and instead to live in holy virginity. But because Emmelia was an orphan, others were concerned that if she did not take a husband of her own choosing, she would suffer some insult against her will and be abducted and forced into a marriage. Such marriages were not uncommon in antiquity and the act of *raptus* (abduction) was harshly penalized in late Roman law. Frequently they were initiated by rape, which would ruin the victim's chances of making another marriage. Even if she were not raped, the reputation of the abducted woman would be damaged, due to the assumption that she had been assaulted or had chosen to go willingly with her abductor, so her family would be pressured to agree to her marrying her *raptor*.³⁹ To avoid this possibility, Emmelia was married to a very wealthy and reputable man, the elder Basil, who could protect her from such violence.

³⁴ On this see COOPER 1996.

³⁵ In addition to DAVIS 2001, see JOHNSON 2006 on the fifth-century *Life and Miracles of Thekla* and the essays in BARRIER et al. 2017 on reception of Thekla by (male) Christian writers after Tertullian, the material evidence for her cult, and translations of the *Acts of Thekla* into languages other than Greek and Latin.

³⁶ See MUSURILLO 1963 for Greek text and French translation; MUSURILLO 1958 for English translation; MORESCHINI 2017, 1–6 for discussion.

³⁷ Translation from MUSURILLO 1958, 152; Greek text at MUSURILLO 1963, 312.

³⁸ See MORESCHINI 2017 and TOMMASI MORESCHINI 2017 for patristic references to Thekla.

³⁹ E.g., Constantine's law: *Codex Theodosianus* 9,24,1 (320 CE). This would have come into effect in the Eastern Empire after Constantine's defeat of Licinius in 324. Emmelia married “probably during the early or mid-320's” (VAN DAM 2003, 99). See EVANS GRUBBS 1989 on *raptus* marriage.

Shortly before the birth of her oldest child Macrina (the first of nine) in about 327 CE, Emmelia dreamt that a larger-than-life figure appeared and addressed the infant as Thekla, after “that Thekla whose repute among virgins is great.” Clearly, Gregory says, this meant that Thekla would be his sister’s “secret name” and that Macrina would follow Thekla in her way of life.⁴⁰ Gregory’s story implies that Thekla would protect her secret namesake so that Macrina would escape the risk of violation by an abductor and maintain her virginity. In fact, Macrina’s father arranged her betrothal at age 12, but her fiancé died before the marriage could take place, and Macrina was able to convince her father not to arrange another marriage for her by claiming that her fiancé was not really dead but still “living in God” and therefore she could not marry another. After her father died, Macrina continued to live with her mother Emmelia, and eventually they moved to their remote country estate in Pontus which they turned into a monastery. Macrina presided over a community of virgins and widows for the rest of her life.⁴¹

Thekla provided a model not only for virgins but also for widows such as Olympias, a wealthy young woman of Constantinople whose husband had died after so short a period of marriage that her biographer insisted she was still a virgin. Olympias, a close friend and correspondent of John Chrysostom, was said to have “walked in the footsteps” of Thekla, “the citizen of heaven, martyr in many contests, holy among women.”⁴² The emperor Theodosius himself tried to force Olympias to marry again to one of his kinsmen, but she resisted, telling him that had God intended her to marry, he would not have taken away her husband so soon. In Rome, the aristocratic widow Melania the Elder placed her son in the care of a guardian and left for the Holy Land, where she visited the desert monks, eventually settling in Jerusalem and establishing joint monasteries with her friend and spiritual advisor Rufinus. The Christian scholar and ascetic Jerome (Hieronymus) praised Melania’s actions, which he said had caused her to be called “Thekla.”⁴³

By the mid-fourth century, the place outside Seleucia where Thekla was believed to have led a life of holiness had become a site of veneration called Hagia-Thekla (Saint Thekla).⁴⁴ Gregory of Nazianzus, friend of Gregory of Nyssa and Basil of Caesarea, spent about four years at Hagia-Thekla, which he calls “the *parthenion* of the renowned maiden Thekla,” seeking spiritual repose and perhaps also recovering from physical illness.⁴⁵ Women also frequented Hagia-Thekla, such as the western pilgrim Egeria, whose detailed account of her travels to Egypt and the Holy Land survives. Egeria made a special detour to Hagia-Thekla in 384 on her way back to Constantinople. She describes the saint’s “quite beautiful” (*satis pulchrum*) martyrion, and reports that the site had *monasteria plurima* (very many monasteries) filled with female and male monastics. Among them was Egeria’s dear friend Marthana, whom she had met in Jerusalem and who was presiding over a group of female virgins at Hagia-Thekla. Egeria calls these virgins *apotaktai*, a name that indicates they were women devoted to a particularly ascetic form of holy celibacy, which we know was

⁴⁰ GREGORY OF NYSSA, *Life of Macrina* 2; Greek text and French translation in MARAVAL 1971.

⁴¹ See VAN DAM 2003, 99–113, who notes that rather than leaving her home and mother, as Thekla did, Macrina’s rejection of marriage resulted in her remaining permanently at home with her mother. CORKE-WEBSTER 2020 gives an intertextual reading of the *Life of Macrina* and the *Acts of Thekla*, although I think he over-emphasizes the possibility of mother-daughter tensions surrounding Macrina’s refusal to marry another after her fiancé’s death. On Macrina’s domestic monastery, see ELM 1994, 39–47 and 78–105.

⁴² *Life of Olympias* 1; Greek text and French translation in MALINGREY 1968; CLARK 1979 has an English translation and notes. The author is unknown, but there is also a narration of Olympias’ posthumous miracles by a woman named Sergia (a later head of Olympias’ monastery in Constantinople), also translated by CLARK 1979.

⁴³ Rufinus, *Apologia* 2,29, citing the *Chronicles* of Jerome (Latin text in TOMMASI MORESCHINI 2017, 92). After his famous falling-out with Rufinus, Jerome removed the mention of Melania from his work.

⁴⁴ See DAVIS 2001, 36–80 (which focuses mainly on the evidence of the *Miracles of Thekla*). On the site, (which has not been fully excavated) see DAGRON 1978, 55–79; WILKINSON 1981, 288–92; COOPER 1995; and KRISTENSEN 2016.

⁴⁵ Gregory of Nazianzus, *Poemata de se ipso*, 1, 547–51 in *Patrologia Graeca* (PG) 37, col. 106. See MORESCHINI 2017, 10–14.

popular in this area of Asia Minor.⁴⁶ While at Hagia-Thekla, Egeria also read the whole of the *Acts of Thekla*, in keeping with her habit of hearing or reading relevant passages of scripture when she visited a holy site.⁴⁷

In the mid-fifth century, a priest of Hagia-Thekla wrote the *Life of Thekla*, a revised, much more literary version of the story in the *Apocryphal Acts of Thekla*. The author's identity is unknown, but scholars refer to him as "Pseudo-Basil" because for centuries he was identified with Basil, bishop of Seleucia in the fifth century. The end of the *Life of Thekla* insists that the saint never actually died but instead miraculously sank down into the earth, right below where her altar was located in Pseudo-Basil's own time. The same author also wrote the *Miracles of Thekla*, which recount the many wonders that Thekla was said to have performed posthumously at her shrine and other locales where she was venerated.⁴⁸ According to Pseudo-Basil, Thekla remained at Hagia-Thekla as a living presence and often interacted with the women and men who frequented her shrine. Pseudo-Basil was clearly a man of erudition and rhetorical training, evidence that Christianity had now achieved full intellectual respectability.⁴⁹ He focuses particularly on two groups of recipients of Thekla's miracles. One is women, especially vulnerable women who came to the saint for help or refuge or who dwelled at Hagia-Thekla.⁵⁰ The other favored group consists of priests of Hagia-Thekla and highly educated men, including the author himself.⁵¹ In the *Miracles*, Thekla is no longer the heroine of a Christian novel but the Christian equivalent of the goddess Athena, clever and resourceful, and the author, whom the saint helped at a particularly difficult time when he had been excommunicated by Basil the bishop of Seleucia, takes the role of Odysseus. However, she still manifests as a very beautiful maiden, according to the author, "a trim girl and not too tall, fair of face, dignified, steady, graceful, pale with some redness of cheek [...] with splendor in her eyes, and splendor in the rest of her body, which sparkled under her somber clothes."⁵²

Pseudo-Basil's claim in his *Life of Thekla* that Thekla did not die but instead departed under the earth is similar (but not identical) to an alternative ending in an extended version of the *Apocryphal Acts of Thekla* found in many manuscripts of the *Acts*. According to this expanded version of the *Acts*, which may date to the fourth century, Thekla proceeded to a mountain outside Seleucia, where she took up residence in a cave. When the well-born women of the neighborhood learned of her presence, they began to go to her for instruction and healing. She converted many and performed several miraculous cures; indeed, she was so successful as a healer that the local doctors felt threatened and plotted against her. They reasoned that because Thekla was a virgin the goddess Artemis had given her special powers, and so if she were deprived of her virginity, Artemis would abandon her. The doctors therefore hired some wicked men to go to Thekla's

⁴⁶ Egeria, *Itinerarium* 23,1–6 (Latin in MARAVAL 1982, 226–30; English translation in WILKINSON 1981). On Egeria, see DIETZ 2005, 44–54 and further below.

⁴⁷ Egeria 23,5 (MARAVAL 1982, 230): *lecto omni actu sanctae Teclae*.

⁴⁸ See DAGRON 1978 for Greek text and French translation of the *Life and Miracles of Thekla*, along with extensive discussion; JOHNSON 2012 for Greek text and English translation of the *Miracles*. Earlier scholars had relied on an incomplete manuscript of the *Miracles* and identified the author as bishop Basil of Seleucia because he was writing at the time of Basil's episcopate. But a complete manuscript of the *Miracles* published by DAGRON 1978 shows clearly that Basil was not the author, since bishop Basil is depicted as the author's enemy and persecutor.

⁴⁹ JOHNSON 2006 examines the *Life and Miracles* as works of literature and products of a classically trained author.

⁵⁰ *Miracles*, chapters 14 (unnamed wife of the unfaithful husband Hypsistios); 18 (Tigriane and Aba); 19 (Bassiane); 20; 21; 34 (the "wandering" virgin; see below); 42 (Kalliste); 43 (another Bassiane); 44 (several women, including Egeria's friend Marthana); 45 (Xenarchis); 46 (Dionysia).

⁵¹ *Miracles*, chapters 7–8 and 32 (Dexianos); 9 (Menodoros); 12,31, and 41 (the author himself); 38 (Alypius); 39 (Isokasios and Aretarchos, both pagans who did not convert even after Thekla's miracle-working).

⁵² *Miracles*, chapter 14,3, trans. JOHNSON 2012, 63. According to Pseudo-Basil, this is how she appeared to Hypsistios, an unfaithful husband whom Thekla had afflicted with illness due to his cruel behavior towards his wife.

cave and rape her. Thekla, by now a ninety-year-old woman, opened her door to the men but when she realized why they had come, she prayed to God to rescue her once again. Immediately an opening appeared in a rock and she entered it, and was received by the Lord. The astonished would-be rapists were left clutching a small piece of her veil.⁵³ This episode is reminiscent of the myth of Daphne and Apollo, where Daphne escapes the god's attempted sexual assault by turning into a laurel tree. It shows Thekla once again avoiding sexual violation, this time much more violent than the assault by Alexander at Antioch.⁵⁴

Another late antique addition to Thekla's story was a letter, supposedly written to the emperors (who are not named), that told the origin of a "true image" (*eikon*) of Thekla.⁵⁵ According to the letter, the young Thekla, having settled outside Seleucia, was picking herbs for her meals near the site of the future Hagia-Thekla. A pagan priest was out riding for his daily exercise and approached the maiden with evil intent, thinking her to be "one of the local girls."⁵⁶ (This implies that it would not be unusual for a powerful man to take advantage of a "local girl" if he came across her alone.) Turning around, Thekla "sent out power (*dynamis*) from herself" – power which dragged him off of his horse. He lay voiceless for three days and nights, to the great consternation of the whole town. Once recovered, he assumed (not without reason) that he had offended a goddess, and he wished to know which one in order to propitiate her. (He may have been thinking of myths of mortal males who presumed upon the privacy of a goddess and were harshly punished, like Actaeon when he spied Artemis bathing.) He asked an artist to paint her according to his description: "a small-faced girl, eighteen years old more or less" of indescribable beauty, wearing earrings and a necklace. The artist, "guided with the help of her [Thekla's] power" painted her true *eikon*. The pagan priest took the picture home, converted to Christianity, and the icon passed down through his family. The letter was probably composed anonymously in the late fifth or sixth century, but two centuries later during the iconoclastic controversy, it was attributed to the fifth-century bishop Basil of Seleucia (also falsely accredited with the *Life and Miracles of Thekla*) and used by the advocates of icons to support their arguments.⁵⁷

Yet another story of Thekla escaping a close encounter with a sexually aggressive male appears in a short sermon wrongly attributed to John Chrysostom. The sermon probably dates to the fifth or sixth century and was delivered on St. Thekla's Day (September 24 in the Eastern church), in the presence of an icon of Thekla (not the icon of the "true image" described above).⁵⁸ According to the sermon, after surviving

⁵³ Text in LIPSIIUS – BONNET 1891, 271–72 (their cod. G). For another manuscript, see BOVON – BOUVIER 2013. They suggest that the episode of the jealous doctors circulated orally apart from the *Apocryphal Acts of Thekla*, and was written down in the fourth century as an extension of the *Acts of Thekla*. There are two manuscript versions of this expanded episode: see KAESTLI – RORDORF 2014, 30–34 and their texts III and VI. The *Life of Thekla* depicts Thekla disappearing into the ground (see above) but does not include the incident of the doctors and the hired rapists. This does not mean that the extended ending of the *Apocryphal Acts* was later than Pseudo-Basil; he may have chosen to ignore it.

⁵⁴ Another alternative ending to the *Apocryphal Acts of Thekla* says that after disappearing into the rock to escape the rapists hired by the jealous doctors, Thekla went to Rome (evidently underground) to see Paul again. After remaining there a short time, she "slept with a good sleep" and was buried in Rome not far from the tomb of her mentor Paul. This serves to explain the Catacomb of Thekla located at Rome near the basilica of St. Paul Outside the Walls (which actually was the catacomb of a local martyr Thekla). See COOPER 1995; DAVIS 2001, 46–47 and KAESTLI – RORDORF 2014, 36–37; Greek text at LIPSIIUS – BONNET 1891, 270 and KAESTLI – RORDORF 2014, 91.

⁵⁵ Greek text with French translation in KAESTLI – RORDORF 2014, 50–61. JOHNSON 2012, 184–89 reprints the Greek text of the appendix of DAGRON 1978, 413 along with English translation.

⁵⁶ Translation from JOHNSON 2012, 187.

⁵⁷ See KAESTLI – RORDORF 2014, 34–35.

⁵⁸ The text of the sermon found at *Patrologia Graeca* (PG) 50, columns 745–48 is taken from an incomplete manuscript of the tenth–eleventh century; AUBINEAU 1975 discovered and published a complete version in a manuscript of the 13th century. MACDONALD – SCRIMGEOUR 1986 provide an English translation of the whole sermon. It was very common for anonymous writings to be attributed to a famous Christian writer, like John Chrysostom, or to someone whose name was associated with the place the work was written, like Basil of Seleucia.

martyrdom Thekla was traveling alone, in search of Paul, when the devil sent a nameless "suitor" (*mnester*) against her, "like a thief of virginity in the desert," the writer says. The *mnester*, evidently on horseback, was on the verge of seizing Thekla when she cried out to God for help: "Save me from all pursuers!" Immediately she became invisible, leaving her pursuer with nothing.⁵⁹

All of these narratives about Thekla's ability to narrowly avoid sexual assault have the same point: Thekla's virginity is the source of her super-power. This power (*dynamis*) enables her to repel rapists, sometimes by miraculously vanishing with divine aid (as with the rapists sent by the doctors and the anonymous suitor in the desert) but sometimes by employing physical violence herself (as with Alexander at Antioch in the *Acts of Thekla* and the pagan priest in the miracle at Seleucia). They show that the saint's popularity was due not just to her status as a virgin and (almost) martyr, but above all to her ability to exercise this power.

The Relevance of Thekla for the lives of late antique Christian women

Thekla's story was especially meaningful to Christian women who wished to live a life of holy virginity without fear. Two intersecting aspects of late antique Christianity that impacted the lives of such holy women are relevant here. One is the rise of the monasticism and the growth of single-sex communities of women as an alternative to marriage and child-bearing. The other is pilgrimage, travel by Christian women to Jerusalem and Bethlehem (the two holiest places to Christians) and to Egypt to visit the desert monks, whose lives were considered exceptionally holy by contemporary Christians. These changes in society are reflected in contemporary writings about and by women who chose a life of virginity and of wandering to the places held sacred by late antique Christians.

The fourth century saw the beginnings of the monastic movement, where men and women chose to forgo marriage and instead pursue lives of celibacy and asceticism. Late antique monasticism was much more varied and experimental than its medieval successor, and had not yet come under the centralized control of church authorities. There were several different living arrangements possible for young women who wished to remain virgins and widows who renounced remarriage.⁶⁰ These ranged from remaining at home with one's natal family to living alone as a desert hermit. Many women chose to live in small, familial groups, as did Macrina, sister of Gregory of Nyssa, who led an ascetic lifestyle on her family estate along with her mother and other household members. Other wealthy women, like Jerome's friend Paula or Melania the Elder and her granddaughter Melania the Younger, established monasteries for themselves and others, including formerly enslaved women. Even the larger communities of such holy women would number in the dozens rather than the hundreds, and many seem to have been like the one described by the pilgrim Egeria at the shrine of Hagia-Thekla outside Seleucia: small individual dwellings gathered around the same center, overseen by a "mother" like Egeria's friend Marthana. Some women chose to live in celibate companionship with a male monastic, maintaining traditional gender roles in their asexual household. This option was greatly disapproved of by church leaders, who were skeptical of the spiritual couple's claim to have renounced sex. But it is easy to see why it continued to be a popular option into the Middle Ages, because it afforded unmarried women the protection of a male companion and so discouraged sexual predators.⁶¹

⁵⁹ PG 50, column 748; AUBINEAU 1975, 351. Again, there are echoes of the Greek myth of Daphne and Apollo.

⁶⁰ See especially ELM 1994.

⁶¹ CLARK 1979 translates two treatises by John Chrysostom attacking the practice of a male and female ascetic cohabiting; see also ELM 1994, 47–51. Roman law also condemned such unions: see EVANS GRUBBS 2001, 224–25.

For indeed, in antiquity women who chose not to marry or remarry were targets for predators, just as Thekla had been after renouncing her betrothal and following Paul. In the fourth century, Roman emperors began to make laws aiming to protect the sexual chastity of Christian women who had dedicated themselves to holy celibacy. Whereas the emperor Constantine had harshly penalized the *raptus* (abduction) of virgins destined for marriage (the sort of abduction Emmelia, mother of Macrina and Gregory of Nyssa, had avoided by marrying a respectable husband), his son Constantius legislated against the *raptus* of consecrated virgins and widows who had renounced marriage entirely (like Macrina). Similar laws continued to be enacted over the next two centuries.⁶² As the number of such consecrated women grew, their vulnerability to seizure and rape was increasingly recognized in law and is reflected in stories about Thekla.

The risk faced by holy women, even in a Christian enclosure, is illustrated in one of the episodes in the fifth-century collection of the *Miracles of Thekla*. Two men of the city of Eirenopolis, not far from Seleucia, came by some ill-gotten money. They proceeded to use it to get extremely drunk in one of the gardens of Hagia-Thekla, the shrine which Thekla inhabited as a divine presence, eternally young and highly protective of the women who lived there. The men came upon a virgin who was, according to the author of the *Miracles*, “wandering” alone outside the shrine precincts. They seized the virgin, forced her to share a meal with them and were about to force her to share their bed, but they were so inebriated that they fell asleep first. Thekla realized that the virgin was in danger and rushed out of her church in fury. The men, now awake, tried to run away, but were unable to escape the “sleepless eye” of Thekla. Not long afterwards, both men died at Seleucia – apparently by accident, but according to Pseudo-Basil, it was clear to all that Thekla had actively intervened to save her devotee.⁶³

The virgin who narrowly escaped rape may have lived at Hagia-Thekla, perhaps in a group of ascetic women like the one over which Egeria’s friend Marthana presided. Or she may have been an itinerant pilgrim who stopped by Thekla’s shrine during her journeys, like Egeria herself. In addition to monasticism, the fourth century also saw the beginnings of Christian pilgrimage, although as with monasticism, this late antique holy travel was quite different from the much more organized group pilgrimage to holy places in the Middle Ages.⁶⁴ The women who travelled throughout the eastern Mediterranean were eager to see the desert fathers, and sometimes desert mothers, about whom they had read in the *Life of St Antony* and other hagiographical works, as well as to visit places connected with the Old and New Testament. Egeria, whose account of her travels in the late fourth century is an invaluable source for our understanding of early pilgrimage, was a consecrated woman from northern Spain or southern Gaul, apparently part of a community of religious “sisters” to whom she addressed her account. Egeria did not travel as part of an organized group of pilgrims (though presumably she was accompanied by personal attendants and perhaps a bodyguard), but wherever she went she sought out priests and holy men who were happy to take her on lengthy guided tours. Her lively account of her travels does not express any fear of rape or robbery, though she does note that a wall had been built around the martyrion at Hagia-Thekla as protection from local Isaurian marauders, and for a particularly dangerous section of her journey in Egypt she was accompanied by Roman soldiers (whom she eventually dismissed).⁶⁵ But other sources are more open about the dangers “wandering women” faced, and some Christian men, especially in the Eastern provinces, were opposed to women travelling even for

⁶² Constantius’ law: *Codex Theodosianus* 9,25,1 (354 CE); see also *cod. Theod.* 9,25,2 (364 CE); *cod. Theod.* 9,25,3 (420 CE); and *Novel* 6,4 of Majorian (458 CE); discussed in EVANS GRUBBS 2001, 224–25.

⁶³ *Miracles of Thekla*, miracle 34. See also DAVIS 1998, 320–21.

⁶⁴ See ELM 1994, 272–82; DIETZ 2005, especially 107–53. On Egeria, see above.

⁶⁵ Egeria 23, 4 (wall around martyrion at Hagia-Thekla); 7,2–9,3 (Roman soldiers in Egypt).

holy purposes. Many of the "sayings" of desert fathers stress that women were a source of temptation to the monks and might even be demons in disguise.⁶⁶ However, this is most likely a projection onto women of the monks' inner wrestling with their own sexual drives and the temptations of female company. It is much more likely that a woman travelling alone in the desert would herself be assaulted.

This is illustrated by one of the miracles attributed to St. Menas, a soldier martyr whose shrine (Abu Mina) was located in the Egyptian desert about twenty-eight miles southwest of Alexandria. Abu Mina was highly popular with pilgrims and is known for the *ampullae* (pilgrims' flasks) that depict Menas. Sixteen of these ampullae also show Thekla, which suggests a connection between the two saints' cults.⁶⁷ According to the *Miracles of St. Menas*, a wealthy woman had decided to give all her money to St. Menas (that is, to his shrine), and was travelling alone to Abu Mina. On the way she went by a church of St. Thekla (which is otherwise unknown; the site has not been found). There she was assaulted by a Roman soldier on horseback, who was on the point of raping her when St. Menas himself rode up, rescued her, and took the soldier's horse, dragging along the soldier (who had tied his horse's reins to his foot so that it wouldn't run away while he raped the woman) all the way to Abu Mina.⁶⁸ One might expect that Thekla herself would have come to the woman's rescue, since the assault occurred at or near her sanctuary and she was known for her ability to repel rapists. I am happy to accept the suggestion of Stephen Davis that originally this miracle story circulated orally and the woman's rescue was attributed to Thekla, but that due to competition between the neighboring shrines of Thekla and Menas, adherents of Abu Mina appropriated it and attributed it to their patron St. Menas instead. Both this narrative, and the story in the *Miracles of Thekla* where Thekla rescues a consecrated virgin at Hagia-Thekla from two drunken rapists, illustrate the risks run by women ascetics and pilgrims traveling by themselves in unfamiliar surroundings.⁶⁹

Conclusion

In the late antique Mediterranean, centuries-old gender constructs came into collision with the new phenomenon of Christian women rejecting marriage and travelling freely over long distances. This had the unintended consequence of further fostering an already extant culture of sexual violence against women. The popularity of an ascetic lifestyle offered women the opportunity to live apart from men and travel to often dangerous regions, but at the same time this new independence exposed ascetic women, especially travelers, to an even greater risk of sexual harassment and assault than had been the case in earlier times when there had been few options for women beyond marriage and domestic life. Thekla embodied this paradoxical combination of increased vulnerability and enhanced mobility and activity outside the traditional domestic sphere. Scholarly work on Thekla has tended to focus either on the "transgressive" fictional protagonist of the *Apocryphal Acts*, or on the ideal virgin cited as a model for Christian women by male proponents of asceticism like Ambrose and Jerome.⁷⁰ But that is not how Christian women in the late antiquity would have seen her. To them, she was a predecessor for pilgrims and monastics, and a divine protector whose *dynamis*

⁶⁶ ELM 1994, 253–58 and cf. 277–82 on concerns about wandering women.

⁶⁷ See above (n. 13) on the *ampullae* of St. Menas, with Thekla shown on the reverse.

⁶⁸ The *Miracles of St. Menas* are known in Coptic (edited and translated by DRESCHER 1946) and Greek versions. Unfortunately, only the very beginning of this particular miracle survives in the Coptic version; the Greek version, which I was unable to consult directly, was edited by the Russian scholar Ivan POMIALOVSKII and published in St. Petersburg in 1900. I rely on the summation of the Greek text in DRESCHER 1946, 116–17 and DAVIS 1998, 314–16.

⁶⁹ DAVIS 1998, 319–24.

⁷⁰ DAVIS 2001 is exceptional in focusing on what Thekla meant to late antique women.

enabled her to repel assault and humiliate her attackers. Through the stories about Thekla's escapes from sexual violence and death, and through accounts by and about historical women like Egeria and Macrina, we can learn about aspects of late antique Christian life that go unmentioned in other sources – including, unfortunately, the persistence of an ancient rape culture.

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For the Good of the Empire: A Wedding in Milan, Imperial Succession, and the Creation of Ritualised Rape Culture in the Late Antique Court

ALEXANDER THIES

Introduction

In 398 CE, Milan, the capital of the Western Roman Empire, bore witness to a grand spectacle: the celebration of the marriage between the child emperor Honorius, who was thirteen or fourteen years old at the time, and his cousin Maria, the daughter of the powerful *magister utriusque militiae praesentalis* Stilicho, who was twelve or thirteen years old.¹ For this joyous occasion, the renowned court panegyrist Claudian composed a wedding speech in verses, the *epithalamium*,² along with four short festive poems, the so-called *fescennini*.³ In the latter, he described the beauty of marriage and the eagerness of the young couple to get married. Further, the couple would have even received divine help from the pagan gods in preparing the ceremony. Overall, the author evoked a quite harmonious picture. In his fourth and final writing, however, Claudian addressed the imperial groom with a direct exhortation (*allocutio sponsalis*):

*ne cessa, iuvenis, comminus adgredi,
inpacata licet saeviat unguibus.
non quisquam fruitur veris odoribus
Hyblaeos latebris nec spoliat favos,
si fronti caveat, si timeat rubos:
armat spina rosas, mella tegunt apes.
crescunt difficili gaudia iurgio
accenditque magis, quae refugit, Venus.
quod flenti tuleris, plus sapit osculum.*

(Claud. *fescenn.* 4,5–14)

Don't hold off, young man! Get close and attack, even though she's untamed and may rend you with her fingernails. No one enjoys spring's perfumes, nor steals Mount Hybla's honey from its hiding places, if he worries about his forehead, if he's afraid of thorns. Thorns defend roses and bees protect

¹ CAMERON 1970, 95. For Honorius, see DOYLE 2019; for Maria BUSCH 2015, 53–58; and for Stilicho MAZZARINO 1942, O'FLYNN 1983, 14–42, and JANSSEN 2004.

² The term originated in ancient Greece and referred to the custom of singing at the bridal chamber, see KRUMMEN – RUSSELL 2012.

³ For a comprehensive examination of these wedding poems, see CAMERON 1970, 98–102; FRINGS 1975; BERTINI CONIDI 1988; and HORSTMANN 2004, 97–138. There is some ambiguity regarding the sequence of the *fescennini* in relation to the *epithalamium*; see HALL 1986; GINESTE 2004; WASDIN 2014.

their honey. Challenging reproaches increase joys, and passion that shrinks back burns hotter. Stealing a kiss from a crying bride tastes better.⁴

Honorius was exhorted to rape his bride should Maria refuse to have sexual intercourse on their wedding night. For this exhortation, Claudian chose a flowery and pompous language, which would become a trademark of his literary production. This style reflects the conventions of late antique panegyrics and poems, often called the ‘jeweled style’ of the era.⁵ Claudian portrayed the sexual act as a pleasurable and even triumphant experience for the groom. But why did he choose, in the first place, to include this exhortation to the imperial groom, which might be shocking to modern readers? From a philological perspective, Katherine Wasdin has convincingly shown that Claudian transformed the traditional elegiac motive of *militia amoris* by asserting that Honorius should demonstrate his manliness through rape. Just as he ‘conquered’ his bride sexually, he and his troops would ultimately overcome the contemporary usurper Gildo, who had been leading a rebellion in the African provinces since 397.⁶ Furthermore, Clare Coombe has pointed out that Maria’s resistance against her violent ‘conquest’ by Honorius was just a literary topos signifying her chaste virginity before the wedding.⁷ Similar interpretations, nevertheless, fail to explain the reasons for the propagation of sexual violence for the logic of the late antique imperial succession and especially the intricate Western Roman politics under the *magister praesentalis* and regent Stilicho. By examining Claudian’s exhortation to commit rape, I try to argue that at the wedding in Milan in 398, a culture of ritualised rape developed and was promoted within the Western imperial court. The term ‘rape culture’ should here, therefore, be understood as a society or environment that encourages or normalises rape and sexual assault.⁸

It is crucial to note, nonetheless, that in Roman antiquity, there was no distinct concept of marital rape. While some laws occasionally emphasised consent between bride and groom as a requirement for marriage, in reality, only an agreement between the groom and the bride’s father was crucial for arranging a marriage.⁹ Accordingly, there were also no legal provisions against rape in arranged marriages, since all marital sexual intercourse was considered legitimate. Only the *raptus* of a virgin – more correctly translated as “abduction” (with a possible rape afterwards) – was considered a criminal offence.¹⁰ However, this was not so much because the young woman had (most likely) been raped, but because her abduction lacked a prior agreement between the groom and the father of the *virgo*. In 326, Constantine even passed a law denying women, who wished to marry their abductor after the *raptus*, any legal autonomy since only the agreement with the *virgo*’s parents was considered to be legitimate.¹¹ Consequently, even if an abductor was

⁴ Transl. N. BERNSTEIN (2023).

⁵ See ROBERTS 1989, especially 49–58.

⁶ See WASDIN 2014. I cannot follow the interpretation of COOMBE 2018, 147–71, who understands the hyper-masculinisation of Honorius and the depiction of Maria as sexually attractive in the *epithalamium* and *fescennini* as ‘comical’ for the audience, mainly due to their young age. It was quite common in antiquity (especially for women) to marry at such a young age; see SCHEIDEL 2007 and CALDWELL 2015, 2–3, 125.

⁷ See COOMBE 2018, 171–78.

⁸ See BURNETT 2016, based on HERMAN 1984.

⁹ For a comprehensive legal examination of the issue of consent within late Roman marriage, see ARJAVA 1996, 33–36. The third-century jurist Ulpian posited that a girl would generally be regarded as giving her consent to a betrothal if she did not voice any objections to the groom selected by her father. This refusal, however, would only be possible if the potential bride was considered unsuitable for betrothal due to moral deficiencies or a questionable character – a rather vague statement. See Ulp. *D.* 23, 1, 12.

¹⁰ See the contribution of EVANS-GRUBBS in this volume (218) and EVANS-GRUBBS 1989.

¹¹ CTh 9, 24, 1. See particularly EVANS-GRUBBS 1989.

captured and executed, after the *raptus*, the girl was no longer regarded as a virgin, rendering her unavailable for future marriage alliances.¹²

While examining Claudian's wedding poems, I also try to take into account Maria's often-overlooked experience of sexual violence. Patriarchal interpretations of rape have long minimised the trauma endured by women, often misinterpreting the lack of consent as an invitation for male violence. Regrettably, similar cultural understandings have also too often influenced academic writing.¹³ After the rape, Claudian imagined how Maria's torn hymen would leave a Tyrian purple stain on the newlywed couple's bedsheets.¹⁴ Usually produced from thousands of purple snails, the colour purple alluded to imperial dignity and regalia in late antiquity.¹⁵ In his conclusive verses, Claudian described how all the people of the Empire would rejoice at the news of the perpetrated sexual act.¹⁶ Such graphic descriptions have led scholars to consider the *fescennini* as merely a 'first draft' of the commissioned wedding poem. Regarded as supposedly too licentious for their time, Claudian would have written the less explicit *epithalamium* as a sort of 'apology' for his first inappropriate composition.¹⁷ However, there is no evidence that contemporary readers would have regarded his verses as scandalous. Rather, such interpretations tend to reflect the social sensibility of modern scholars. Moreover, the fact that Claudian's writings constitute the sole surviving late antique imperial wedding speech makes it exceedingly challenging to assess their originality in an accurate way.

Determining the contemporary reception of Claudian's fourth *fescenninus* is further complicated by the fact that Claudian's poems are the only surviving *fescennini* from Latin literature.¹⁸ Nevertheless, they can be contextualised within the broader landscape of late antique imperial panegyric. It is likely that the *fescennini* would have been well-received or, at the very least, not met with reprehension by their courtly readership. This assumption is supported by the fact that they were subsequently published seemingly without revisions as part of Claudian's official panegyric collection. Additionally, later in his life, Claudian accepted new commissions from Maria's father, Stilicho, implying a reasonable likelihood that these works were approved and perhaps even requested by the court society.

Recent scholarship on late antique panegyric has underscored its nuances, challenging the simplistic view that it merely served as a vehicle for flattery directed at the emperor and the imperial administration or as a mediocre artistic endeavour. Instead, panegyrics emerge as intricate literary compositions, strategically employed to consolidate the standing of prominent court figures, such as Maria's father and the *de facto* regent, Stilicho. In fact, Claudian and other panegyrists acted as skilled propagators of the official court policy dictated by Stilicho and directed to the Western Roman Senate and other members of the elite. On numerous occasions, the Western Roman elite would have been required to listen to similar official pronouncements, thus turning such official state gatherings into a ritualised act of submission to the imperial family and gen-

¹² See CALDWELL 2015, 45–78.

¹³ See HIGGINS and SILVER 1991, 1–9.

¹⁴ Claud. *fescenn.* 4,25–29: *amplexu caleat purpura regio / et vestes Tyrio sanguine fulgidas / alter virgineus nobilitet cruor: / tum victor madido prosilias toro // nocturni referens vulnera proelii.*

¹⁵ MEYER 1970, 62–70.

¹⁶ Claud. *fescenn.* 4,30–37: *Ducant pervigiles carmina tibiae / permissisque iocis turba licentior / exultet tetricis libera legibus. / passim cum ducibus ludite milites, / passim cum pueris ludite virgines. / haec vox aetheriis insonet axibus, / haec vox per populos, per mare transeat: / "formosus Mariam ducit Honorius."*

¹⁷ See explicitly HORSTMANN 2004, 113–14, also with older references.

¹⁸ Ibid. 54.

eral approval of the imperial policy. Late antique imperial epic panegyric can thus be understood as a medium of communication between the emperor (or the powerful *magister praesentalis* Stilicho) and the elite.¹⁹

Considering such reflections on the political role of panegyric oratory in the culture of the imperial court, there is good reason to assume that Claudian's wedding poems, including his exhortation to commit sexual violence, could have been a central aspect. For this reason, I want to argue that a culture of ritualised rape was created at the court of the Western Roman Empire in 398. In order to prove this, I will first reconstruct the intertextual references and the literary models for Claudian's *fescennini*. Secondly, I will explain why the uncertain order of Roman imperial succession and dynastic instability promoted and legitimised the emergence of such a rape culture at the Western imperial court. Thirdly, Claudian's exhortation to sexual violence also reflected the political interests of the *de facto* ruler Stilicho: only if his daughter Maria had given birth to an heir, would his contested power at court be secured. For a similar reason, Stilicho was ready to accept and even promote the raping of his eldest daughter.

Claudian's literary models and the wedding speeches in late antiquity

Wedding speeches (*epithalamia*) have a well-established tradition in Greek and Latin literature. A key rhetorical element of such speeches was the *allocutio sponsalis*, a direct address to the newly wedded couple, urging them to consummate the marriage.²⁰ It is worth noting that while Claudian's exhortation for the groom to rape Maria fits into the category of *allocutio sponsalis*, such explicit endorsements of sexual violence are rarely found in earlier wedding speeches. Sources of possible inspiration for similar exhortations can be traced to two of Catullus' *carmina* or Ausonius' *cento nuptialis*. Nonetheless, it remains uncertain to what extent Claudian might have been influenced by these texts, as there are no direct references to them.²¹ A linguistic precursor of Claudian's metaphorical image of rape as a game for the groom to obtain 'honey' from 'bees' and not to fear their 'stings' can be found in Plutarch's *Moralia*, 'Advice to Bride and Groom'.²² However, Claudian does not directly cite Plutarch; instead, he employs what seems to have been a common euphemistic metaphor for describing the wedding night.

The intertextuality of Claudian's wedding oratory is, however, undeniably profound. The Theodosian author found a significant model in Statius' *epithalamium* for Stella and Violentilla when crafting the structural and linguistic elements of his own *epithalamia*,²³ but there is no inspiration in Statius for the content of the *fescennini*. Claudian's oeuvre also includes another *epithalamium* dedicated to the noble pair Palladius and Celerina. Remarkably, this composition lacked any endorsement of physical coercion, opting instead for a call for harmony between bride and groom as they approached their conjugal union.²⁴ In the account of the *raptus Proserpinae*, most likely Claudian's best-known literary work, Pluto violently abducts the future queen of the underworld; however, there is no explicit description of the rape.²⁵ In addition to omitting

¹⁹ See GILLET 2012, OMISSI 2018, 61–62, and CAMERON 1970, 228–52. Cameron even characterised Claudian as “Stilico's official propagandist” (quotation at 59).

²⁰ See HORSTMANN 2004, 60–62.

²¹ Catull. *carm.* 61 and 62; Auson. *c.n.* 101–31. See also SCHOTTENIUS CULLHED 2016 for an excellent analysis of the latter.

²² See Plut. *mor.* 138E: πολλὰ δὲ καὶ τῶν νεογάμων δυσχεράνασαι διὰ τὰ πρῶτα τοὺς νυμφίους ὁμοίον ἔπαθον πάθος τοῖς τὴν μὲν πληγὴν τῆς μελίττης ὑπομείνασι, τὸ δὲ κηρίον προεμένοις.

²³ See MORELLI 1910 and PAVLOVSKIS 1965. The Latin *epithalamia* after Claudian, therefore, not only incorporate elements of his models, but also take his wedding speeches as examples.

²⁴ Claud. *carmin. min.* 35, 130–45.

²⁵ See Claud. *rapt. Pros.* 2, 361–72. However, Claudian exhibits a notable recurrence in his expression. Following what is arguably the most iconic scene – the depiction of the tapestry woven by the maiden Proserpina – she blushes, which Claudian calls a “purple blush”, which would even outshine the brilliance of ivory dyed with Tyrian purple, see Claud. *rapt. Pros.* 1, 271–75. Considering

the elaborate, poetic description of rape, these other works by Claudian also omit the element of collective celebration following the violent consummation of the marriage. Consequently, the decision to include the communal rejoicing in the *fescennini* must carry exceptional importance and can only be explained in the imperial context.

It is evident, however, that Claudian was influenced by other sources, most importantly Menander, the third-century rhetorician, who had written a handbook on how to write nearly all types of eulogy and panegyric²⁶ In the handbook, Menander distinguishes between the *epithalamium*/ἐπιθαλάμιον itself and the speech with the incitement to consummate the wedding, the so-called bedroom speech or κατευναστικός λόγος. The κατευναστικός λόγος, as described by Menander, was most likely the model for Claudian's *fescennini*. According to the rhetorician, a good *allocutio sponsalis* should exhort the groom to consummate the marriage on the first wedding night, thus ensuring that the witnesses gathered by their bedside would not leave disappointed on the morning after.²⁷ Furthermore, he also addressed several of the key features that would later set Claudian's *fescennini* apart from previous models:

Προτρέψη δ' αὐτὸν καὶ ἀπὸ τοῦ κάλλους τοῦ θαλάμου, ὃν αἱ Χάριτες κατεποίκιλαν, καὶ ἀπὸ τῆς ὥρας τῆς κόρης καὶ ὅποιοι περὶ ἐκείνην θεοὶ γαμήλιοι· Ἀφροδίτη καὶ Ἥμερος προδώσουσί σοι ταύτην καὶ ἐγχειρίσουσιν, ἵνα δημιουργήσητε παῖδας ὁμοίους μὲν σοί, ὁμοίους δὲ ἐκείνῃ· ἐὰν δέ σε καὶ ἀπατᾶν ἐπιχειρήσῃ αἰμύλα κωτίλλουσα, φύλαξαι τὴν ἀπάτην· περικείται γὰρ καὶ Ἀφροδίτης κεστόν, ἐν ᾧ διὰ λόγων ἐστὶν ἀπάτη.

(Men. Rhet. 2,6,7)

You may also exhort him by citing the beauty of the wedding chamber adorned by the Graces, the youthful beauty of the bride, and the gods of marriage attending her. 'Aphrodite and Desire (Himeros) will deliver her into your hands, so that you may create children like yourselves. And if she tries to deceive you 'with wheedling words,' beware of her deceit: she is wearing Aphrodite's girdle, in which there is deceit through words.'²⁸

According to Menander, the groom should be aware that the bride might want to deceive him (ἀπάτη) and, therefore, would have to rape her if she did not give her consent. Although Menander's work lacks a graphic description of the sexual violence,²⁹ it proves that there were precedents for referring to rape in wedding speeches. In his instructions to the wedding orator, Menander also emphasises that the aim of such acts was the conception of a child during the first wedding night. Accordingly, a good wedding orator should always stress that the groom "may bear children for the city, who will flourish in speaking, public service, and acts

that the entire scene serves as a foreshadowing, it is plausible that this interplay of colours serves as an allusion to the impending deflowering of Proserpina.

²⁶ This connection to Menander is pointed out by GUALANDRI 1968, 7–16, and GINESTE 2004.

²⁷ Men. Rhet. 2,6,2: τοῦ δὲ νεανίσκου τὴν ἀλκὴν καὶ τὴν ῥώμην, παραινοῦντες μὴ κατασχῶναι ταῦτα τοσοῦτων μαρτύρων γενησομένων τῇ ὑστεραίᾳ τῆς τελετῆς. In her renowned work *Le Deuxième Sexe*, Simone de Beauvoir has written about an interesting parallel observation concerning traditional rural weddings in France. These weddings encompassed celebratory events, the sanctity attached to the bride's virginity, and the presence of witnesses during the bride's defloration – an element she aptly characterised as "an obscene paradox in superposing a stately ceremony upon an animal function of brutal reality." See DE BEAUVOIR 1956, 427–29 (quotation at 428).

²⁸ Transl. W. RACE (2019).

²⁹ According to GIBSON 2021, 184, Menander imagines the wedding night not as "a time of violence and victimization", but as a "happy, festive occasion with a mixed-gender audience".

of charity.”³⁰ This attitude persists in subsequent *epithalamia*, in which wedding orators commonly extend wishes for offspring to the newlyweds.³¹ However, many later orators deviated from Menander’s handbook in the explicit instructions on calling for rape. Ausonius, in his most likely fictional *cento nuptialis* (which probably remained relatively uninfluenced by the Menandrian tradition),³² narrated a violent rape of the bride. Nevertheless, the author also apologised for writing such a scene, emphasising that he would be portraying something distasteful.³³

Although Menander himself “does not offer anything to spoil the mood: no coarse, language, nothing vulgar, no allusions to anything unpleasant, and [...] certainly no mention of blood”,³⁴ he nevertheless strongly emphasises the social shame that the bridegroom is likely to experience the next morning should he fail to deflower the bride. What is left unsaid by Menander is that the presenting of a blood-stained sheet was essential in order to prove that the marriage had been consummated. As noted by Craig Gibson, this occasion represents the earliest documented instance of such a custom in the Greek world, even though it was prevalent in other premodern cultures.³⁵ Over a century later, Claudian would explicitly describe the presentation of the blood-stained sheet; there must have been peculiar circumstances surrounding the imperial wedding of 398 that prompted him to depart from Menander and explicitly mention this singular detail.

The social pressure for the couple to produce legitimate children may have been the main reason for aristocratic families to have a wedding orator demand that the bride be raped by her groom on the wedding night. However, it is essential to note that this invitation to consummate the marriage, involving social shame for the groom if he failed to do so, was only a performative ritual, like the *κατευναστικός λόγος* itself – a single sexual act alone only rarely leads to pregnancy. The speech, the display of the blood-stained sheet, and even the potential act of consummation only served to fulfill the societal expectations of aristocratic kinship.

While Menander wrote his manual with an audience of Roman provincial elite in mind, the same anxieties around reproduction and the preservation of the dynastic line were present at the imperial court. To imperial panegyrists specifically, Menander advised incorporating into a formal panegyric to the emperor (*βασιλικὸς λόγος*) a eulogy to the reigning emperor as a fetus:

μετὰ τὴν γένεσιν ἔρεις τι καὶ περὶ φύσεως, οἷον ὅτι ἐξέλαμψεν ἐξ ὠδίνων εὐειδῆς τῷ κάλλει καταλάμπων τὸ φαινόμενον ἀστέρι καλλίστῳ τῶν κατ’ οὐρανὸν ἐφάμιλλος.

(Men. Rhet. 2,1,14)

After the topic of birth, say something about his nature, as for example, ‘He shone forth from the womb resplendent with beauty and lighting up the world, a match for the fairest star in heaven.’³⁶

³⁰ Men Rhet. 2,6,11: προσθήσεις δ’ ὡς ἴνα καὶ παῖδας φυτεύσῃς τῇ πατρίδι λόγοις ἐνακμάσσοντας, φιλοτιμίαις, ἐπιδόσεις.

³¹ See, for example, P.Ryl. 1,17,4–6; Prok. Gaz. op. 13 (= or. 3),17 for Greek *epithalamia*; see SCHWITTER 2020, 123 with n. 34 for references to the later Latin *epithalamia*; he even calls the wish for children in the wedding poem “a conventional motif”.

³² Brunella Moroni has extensively studied Ausonius’ *cento nuptialis* and concludes very convincingly that it remains unclear whether it might have been a highly stylised type of a real *epithalamium*, maybe for the wedding of Gratian and Flavia Constantia, or just literary fiction, see MORONI 2006, 82–88.

³³ See Auson. c.n. *epilogus* 2–8; see also SCHOTTENIUS CULLHED 2016, 238.

³⁴ GIBSON 2021, 184.

³⁵ GIBSON 2021, 185–87. Gibson suggests further that this might have been a localised wedding custom unique to Alexandria.

³⁶ Transl. W. RACE (2019).

In Menander's eloquent expressions, the metaphorical radiance of the imperial mother's womb, whether she was the emperor's mother or bride, was synonymous with the anticipation of bearing an heir to the throne. Similar metaphors of light had been used to represent the emperors since the third century.³⁷ In the following section, I will illuminate the origins of similar ideas surrounding imperial succession and explore their significance at Honorius' and Maria's wedding.

Maria: guarantee for the *salus rei publicae* and Stilicho's power

The logic of imperial succession in the Roman Empire was always intricate. It was far from guaranteed that the torch of Roman rule would be passed through biological lineage. Originally, the Roman Empire had emerged from an aristocratic Republican order in which the patriarchs of a few elite families held the political power. After Augustus successfully established a monarchy, the Republican order was not entirely overthrown, but some of its defining elements, like the senatorial *cursus honorum*, remained intact. Hence, scholars have stressed that while the institution of monarchy was widely accepted, the *individual monarchs* themselves were often considered illegitimate and had to fight for acceptance.³⁸ This also inevitably led to (actual or sometimes merely symbolic) compromises to the senatorial aristocracy of Rome so that the fiction of a continuing Republic could be perpetuated.

Under these circumstances, no clear dynastic succession could be implemented. The presence of an imperial woman at the emperor's side would have inevitably evoked associations with the 'real monarchies' of the Eastern Hellenistic states, characterised by hereditary right. As a result, official depictions of imperial women, the emphasis on motherhood, and the overt portrayal of dynastic succession had to be carefully managed and controlled.³⁹ Nevertheless, from the first establishment of the Roman Empire onwards, nearly all emperors tried to retain the imperial title within their own biological or at least, adopted, family. Indeed, familial links to a prior emperor were considered a powerful legitimating force, though not an absolute requirement for ascending the throne.⁴⁰ However, since the demise of the childless emperor Commodus in 192 CE, a series of catastrophic usurpations and civil wars rendered each imperial succession fiercely contested.

At the end of the third century, a clear alternative to the system of imperial succession via bloodline or adoption emerged. Emperor Diocletian conducted an experiment, introducing a shared power structure with three other military commanders – a system composed of two senior (*Augusti*) and two junior (*Caesares*) emperors, forming a fictitious family (the so-called 'tetrarchy'). This arrangement aimed to ensure peace and stability, with the understanding that the senior emperors would voluntarily abdicate after twenty years, followed by the promotion of the *Caesares*. Remarkably, biological sons were to be bypassed in favour of merit.⁴¹ However, the experiment failed miserably after Diocletian's abdication in 305. After decades of chaos, Constantine I ultimately established himself as the sole ruler in 324 and reverted to dynastic succession, designating his three sons as heirs and leveraging the burgeoning Christian faith as a stabilising and legitimising force.⁴² For this reason, his wife Fausta was featured on the imperial coinage from 324 until her

³⁷ See ALFÖLDI 1970, 111–12.

³⁸ See FLAIG 1997 and PFEILSCHIFTER 2013, 9–38.

³⁹ See HEKSTER 2015, 17–18.

⁴⁰ See HEKSTER 2015, *passim*, and OMISSI 2018, 18.

⁴¹ See HEKSTER 2015, 287–96 and WALDRON 2022, 117–65.

⁴² See BÖRM 2015, 246–51.

execution in 326. She appears on the reverse as a mother nursing two children. The inscription of the coins reads *SALVS REI PUBLICAE*, the salvation of the state.⁴³

A few decades earlier, Menander had evoked a similar notion of imperial succession, when describing the imperial mother's 'radiant womb'. From Constantine onward, the 'light of the world' was the birth of a new prince, as this event symbolised the certainty of peace and stability – a solemn promise to the people of the Roman Empire. This pledge became increasingly vital after years of tumultuous crises, establishing the concept of a strictly dynastic succession through the empress' motherhood. However, the increasingly diverse imperial elite only partially embraced this concept. If presented with an opportunity, the senatorial elite often favoured one of their own over the son of the emperor.⁴⁴ Thus, even though the dynastic principle persisted in the later Roman and early Byzantine Empire, it remained vital to legitimise a new emperor in the eyes of God and the senatorial elite.⁴⁵

Honorius' ascent to the imperial throne is a paradigmatic example of this principle. Theodosius the Great died in Milan in 395, only a few months after quelling the usurpation of Flavius Eugenius, who had been supported by the vast majority of the Western Roman senators, some of whom retained pagan affiliations. Led by the influential senator Virius Nicomachus Flavianus, a significant part of the senate had backed Eugenius,⁴⁶ only to promptly shift allegiances when Theodosius triumphed on the battlefield. The situation following Theodosius' death carried inherent risks for the Theodosian dynasty. Despite of having accompanied his father during his campaign into the Roman West, young Honorius had no guarantee that the Western Roman Senate would readily acknowledge him as the rightful emperor.

Nevertheless, Honorius eventually ascended the Western-Roman throne. However, he was undeniably too young to engage in active governance. In an (allegedly) private conversation shortly before his death, Theodosius appointed his loyal general Stilicho as *magister praesentalis* and official guardian to his underage son.⁴⁷ Consequently, Stilicho emerged as the paramount figure at the imperial court, wielding considerable influence over the politics of the Western Roman Empire for over a decade until his downfall in 408. Stilicho's questionable appointment roused much controversy amongst the Roman elite. Although he managed to win some support amongst the nobility during his governance, a considerable portion of the conservative Roman senatorial aristocracy harboured reservations about the *magister*, a '*semibarbarus*' of Vandal descent, and would have been only too happy to remove him.⁴⁸ The notion that a ten-year-old was deemed unfit to rule further endangered Honorius' and his guardian's standing, especially given the elite's recent support for Flavius Eugenius' uprising against Honorius' father.⁴⁹ Stilicho's precarious situation was

⁴³ RIC VII Londinium 300; RIC VII Lugdunum 235; RIC VII Treveri 459, 483; RIC VII Arelate 277, 298; RIC VII Ticinum 182; RIC VII Sirmium 55, 61; RIC VII Thessalonica 160; RIC VII Constantinople 12; RIC VII Nicomedia 77, 78, 96, 130, 149; RIC VII Antioch 68, 76; RIC VII Alexandria 39. See LONGO 2009, 107–09.

⁴⁴ As Ammian reports, in 367, Emperor Valentinian I suffered from a severe illness. Some members of the elite proposed that he should designate Sextius Rusticus Iulianus, a senator unrelated to him, as his successor. However, in response to these suggestions, Valentinian promptly appointed his underage son, Gratian, as co-emperor, see Amm. 27,6,1. For Iulianus, see PLRE I, 479–80.

⁴⁵ As argued by Gilbert Dagron, "while 'dynastic feeling' was clearly quite widespread, it lacked any institutional or ideological support". DAGRON 2003, 13–53 (quotation at 14).

⁴⁶ See MATTHEWS 1975, 241–47.

⁴⁷ The first to mention Stilicho's 'guardianship' was the Milanese bishop Ambrose in Ambr. *obit. Theod.* 5. See DOYLE 2019, 80 for further references.

⁴⁸ See MATTHEWS 1975, 257–70; 276–79 for Stilicho's relations with the Italian elites.

⁴⁹ This is probably why Bishop Ambrose of Milan gave his funeral oration on Theodosius the Great and invented the legend that Helena, the mother of Constantine the Great, had sent her son a few nails when she allegedly found the True Cross in Jerusalem. Constantine would then have worked a nail into his diadem so Christians would have a duty to worship and obey the emperor. Ambrose emphasises that this very diadem was now on the head of little Honorius. See Ambr. *obit. Theod.* 47–51.

characterised by volatile political dynamics and legal uncertainties, especially as, under Roman law, Honorius would attain adulthood at fourteen, which would terminate Stilicho's appointment at the imperial court.

The talented orator Claudian played a vital role in strengthening Honorius' and Stilicho's claims to power and legitimacy. As Andrew Gillett elucidates, Claudian served not only as a 'propagandist' to the imperial government (and Stilicho in particular); instead, his speeches were ritualised acts during which the Western Roman Senators and other elite members had to convene in Milan and, most importantly, were made to listen. Through their mere presence, applause and, most likely, acclamations, they symbolically approved of the ideas concerning imperial succession that were publicly pronounced by the panegyrist, and legitimised the imperial government.⁵⁰ The same dynamic played out at Honorius' and Maria's wedding. In his *fescennini* and *epithalamium*, Claudian let the goddess of love, Venus, address the scared bride Maria with the following words:

*Adstitit et blande Mariam Cytherea salutat:
 "salve sidereae proles augusta Serenae,
 magnorum suboles regum parituraque reges.
 [...] accipe fortunam generis, diadema resume,
 quod tribuas natis, et in haec penetralia rursus,
 unde parens progressa, redi*
 (Claud. *epith. Hon.* 251–61)

Venus stood before Maria and greeted her gently: "Greetings, heavenly Serena's noble daughter, child of great emperors, who shall bear emperors. [...] Accept your family's destiny, take up your crown again, that you'll pass down to your children. Come back into the palace your mother came from."⁵¹

Maria was expected to give birth to new emperors and perpetuate the Theodosian dynasty. As explained by Menander, the purpose of encouraging the groom to rape his bride was the birth of children. In this case, the exhortation to raping had significant political functions. Firstly, the birth of children would have further strengthened Stilicho's weak claim to power and secured his position for his lifetime. Honorius was to become fourteen, an age at which, according to Roman law, he would no longer need a legal guardian. Stilicho, however, could through Honorius' marriage to Maria consolidate his position as a '(step-)father' to Honorius.⁵² Therefore, the wedding was doubtless urged by Stilicho. Typically, in Roman society, there was a significant age gap between the aristocratic bride and groom.⁵³ Other contemporary male emperors, such as Honorius' brother Arcadius and his son, Theodosius II, did not marry until they were approximately 20 years old, meaning that Honorius married prematurely.⁵⁴ It is no coincidence that Claudian ended his *epithalamium* with an remarkably odd but politically highly relevant image of the future: "So may Maria's womb increase. So may Honorius's little son, born to the emperor's purple robe, sit on his grandfather's knee."⁵⁵ This im-

⁵⁰ See GILLETT 2012. See DAVIDSON 1946, 168–75 for the political culture of senatorial acclamations.

⁵¹ Transl. N. BERNSTEIN (2023).

⁵² Olymp. *fr.* 3; Zos. 5,4,1–2; 5,28,2. See CAMERON 1970, 58, 95 and DOYLE 2019, 102.

⁵³ Data from tombstones and Egyptian papyri suggest that Roman men were statistically around ten years older than women/girls at their marriage, see CALDWELL 2015, 4.

⁵⁴ See BUSCH 2015, 60, 142.

⁵⁵ Claud. *epith. Hon.* 340–41 (Transl. N. BERNSTEIN, 2023): *sic uterus crescat Mariae; sic natus in ostro parvus Honoriades genibus considat avitis.*

age of the future gains its particular political relevance from the fact that, even though it is not derived from Menander's handbook, similar descriptions were commonly used in many other surviving *epithalamia* of late antiquity. However, in these, the future children are described as sitting on their father's knee, not their grandfather's.⁵⁶ Claudian cleverly promoted the *de facto* power dynamics at the Western court: The offspring would be part of Stilicho's, not Honorius's dynasty.

Secondly, since no legally defined order of imperial succession existed, the death of an emperor was always a potential cause for chaos. Mighty army leaders or senators could try to seize power, often with the support of the Western Roman elite. A biological son would lower the risk of usurpation and civil war after Honorius' death and promote peace and stability: an heir would represent the *salus rei publicae*. Claudian also emphasised in his *epithalamium* that Honorius had given his bride the ornaments of Livia, wife of Augustus, as a wedding gift.⁵⁷ This statement was intended to evoke for Claudian's elite audience a pseudo-dynastic continuity of empresses from the beginning of the Roman Empire – an idea which was entirely fictitious due to the volatility of the preceding dynasties. Livia herself, for example, had not borne any children to Augustus. Nonetheless, the figure of speech strove to suggest to the audience that a clear hereditary continuity existed.

In general, Roman weddings, as modern scholars have observed, were often marked by violence inflicted upon the bride, even if no other wedding orator would promote the rape of the bride in such an explicit way. This brutality was not just an unfortunate occurrence but a ritual in which a *virgo* transitioned into a sexual being.⁵⁸ However, Karen K. Hersch has shed light on an additional aspect of this ritualistic violence perpetrated by the groom. According to her, in Roman society, the violation of the bride was considered a crucial act which ensured the legitimacy of the offspring and emulated the legendary *raptus* of the Sabine Women. Symbolically, this act of violence evoked the foundation and perpetuation of the Roman *res publica*, signifying a profound 'service to the state'.⁵⁹ This concept held particularly true for Maria, as her legitimate children would have been regarded as the *salus rei publicae*.

Therefore, it was to gain the imperial elites' support for the principle of dynastic succession that the court panegyrist Claudian was commissioned to write the *epithalamium* and four *fescennini* in honour of Honorius' and Maria's wedding. To ensure the conception of a future heir, he addressed the groom in his *allocutio sponsalis*, encouraging him to rape his bride. Ironically, Maria – just like her younger sister Thermantia, who was married off to Honorius after her sister's passing – never got pregnant. Ancient authors explained that this was either due to Honorius' impotence, his ascetic and chaste lifestyle, or his stepmother Serena administering him poison.⁶⁰

From the historiographer Zosimus' account of Serena, written around 500, we may be able to gain valuable insights about the female perspective on these matters. It is rather difficult to evaluate how Maria herself might have perceived her marriage to her cousin; Claudian emphasises Maria's resistance and fear before the wedding, which is typical of the genre, but nonetheless not unimportant.⁶¹ Zosimus, however, relates that Maria's mother Serena thought that "to give away her daughter to the marriage bed when she was

⁵⁶ See, for example, the fragmentary *epithalamia* of Dioscoros of Aphroditos: P. Lit. Lond 100C (= *epithalamium* for Paul and Patricia) 22–24; P. Cair. Masp. II 67179 (= *epithalamium* for Count Callinicus and Theophile) 15–16; P. Cair. Masp. II 67181 (= *epithalamium* for Matthew) 21–22.

⁵⁷ Claud. *epith. Hon.* 10–13.

⁵⁸ See CALDWELL 2015, 134–65.

⁵⁹ See HERSCH 2020.

⁶⁰ See DOYLE 2019, 105, 156–57.

⁶¹ Claud. *fescenn.* 4,3–4.

too young was a crime against nature”, which is why she administered poison to her son-in-law so that “her daughter should marry the emperor and even sleep with him, but that he should be neither willing nor able to fulfil his conjugal duty.”⁶² Although this can be viewed as a retrospective negative projection by a misogynistic male author, with the goal of explaining the childlessness of the imperial marriage (while portraying female influence as the source of all evil),⁶³ another interpretation can also be suggested. It was well known to Roman physicians and elites that sexual intercourse and pregnancy at a young age could pose potential risks to a teenage girl’s health.⁶⁴ In Zosimus’ view, Serena may have known what painful experiences her teenage daughter would experience on her wedding night and what struggles she would have to endure due to an early pregnancy; therefore, she may have wanted to prevent the rape of her daughter encouraged by Claudian. As Zosimus points out, however, Serena acted in a contradictory way a few years later: After Maria’s death between 404 and 407, Serena feared for her position at court and married her younger daughter Thermantia off to Honorius to secure her position through the birth of a child.⁶⁵ Serena might have forsaken her possible motherly concerns and, like her husband, submitted to the logic of power; Thermantia would probably have had to endure the same wedding ritual with a similar speech delivered by Claudian or another orator.

Conclusion

At the imperial wedding of 398, the court panegyrist Claudian held his *epithalamium* together with four *fescennini* in which he exhorted Honorius to rape his new bride Maria. Towards the end, he evoked the image of an imperial blood-stained sheet and the rejoicing of the Emperor’s subjects at the announcement of the consummation of the marriage. As my analysis reveals, Claudian drew inspiration from Menander Rhetor, who was the pioneer in incorporating the elements of rape and the symbolics of the blood-stained sheet into Graeco-Roman wedding speeches. However, it is worth noting that, apart from Claudian, subsequent wedding orators opted not to follow Menander’s example.

I have argued that in the unique context of the Western Roman imperial court during the last years of the fourth century, Claudian deliberately turned to Menander’s example. His intention extended beyond merely encouraging the imperial couple to procreate; he demanded it. In the specific milieu of Honorius’ court, the birth of imperial offspring held paramount significance for the *magister praesentalis* and father of the bride, Stilicho. By orchestrating Maria’s marriage, Stilicho sought to strengthen his grip on power even after the child emperor Honorius would have reached adulthood. A child born from this marriage would have been the ultimate fruit of his ambitions.

Further, the imperial wedding also served as a ritualised event at which the senatorial elite had to assemble. Claudian’s call for the raping of the bride and the evocation of the following display of the blood-stained sheet were rhetorical elements, intended to persuade the senatorial and court nobility to accept the hereditary succession to the throne, as well as Stilicho’s position as the emperor’s stepfather and the future

⁶² Zos. 5,28,3 (Transl. RIDLEY 1982): Τοῦ γάμου τοῦ πρὸς Μαρίαν Ὀνωρίῳ συνισταμένου, γάμων ὥραν οὕτω τὴν κόρην ἄγουσαν ἢ μήτηρ ὀρώσα, καὶ οὔτε ἀναβαλέσθαι τὸν γάμον ἀνεχομένη, καὶ τὸ παρ’ ἡλικίαν εἰς μῖζιν ἐκδοῦναι φύσεως ἀδικίαν καὶ οὐδὲν ἡλικίαν εἰς μῖζιν ἐκδοῦναι φύσεως ἀδικίαν καὶ οὐδὲν ἕτερον εἶναι <νομίζουσα>, γυναικὶ τὰ τοιαῦτα θεραπεύειν ἐπισταμένη περιτυχοῦσα πράττει διὰ ταύτης τὸ συνεῖναι μὲν τὴν θυγατέρα τῷ βασιλεῖ καὶ ὁμόλεκτρον εἶναι, τὸν δὲ μήτε ἐθέλειν μήτε δύνασθαι τὰ τῷ γάμῳ προσήκοντα πράττειν.

⁶³ See BUSCH 2015, 54.

⁶⁴ See CALDWELL 2015, 79–104.

⁶⁵ Zos. 5,28,4.

emperor's grandfather. The likelihood of Maria immediately getting pregnant was only marginally relevant. Rather, the speech strove was to ensure that the emperor would be willing to do everything (even engage in violence against his bride) to secure a succession through bloodline and force the elite to approve the dynastic succession.

At the court of Honorius, the pressure to conceive children removed taboos surrounding speaking of and committing sexual violence. Maria was probably only one of the many imperial brides who became a victim of rape due to the constant pressure to produce heirs to the throne.⁶⁶ It is not unlikely that many imperial women like her faced the trauma of sexual violence during their wedding night and possibly throughout their lives. However, Claudian's graphic public address and encouragement to commit a socially acceptable act of sexual violence were unprecedented, and allow characterising the imperial wedding of 398 as a performance of ritualised rape culture.

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⁶⁶ See HERRIN 2013, 175–77 about the 'duty' of the Byzantine empress to bear children.

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BIBLICAL RECEPTIONS

Listening for Dinah in Abelard's *Planctus* and Other Latin Poems

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Introduction

Anita Diamant's 1997 novel *The Red Tent* struck a chord with readers because it filled a gap in a well-known biblical narrative.¹ The basis for the novel is *Genesis* 34, in which the Hivite Schem rapes Dinah, the daughter of Leah and Jacob, offers to marry her, and is killed by her brothers in retribution. Yet unlike the biblical account, which offers none of Dinah's words or feelings, the novel takes Dinah and her experience as focal points. Diamant was not the first to see poetic potential in this void. In his Latin *planctus* Peter Abelard gave lyric laments in the voices of various characters from the Hebrew Bible. The first of these is his *Planctus Dine filie Jacob*, in which Dinah mourns for Schem and blames her brothers for the injustice shown to him. This poem precludes simple explanation, and in recent years, several critics have presented theories about its meaning and purpose.² In this essay, I want to read Abelard's poem alongside others from the twelfth century and before. This has not yet been done, and my hope is that this investigation will reveal what is typical in Abelard's poem and what sets it apart. In short, Abelard's *planctus* is unique in that it is the first in Latin to explore the complex emotional toll of the rape and its aftermath on Dinah. The poem's inherent arguments about guilt and justice, however, are much more in line with those of the other Latin poetic treatments of the episode. These tend either to sideline Dinah's experience and to sympathize with Schem, or to present his as a cautionary tale. By doing so, they typify what Wendy Hesford called "rape scripts", narratives that normalize non-consensual sex and perpetuate cultural modes that allow it to continue.³ Hesford's work raises questions of hermeneutical ethics concerning the exegetical and philological interpretation of these texts,⁴ which hold Dinah at various distances from discussion of her rape. The worthwhile literary- and cultural-historical exercise of interpreting these works requires prior consideration of their ramifications for victims of real-world sexual violence.⁵

The source text

Before discussing these poems, I would like to look at the source text and some early interpretations of it to better understand the event treated by the poets. The Bible is characteristically terse:

¹ DIAMANT 1997.

² SWEENEY 2016, 107–10; RUYS 2014, 80–83; DAHAN 2008, 255–67; NIGGLI 2007; SCHROEDER 2007, 27–29; SWEENEY 2006, 97–99; RUYS 2006; THIBODEAU 1990; CLARK 1982.

³ HESFORD 1999, 198–202. See also MACKENZIE 2022 and JENKINS 2017.

⁴ FRICKER 2007, 147–75.

⁵ On the ethics of similar work on other Greek and Latin texts, see RICHELIN 1992; KAHN 2005; LIVELEY 2012; SHARON 2014.

1 וַתֵּצֵא דִינָה בִתְ-לֵאָה אֲשֶׁר יָלְדָה לְיַעֲקֹב לְרֵאוֹת בְּכָנוֹת הָאָרֶץ: 2 וַיֵּרָא אֹתָהּ שָׁכֶם בֶּן-חָמוֹר הַחִוִּי נָשִׂיא הָאָרֶץ וַיִּקַּח אֹתָהּ וַיִּשְׁכַּב אִתָּהּ וַיַּעֲנֶה: 3 וַתִּדְּבַק בְּנַפְשׁוֹ בְּדִינָה בִתְ-יַעֲקֹב וַיֶּאֱהַב אֶת-הַנַּעֲרָ וַיְדַבֵּר עַל-לֵב הַנַּעֲרָ: 4 וַיֹּאמֶר שָׁכֶם אֶל-חָמוֹר אָבִיו לֵאמֹר קַח-לִי אֶת-הַיְלָדָה הַזֹּאת לְאִשָּׁה:
(Gen. 34:1–4)

And Dinah, the daughter of Leah, whom she bore for Jacob, went out to see the daughters of the land. And Sichem, son of Hamor the Hivite, the prince of the land, saw her, took her, laid with her, and humiliated her. And his soul clung to Dinah, the daughter of Jacob, and he loved the girl, and he spoke to the heart of the girl. And Sichem spoke to Hamor, his father, saying get me that girl as a wife.⁶

After this, Sichem's family reaches an agreement with Jacob:⁷ Jacob's people may live peacefully in Hivite territory and Sichem may marry Dinah. Before the wedding can take place, however, the Hivites must be circumcised. When the Hivite men are incapacitated by the pain of circumcision, Dinah's brothers, Simeon and Levi, kill them all, take their possessions, and enslave the women and children in revenge for her rape.⁸ Jacob condemns this act and the two brothers do not receive the blessing that his other sons do in *Genesis* 49.

In the passage above, I have translated the word *yay'aneh* as "and he humiliated her" in order to preserve an ambiguity in the Hebrew concerning what Sichem actually did to Dinah. The verb is a form of the stem *'nh*, forms of which range in meaning, but all relate to affliction, bowing down, or the diminution of status.⁹ A survey of all the uses of *'nh* in the *pi'el* stem, as it appears here, shows that while Dinah certainly suffers a lowering of status as a result of having sex with Sichem, the Bible does not state in clear terms that this sex was nonconsensual.

Many uses of the word do refer to cases that would clearly conform to modern notions of rape. For instance, it is applied to the violent gang rape of the woman accompanying the Levite in Judges 19:24 and 20:5 and to Amnon's forceful rape of his half-sister Tamar in 2 Samuel 13:12, 14, 22, 32. Deut. 21:14 establishes that an Israelite may not treat as enslaved a woman whom he has taken captive in war and legally married because he has done this action to her. As the captive woman of this law has no say in what happens to her, her situation fits modern notions of rape, even if Biblical law might see it differently from the cases of the woman in Judges 19 and of Tamar.

In other passages where the word is used, and especially in the prophetic books, it is unclear if the outrage committed is forceful rape, another sexual transgression, or a combination of the two. Ezekiel 22:10 opposes this happening to women while they are menstruating and 22:11 denounces doing it to one's sister. Lamentations 5:11 objects to enslaved men treating the women of Zion in this way. The authors of these works might have envisaged rape, but since every one of these passages also discusses other sexual transgressions, it is impossible to know for sure. The law of Deut. 22:29, which seems to fit Dinah's story, is also ambiguous as to whether the sex described is consensual. It states that a man who has sex with a virgin before she is betrothed must pay her father fifty shekels of silver, marry her, and never divorce her since he has humiliated her *'innah*. This woman's wishes do not bear on the legal ramifications.

⁶ All translations presented are my own.

⁷ Gen. 34:6–17. This is in accord with stipulations given in Ex. 22:15–16 and Deut. 22:23–24, whereby rapists must marry their victims.

⁸ Gen. 34:24–29.

⁹ BROWN 1906 suggests "*humble*, a woman by cohabit" for this specific usage of the *pi'el*.

So far, all the examples of the use of *'nh* in the *pi'el* refer to cases in which a woman is unwilling, or in which her consent is not taken into account. In Deut. 22:24, however, the verb appears in a case where the sex is found not to be coercive, a situation the Bible and subsequent sources elide with one of mutual consent. According to this passage, if a man has sex with a betrothed woman within the city walls, she should be killed with him, since she “did not cry out”.¹⁰ In other words, the woman’s guilt depends on whether she shouted for help. This biblical standard for consent forms the legal difference between rape and adultery in Deut. 22:25–26.¹¹ So, in this passage, the *pi'el* o *'nh* refers to sex that, by the legal standard, is consensual. The only thing that all instances of this word share, then, is that they represent sex that lowers the social status of the woman. *Genesis* 34:2 necessarily states that Sichem diminished Dinah’s social status, but it leaves open the question of whether she wanted to have sex with him.

The Greek *Septuagint* (*LXX*) and its early Latin translations preserved in the *Vetus Latina* did little to clarify this ambiguity. The *LXX* gives καὶ ἐταπείνωσεν αὐτήν for *ay'aneh*, the form discussed above. This verb, ταπεινῶω, has a range of meanings like those of *'nh*, and it appears in the *LXX* in all the aforementioned passages, those in which *pi'el* of *'nh* appears.¹²

The Greek translation shows only a few changes from the Hebrew. In place of the unmarked *lir'oth* “to see,” it gives the marked καταμαθεῖν “to examine closely, to acquire knowledge of”. This represents an interpretive intervention whereby the translators suggest that it was Dinah’s curiosity that led her out of her family’s tent. The *LXX* also makes Sichem a Horite (Χορραῖος) instead of a Hivite.¹³

Augustine’s *Quaestiones in Genesim* transmitted fragments of a *Vetus Latina* translation of the *LXX* for these lines. This Old Latin translation of *Genesis* suggested the same motive for Dinah’s exploration (*ut condisceret filias regionis eius*)¹⁴ that appears in the Greek, and it also made Sichem a Horite (*Chorraeus*).¹⁵ Furthermore, it translates καὶ ἐταπείνωσεν αὐτήν as *et humiliavit eam*, which offers no additional interpretation. This verb *humilio* (also spelled *humilo*), a relative latecomer to the Latin language, appears for the first time in the *Vetus Latina* and has the same connotations as ταπεινῶω.¹⁶ Most of the poets whose works I discuss here, though, did not access the biblical account through its Hebrew, Greek, or Old Latin¹⁷ versions; their text was Jerome’s.

When Jerome wrote his Vulgate translation of *Genesis*, working – as he claims – from the Hebrew, he made some significant changes. The word *vay'aneh*, which appeared in more or less direct translation in the *LXX* and *Vetus Latina*, became *vi opprimens virginem* (“overcoming the maiden by force”). Then, he translated *vaydaber 'al lev hana'ara*, “and he spoke to the heart of the girl” as *tristemque blanditiis delinivit* (“and he soothed the sad girl with flattery”). This is a much more significant intervention than either the *LXX*’s or the *Vetus Latina*’s, both of which mean “and he spoke to her according to the girl’s understanding”. Whereas the Masoretic text, the *LXX*, and the *Vetus Latina* merely say that Sichem had illicit sex with Dinah and then spoke to her in a way that she understood, Jerome wrote that Sichem raped Dinah forcefully and then used

¹⁰ Deut. 22:24: “and you should pelt them with stones and kill them – the girl because she did not cry out in the city.”

¹¹ If it is plausible that a girl’s cries could have gone unheard (i.e. the sex could have been nonconsensual), only the man is to be killed.

¹² Deut. 21:14, 22:24, 29, Jud. 19:24, 20:5, 2 Sam. 13:12, 14, 22, 32, Ezek. 22:10, 11, Lam. 5:11.

¹³ Both peoples are considered descendants of Esau, and the confusion was also made in the *LXX* at Joshua 9.

¹⁴ Aug. *quaest. hept.* 1,108.

¹⁵ Ibid. 1,107. The edition of DE BRUYNE – FRAIPONT 1958 gives *evei* and *evaei* as alternate readings that come, perhaps, from contamination with the Vulgate text.

¹⁶ KLEPL 1941.

¹⁷ Cyprianus Gallus, who did use the *Vetus Latina*, is a notable exception.

flattery to coerce her into accepting what he had done. In other words, the Sichem that was available to most western Christians in the Middle Ages was more violent and manipulative than that of the Hebrew text or of its earlier Greek and Latin translations.

Dinah as a moral *exemplum*

Jerome's translation underscores Sichem's brutality, but some of his exegetical comments censure Dinah instead of her rapist. By focusing on Dinah, Jerome set himself apart from other writers of the third and fourth centuries, including Hippolytus, Ambrose, and Rufinus, who mostly focused on Simeon and Levi's revenge.¹⁸ This might have to do with his general interest in issues concerning women. When he came to Rome in the 380s, Jerome surrounded himself with powerful women whom he served as a spiritual guide.¹⁹ In a famous letter to one of these followers, Eustochium, he draws on Dinah's story to warn her of the dangers of leaving home:

cave ne domum exeas, ne velis videre filias regions alienatae, quamvis fratres habeas patriarchas et Israhel parente laeteris: Dina egressa corrumpitur.

(Hier. *epist.* 22)

Be careful not to leave your house, lest you desire to see the girls of the foreign land, even though your brothers are patriarchs, and you delight in Israel as your father; Dina was seduced after she left home.

Jerome's translation of the biblical text unambiguously sees Sichem's act as violent. Here, Sichem clearly still is the agent of the crime, since Dinah is the subject of the passive *corrumpitur*, but Jerome's implication is that she shares some of the blame: she left the house and so exposed her own vulnerability.

In a later letter to Laeta, a powerful Roman matron, Jerome expressed a similar understanding of Dinah's culpability.²⁰ He tells Laeta that she must keep her daughter in the home to protect her from the temptations of the world. Both letters present Dinah as a moral *exemplum* and her story as a reason why Christian women ought not to leave the house. These are not exegetical texts in a strict sense, but they do offer interpretations of *Genesis* 34 for the purpose of instruction. This interpretation minimizes Sichem's part and lays responsibility for furnishing an opportunity for the rape at Dinah's feet. In both letters, Jerome used forms of the verb *volo* (to desire) to indicate that Dinah actively wanted to venture out to see the Hivite women and so allowed herself to be seduced. In letter 107, this desire is the summit of a rising tricolon of secular dangers that includes drinking from Babylon's golden cup (*bibat de aureo calice Babylonis*). Through his intercessions as a translator and interpreter of the biblical text, Jerome removed all doubt that Dinah's rape was violent, but he also suggested that she brought it on herself by venturing out of doors. As the following examples will show, this was a rape script that came to underlie several poetic adaptations.

¹⁸ Our knowledge of Hippolytus, *De Patriarchis* depends on Armenian and Georgian translations. See GRAFFIN 1954, 61–69; Ambr. *patr.* 3,10–12; Rufin. *patr.* 2,7–8.

¹⁹ KELLY 1975, 91–115.

²⁰ Hier. *epist.* 107.

Cyprianus Gallus's is the oldest surviving poetic treatment of Dinah's episode.²¹ Like those that come after it, it mostly bypasses her experience and elicits sympathy for Sichem. Cyprianus probably wrote during Jerome's era, though we know very little about him.²² His main work is a large-scale versification of *Genesis* through Judges, which depends on the *Vetus Latina* and survives in fragments in only six manuscripts. Despite its seemingly narrow circulation, both Aldhelm and Bede knew and cited the work.²³ In general, Cyprianus stayed close to his source and only occasionally added exegetical or extra-biblical material. His treatment of Dinah may be one such instance. Instead of giving Sichem's name, he probably wrote *Correus*. This is an alternate spelling of the *Vetus Latina*'s *Chorraeus*, which in the oldest manuscript²⁴ was corrupted to the meaningless *cur reus*. While it is possible that Cyprianus meant nothing more than "the Horite," this could be an instance of the *paranomasia* that is typical of late antique Christian poetry.²⁵ The common noun *corrēus* is a rare compound formed from the elements *con* ("together") and *reus* ("a guilty party"), which together means "a partaker in guilt."²⁶ Such a compound would fit this *Chorraeus*,²⁷ since Cyprianus's passage mostly concerns Sichem's crime and punishment. I see two possibilities for potential sharers in his guilt: the prefix *con-* could involve the Hivite men, who do pay the price for their prince's crime; or it could refer to Dinah. If so, this might recall Jerome's position, which at least partially blames Dinah for what Sichem did to her.

Cyprianus's poem does more to soften censure for Sichem and generally portrays him, not Dinah, as the appropriate object of pity. While he initially says Sichem acted wickedly (*improbius*, 1071) and uses a verb of disgrace (*polluit*, 1072) for his deed, his diction does not garner sympathy for Dinah. Rather, the offended party is her male family, and Sichem mitigates his guilt by bringing great gifts (*grandia dona*, 1074). Reproach, then is due not to the rapist, but to Dinah's brothers, who killed the man despite his attempts at redemption. Cyprianus underscored the deception inherent in Simeon and Levi's choice to strike when the Hivites were in pain,²⁸ and suggests that this rightfully deserved their fathers' disapproval.²⁹ Moreover, Cyprianus probably drew language for Jacob's reproof (*natorum ferro doluit haec gesta Iacobus*) from Ovid:³⁰ *tingueret ut ferrum natorum sanguine mater, / concitus a laeso fecit amore dolor* ("The pain

²¹ Cypr. Gall. *gen.* 1068–78.

²² For more on Cyprianus, see SCHMALZGRUBER 2017, 29–37. I will use this name, though it certainly did not actually belong to the poet: "Cyprianus" comes from Carolingian manuscript catalogs and "Gallus" is the invention of Rudolf PEIPER, who in 1891 was the last to edit his whole poem. ERCAM, a department of the UR 4377 of Catholic Theology and Religious Sciences of the University of Strasbourg is overseeing the production of a new critical edition of the *Heptateuchos*, which is unavailable at the time of this publication.

²³ Together, they cite him twenty-five times. See McBRINE 2017, 222–23.

²⁴ Laon, Bibliothèque Municipale 279 IXⁱⁿ.

²⁵ ROBERTS 1989, 16 and 37.

²⁶ LOMMATZSCH 1908.

²⁷ In Carolingian transmission, it was normal for the diphthong *ae* to be written as *e*. The most significant difference between the proper noun *Correus* and the common noun *corrēus* is the length of the *e*, which is long in verse 1071. Cyprianus often did not obey the laws of Classical prosody: he elongated short vowels, for instance writing *platēa* in place of the standard *platēa* in Gen. 639 (for a list of many such examples, see PEIPER 1891, 346–47). Moreover, he often shortened the diphthong *ae* and was generally free with his metrical treatment of proper names (see PEIPER 1891, 344 and 348).

²⁸ Cypr. Gall. *gen.* 1075: *maius qua vulnera fervent*.

²⁹ Ibid. 1078: *infractum foedus socia cum gente*.

³⁰ Ov. *trist.* 2, 387–88. Ludwig Traube gave the name *aetas Ovidiana* to the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, when the Leonine hexameter gave way to Ovidian distichs. See TRAUBE 1911, 113. Because of this, Ovidian influence is often associated with the verse of that era, though it is found in the poetry of the preceding centuries, as well. For an overview, see WHEELER 2004. In late antiquity, Ovid was an important poetic model, second only to Virgil. On late antique Virgilianism and Ovidianism, see HARDIE 2019, 6–31. On the importance of Ovid to late antique biblical versifications, see OH 2018, ROBERTS 2018, FURBETTA 2018, and MORI 2018.

aroused by love betrayed made the mother stain her knife with her childrens' blood"). At this point in *Tristia* 2, Ovid presented Medea as yet another example of how tragedy is always about love.³¹ This is just how Cyprianus presents Dinah's rape: a tragic turn of events spurred on by love (*amatam*, 1071) gone wrong. We learn nothing of Dinah's role, nor of her experience, aside from perhaps her partial complicity; on the other hand, Sichem emerges as a pitiable young man who errs, but gets more in retribution than he deserves.

Another late antique poet, Orientius,³² did even more to win sympathy for Sichem. Only one manuscript of his *Commonitorium* survives,³³ yet Orientius must have held some cachet in the following century, as Venantius Fortunatus mentions him along with other important Christian poets in the proem to his verse *Life of Saint Martin*.³⁴ The *Commonitorium* is a moralizing poem in elegiac couplets, which includes an extensive discussion of various sins and advice on how to avoid committing them. It is here that we find Dinah:

*de sacris, inquam, de sacris percipe libris,
obprobrio quantis turpis amor fuerit.
te Dinae species nimio sub amore ruentem
extinxit, Sichem, cum patre, cum patria.
nam male compressam fratrum pia cura sororem
promittit thalamo, vindicat gladio.*
(Orient. *Comm.* 1,353–58)

I say, see from the sacred, from the holy books how many people base love dishonored. The beauty of Dinah destroyed you Sichem, rushing forward under too much love, just as it destroyed your father, and your fatherland. For the pious care of her brothers promised their wickedly raped sister to your bed, but then avenged her with the sword.

In the lead-up to the passage, Orientius claimed that he would focus on *exempla* from the holy books to help his readers avoid falling prey to temptations like their biblical predecessors. He then addressed Sichem directly and so invited readers to consider themselves as potential Sichems, who were similarly vulnerable to the threats of beauty and love. The *te* that opens line 355 casts Sichem as the tragic object of the sentence and the true victim, whom womanly beauty has destroyed along with his family and people. The parallel half-lines of the pentameter in verse 358 juxtapose the promised marriage bed (*promittit thalamo*) and the sword of vengeance (*vindicat gladio*) that Sichem received instead. This gap between promise and reality suggests that the brothers, even though they acted with *pia cura* ("pious care," 357), treated Sichem more harshly than he deserved. A reader, then, is left thinking that he must remain vigilant against the temptations of lust

³¹ Ov. *trist.* 2,381–82: *tragoedia [...] materiam semper amoris habet.*

³² An Orientius appears in the *Acta Sanctorum* under 1 May: as bishop at Auch he devoted himself to converting the pagans and caring for his flock. Theoderic I sent him to meet Aetius and Litorius as they were advancing on Toulouse. Based on these data and a possible mention in 2,184 to the events of 406 CE, the best guess at the poem's date of composition is roughly 430. See RAPISARDA 1958, 7–12; TOBIN 1945, 2–5. I use the edition of RAPISARDA 1958.

³³ This is the *Codex Ashburnhamensis* or *Turonensis*, the survival of which is lucky as it was once the loot of the famous book thief Guglielmo Libri, who sold it to Lord Ashburnham. The manuscript is now in Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale nouv. acq. lat. 457. A *Codex Aquicinctensis* contained the first book and was copied by Martin Delrio in 1600 before it was lost. On these manuscripts and the poem's editions, see HUDSON-WILLIAMS 1949, 130–31.

³⁴ Ven. For. *Mart.* 1,17: *paucaque perstrinxit florente Orientius ore* ("and Orientius touched upon a few things with blossoming speech"). This proem puts Orientius in the company of Juvenecus, Sedulius, Prudentius, Paulinus, Arator, and Alcimus Avitus.

to avoid the Hivite's ruin. Dinah is relegated to the genitive (*Dinae species*, 355); she merely possesses the beauty that destroyed (*extinxit*, 356) Sichem.

After giving a catalog of other biblical figures (mostly men)³⁵ ruined by lust and beauty, Orientius punctuated the passage with a moralizing *sententia* for his readers. They should keep the many pitfalls of beauty and lust in mind and beware the temptations of the devil.³⁶ These lines also contain an Ovidian allusion in support of Orientius's message.³⁷ He may have drawn *castam sollicitare fidem* from *pudicam / sollicitare fidem*,³⁸ which appears in the seventh book of the *Metamorphoses* in the story of Cephalus and Procris. After Cephalus spurned the advances of the goddess Aurora, she caused him to doubt his wife Procris's fidelity and then disguised him so that he could test it. Appearing as someone else, Cephalus approaches Procris and tries repeatedly and unsuccessfully to seduce her. Finally, by offering lavish gifts, he causes her to waver. In the lines to which Orientius alluded, Cephalus makes his decision to put Procris to the test, a test she will fail. A full-knowing reader³⁹ might have applied to the mind or heart what Ovid seems to say about Procris: that even the most pure and trustworthy can be seduced. Yet unlike Jerome, Orientius is unconcerned with the young Dinahs of his day; he worries about the Sichems, the minds of men that are susceptible to temptation. His allusion to Procris helps describe the minds of Sichem and the others listed in the passage: even the strongest are in danger of seduction. To Orientius, Sichem is the focus of the narrative in *Genesis* 34; Dinah is only important insofar as her beauty gives him an opportunity to fall.

Dinah as the human soul

The Benedictine pope Gregory (*sedit* 590–604) understood Dinah differently than Jerome had done. Since he was less concerned than his predecessors were with heresy, and more interested in the monastic aim of personal unity with God, his interpretation tended toward tropological meanings in the tradition of Origen. In his *Regulae pastoralis liber*, Gregory said that the Dinah who wanders away to see foreign women is the errant soul that neglects its own concerns and takes too much care in those of others.⁴⁰ Sichem, then, is the devil, who corrupts the soul that is concerned with others' business.⁴¹ After the soul has fallen, the devil keeps it from penitence through false reassurance and flattery.⁴² This interpretation offered an alternative to reading *Genesis* 34 as a cautionary tale for women on the dangers of curiosity or as one for men on the dangers of lust. No longer was the focus on women's responsibility to protect their own chastity and to save men from desire. When Dinah was made equivalent to the soul,⁴³ male poets and readers could see themselves as

³⁵ These are David (*Orient. comm.* 1,359–62; 2 Kings 11ff.), Absalom and Amnon (363–66; 2 Kings 13), Solomon (367–72; 3 Kings 11:1ff.), Haman (373; Esther 7), Holofernes (374; Judith 10–13, 11), Samson (375–76; Judges 16), the Israelite who slept with a Midianite woman in Numbers and brought about the wrath of God (377–80; Num. 25 and 31), and the woman in Judges 19 (381–85; Judges 19ff.).

³⁶ *Orient. comm.* 1,397–400.

³⁷ Concerning Ovidian influence, and especially that of the *Ars amatoria*, on the *Commonitorium*, see VESSEY 1999, 165–71.

³⁸ RAPISARDA 1958, 100. The borrowed text comes from *Ov. met.* 7,720–21, though *sollicitare fidem* is a favorite phrase of Ovid's. It also appears at *Ov. am.* 3,1,50; *epist.* 17,6; *met.* 6,463; *fast.* 3,484, but in none of these passages is it as closely associated with a synonym for *pudica*.

³⁹ PUCCI 1998; PELTTARI 2014: 115–60.

⁴⁰ *Greg. M. past.* 3,29: *mens sua studia negligens, actiones alienas curans*.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*: *inventam in curis exterioribus diabolus corrumpit*.

⁴² *Ibid.*: *hostis callidus mentem... securitatis pestiferae blanditiis seducit*.

⁴³ Some exegetes used Gregory's approach while imputing other meanings to Dinah, as well. Isidore and then the great Carolingian masters Alcuin and Hrabanus Maurus read Dinah alternatively as a *figura* for the Church or the Synagogue and as the human soul. For an overview of the history of Christian interpretation of *Genesis* 34, see THIBODEAU 1990, 78–149 and CLARK 1982.

Dinah, and Sichem's violence became something that they too could suffer. This created a parallel approach to Dinah in the poetry of the sixth through twelfth centuries.⁴⁴

In the eleventh century, Marbod (c. 1035–1123) bishop of Rennes wrote his *De raptu Dinae*, a 98-verse commentary on Dinah's rape.⁴⁵ As a poet, Marbod often wrote leonine hexameters that displayed his knowledge of classical verse. He is best known for his *Liber de gemmis*, a verse compendium of lore about precious stones, but he also had an interest in writing moralizing poetry about women. This probably brought him to write his poem on Dinah, which he claimed provided instruction to both monks and nuns.⁴⁶ Marbod's advice to men draws on the Gregorian tradition concerning Dinah, while his instruction to women is in line with Jerome's interpretation.

Marbod openly blamed Dinah for her rape and painted Sichem as a victim, both of Dinah's beauty and of her brothers' violence. He suggested that, had Dinah avoided prying eyes, she would have kept her chastity (*integra mansisset*, 12). Instead, she adorned herself, and allowed herself to be seen as more beautiful than the Hivite women.⁴⁷ Marbod implied that this was why she suffered her fate. Through a heavy-handed metaphor of stoking the flames of lust, Dinah appears to give Sichem hardly any chance not to rape her.⁴⁸ The cruel wounds (*crudelia vulnera*, 18) inflicted in the exchange are not Dinah's, but Sichem's. If he is guilty of anything in this poem, it is not rape, but failure to wait until they were legally married (*impatiensque morae*, 19). Finally, it is Dinah's *levitas* ("frivolity," 22) not his violence, that brings Sichem's downfall. This gets to the Hieronymian moral instruction of his poem:

*ergo cum sit ita, consortia publica vita,
virgo dicata Deo, coelique beanda tropaeo.
quae sedit in cella, cupit esse pudica puella;
admissura mares amat occursus populares.*
(DRD 83–86)

So in situations like this, avoid public fellowship, maiden dedicated to God and destined to be blessed with a heavenly triumph. She who sits in her cell desires to be a chaste girl; she who would let men in loves common encounters.

Just as Jerome warned, Marbod instructed virgins dedicated to God not to leave the safety of their community. Avoiding society, one should sit in her cell, remain chaste, and await her heavenly reward. Marbod took a different approach in his guidance for men. He instructs them to hold to their monastic rule (*legem matris teneat, mandataque patris*, 90) in order to keep their minds from wandering waywardly throughout the world (*ne velut effundi mens nostra per avia mundi*, 89). In these lines, Marbod draws on Dinah's allegorical significance and invites male readers to see her in themselves for the purpose of spiritual instruction.

This approach is even more apparent in the *Liber prefigurationum Christi et Ecclesie* and in Peter Riga's *Aurora*. The former was written in the late eleventh or early twelfth century. In its 2670 hexameters,

⁴⁴ Not much Carolingian poetry concerns Dinah. She appears in a single line by the ninth century poet Milo of Saint Amand as the reason for the downfall of Sichem and Hamor. See MGH, *Poetae*, 3,651. She also makes a brief appearance in a poem attributed to Walter of Châtillon. See WILMART 1937, 333.

⁴⁵ PL 171.1682–84.

⁴⁶ DRD 88: *scripsimus haec per quae sexus doceatur uterque*.

⁴⁷ Ibid. 13–14: *sed dum progreditur, dum forma decora politur / naturae donis sponsas superans regionis*.

⁴⁸ Ibid. 15–16: *materies ligni tanto non defuit igni, / nam princeps terrae nequit haec incendia ferre*.

its anonymous author versified episodes from the Hebrew Bible that he found relevant for the instruction of his fellow monastic brothers. He also included poetic adaptations of exegetical remarks from Isidore, Jerome, Bede, Gregory the Great, and Hrabanus Maurus. The poem survives in one manuscript and did not appear in a modern edition before Greti Dinkova-Bruun's of 2007.⁴⁹

This poem explicitly takes the Gregorian view of Dinah. After summarizing the whole affair in four hexameter verses,⁵⁰ the author explained its allegorical significance: Dinah is the errant soul, too interested in the concerns of others,⁵¹ and Sichem is the devil who lures such a soul into sin⁵² and then deceptively keeps it from penitence.⁵³ The author then suggested that his readers do penance by emulating Simeon and Levi, who eradicated sin without delay.⁵⁴ The *Liber* ignores Dinah's experience and reduces her to a husk that contains a grain of meaning relevant to the spiritual instruction of men.

We see a similar approach in the *Aurora* of Peter Riga (c. 1140-1209).⁵⁵ This massive verse paraphrase covers *Genesis* through Ruth, Kings, Tobias, Daniel, Judith, Esther, Maccabees, the Gospels, Acts, Job, and the Song of Songs, and comprises nearly fifteen thousand verses. Riga's versification had a wide readership in the Middle Ages and survives in more than 440 manuscripts, and his treatment of Dinah is typical of the work. First he summarized the story in four verses,⁵⁶ and then he listed neat allegorical equivalences: Dinah is the carnal men of this world whose hearts wander;⁵⁷ Sichem is the deceivers who participate in schisms;⁵⁸ Simeon and Levi are holy teachers, who cut false dogmas with the sword of Christ.⁵⁹ Like the *Liber prefigurationum*, Riga left no room for Dinah's thoughts on what had happened to her. Instead, he looked beyond Dinah's humanity and reduced her to a shell containing something that to him was more valuable, something his male readers (*quosdam carnales*, 1023) could see in themselves or in their peers. This fits Riga's stated aim, which is "to draw out some allegories from the letter itself, as a nut from its shell".⁶⁰

Whereas Riga's allegorizing tended towards the universal, Peter of Blois,⁶¹ who also took the Gregorian approach to Dinah, applied its teachings to his own poetic persona. Dinah appears in two poems attributed to Peter, *Carmina Burana* 31⁶² and *Olim militaveram*.⁶³ These lyrics have very similar structures and use Dinah in a similar way. In *CB* 31, the speaker confesses to having made a habit of hiring sex workers in his youth.⁶⁴ In *Olim militaveram*, he drew on ancient love elegy's *topos* of *militia amoris* and confessed that,

⁴⁹ DINKOVA-BRUUN 2007.

⁵⁰ *LPCE* 1, 582–85.

⁵¹ Ibid. 586–87: *peccati nostri si negligimus reminisci / scrutantes oculis fratrum uitas aquilinis*,

⁵² Ibid. 588: *insidiis Sathane tunc constat nos patuisse*,

⁵³ Ibid. 589–90: *qui nostros sensus deuirginat irremoratus, / excludit gemitus, ne penituisse uelimus*.

⁵⁴ Ibid. 593–94: *sic nos debemus subvertere crimina prorsus / deperit excessus quiuis, si peniteamus*.

⁵⁵ On Peter Riga and his work, see BEICHNER 1965, xi–lv.

⁵⁶ *Genesis* 1019–22.

⁵⁷ Ibid. 1023–24: *Dina notat quosdam carnales, pectora quorum / sunt uaga*.

⁵⁸ Ibid. 1025–26: *Sichem scismaticos signat, qui carnis amicos / fallere nituntur*.

⁵⁹ *Genesis* 1027–28: *Sanctos... magistros, / qui Christi gladio dogmata falsa secant*.

⁶⁰ Riga's Preface 14–15: *de ipsa littera aliquas allegorias elicere tanquam nucleum de testa*. See BEICHNER 1965, 7.

⁶¹ Most consider the Peter of Blois who lived from c. 1135–1212 to be the only author of note by that name. See, for instance, DRONKE 1976. According to SOUTHERN 1992, a second Peter of Blois of the second half of the twelfth century was responsible for the love poems that circulate under the name.

⁶² Most attribute *CB* 31 to Peter of Blois (for attribution and edition, see SCHUMANN 1974, 77), though TRAILL proposed tentatively that Philip the Chancellor (c. 1160–1236) was its author: see TRAILL 2006a, 10 n. 32; 2006b, 181 n. 50.

⁶³ Edited in DRONKE 1976, 233–34.

⁶⁴ *CB* 31, 3: *nec fraudavi temere / coniugis amplexus; / Dalidam persequere, / ne fraudetur sexus!* On the controversy over and meaning of the third stanza, see TRAILL 2007, 339–41.

regardless of his attempts to overcome the temptations of the flesh, his soul was devoted to desire (*addicta voluptati*, 2a). Yet in both poems, the speaker grows up and changes his ways, in part as a reaction to Dinah's story. In *CB* 31, he recognizes that when the devil should eventually catch up with his wayward soul, his spiritual end would resemble her physical rape.⁶⁵ He then explains the allegorical equivalence: she paid the price for wandering away from home, just as his corrupted heart would have done.⁶⁶ Likewise, in *Olim militaveram*, Dinah's story scares him off his life of revelry.⁶⁷ Just like Dinah, the speaker's soul had been drawn to the processions of this world⁶⁸ and so was in danger of rushing into ruin.⁶⁹ Yet by using Dinah's example, he is able to do what she could not: whereas she gave in to Sichem's seduction, the speaker can break free of his old ways and overcome the devil's temptations.⁷⁰ Like the other poems that take Dinah to be an equivalent to the human soul, this one also leaves little room for her personhood or experience. It blames her for her rape so that Peter could claim responsibility for his persona's sinful past. These lyrics, in which Peter of Blois used the biblical narrative as a mirror for the speaker's life, provide a useful background for a discussion of Peter Abelard's *planctus*.

Peter Abelard and the *Planctus Dine filie Jacob*

All the poems under consideration so far take Dinah either as a moral *exemplum* or as a mystical equivalent for the human mind or soul. Both types typify rape scripts that blame Dinah, and the former attempts to exonerate Sichem. The *planctus Dine filie Jacob* of Peter Abelard (born c. 1079) makes similar judgements, but achieves something none of the other poems do.⁷¹ First, Abelard turned away from explicit allegory and took the historical approach to scripture that was popular in his lifetime.⁷² Second, he made Dinah the poem's speaker. Here, she reacts to her rape and the disgrace it has brought on her and her family (1–10); she voices regret for exposing herself to danger when she went to see the foreign women (7–10); she mourns for Sichem, whom she has grown to love (11–30); and she laments the injustice her brothers showed him, especially since he acted honorably in offering marriage and was too young to deserve death (25–30). This poem explores the emotional toll of the event on her and her judgment of those involved. It is the only one that really humanizes Dinah and gives her a voice. She uses that voice to express real emotion: grief, anguish, remorse, and anger.⁷³ She also uses it to plea for mercy for her rapist. When placed beside the poems discussed above, Abelard's arguments resemble those of the poets who used Dinah as a moral *exemplum*, insofar as he also blamed Dinah and defended Sichem.

⁶⁵ Ibid. 31, 5: *dum considero, / quid Dine / contigerit, / finem confero / rapine.*

⁶⁶ Here I accept David TRAILL's *quid luerit* ("for which she paid atonement") in stanza 5 in place of *quis fuerit*, which stands in the Benediktbeuern manuscript (Munich, Bayerische Staatsbibliothek, Clm 4660). *CB* 31,5: *vix evaserit / mens corrupta fine, / diu quam contraxerit, / maculam sentine.*

⁶⁷ *OM* 4: *me deterret Dine raptus, / cuius forma Sichem captus.*

⁶⁸ Ibid. 1: *olim militaveram / pompis huius seculi.*

⁶⁹ Ibid. 3: *sic per proditorias / blandicias / insidias / procurant, / et in mortem anime / miserrime / nequissime / coniurant.*

⁷⁰ Ibid. 5. The implication in this final stanza is that the reader should do as the speaker has done: *nodos abrumpe veteres, ut superes hostis temptamenta.*

⁷¹ I use the edition of DRONKE 1970, 146.

⁷² DAHAN 2008, 264. For the importance of approach in Abelard's poem, see CLARK 1982, 122–23. CLARK highlights Jean de Fécamp and Bernard of Clairveaux as two important exegetes who, by seeking the historical sense of scripture, allow Dinah to emerge as a personality rather than a type.

⁷³ See the commentary of THIBODEAU 1990, 150–245; DRONKE 1968, 54. Against this view, see RUYS 2014, 80–83.

Such a verdict rings truer in the voice of Dinah, whom Abelard chose as the speaker and ultimate judge in the case. Lucille Thibodeau stressed the judicial nature of poem and the importance for Abelard of the etymology of Dinah's name, which he knew from Jerome to have come from the Hebrew root meaning "to act as a judge".⁷⁴ In the first ten lines, Dinah judges herself: it was worthless for her to go out to see the foreign women and their games. Her curiosity put her in danger. The refrain repeats that she is to blame for exposing herself and so has become the greatest stain (*macula summa*, 5) on her eminent family (*generis sancti*, 5). In the next six lines, she weighs Sicheu's guilt in terms that are parallel to her own self-judgment. She is the stain on her people; he is the ruin of his (*in exicium nate tui generis*, 11). Her shame is put in the context of her ancestors, his is in the context of their progeny (*nostris in obprobrium [...] posteris*, 12). Just as Dinah's venture to see the Hivite women did her no good (*quid alienigenas iuvabat me cernere?*, 8), Sicheu's circumcision was useless to him (*frustra circumcisio*, 14). The clearest parallels come in the refrains: *Ve mihi misere, per memet prodite!* (7,10) and *Ve tibi misero, per temet perditio!* (13,16). Abelard's careful balancing of Dinah's judgement on herself and on Sicheu suggest that both are victims, and both are to blame.

Then in the final two sections of the poem, Abelard's Dinah tries to exonerate Sicheu. With its biblical parallelism, the line *coactus me rapere, mea raptus spetie* ("forced to rape me and ravished by my beauty," 17) underscores that the action of *rapio* happens to both parties. Sicheu was therefore a victim, too. Then, Dinah explains why Sicheu deserved a more lenient sentence: he was too young to know better (*levis etas iuvenilis*, 25), he offered marriage (*ducta peregrina*, 28), and he is a royal match (*princeps terre*, 28). Recent interest in the poem has offered explanations for why Abelard might have wanted his Dinah to argue on Sicheu's behalf.

One approach is predicated on undeniably strong parallels between *Genesis* 34 and Abelard's own life.⁷⁵ When Abelard was in his mid-30s and teaching in Paris, he became the personal tutor to the much younger Heloise,⁷⁶ a niece of the powerful Fulbert, canon of Notre-Dame. Abelard began a sexual relationship with Heloise and she gave birth to a son, whom they named Astralabius.⁷⁷ Abelard then married Heloise, which appeased her uncle, but tensions remained, and when Abelard put her in a nearby convent, Fulbert was irate and sent men to castrate Abelard. He became a monk and had Heloise become a nun. Like Sicheu, Abelard developed an illicit sexual relationship with a young girl of high status, he offered marriage to appease her family, his genitals were cut, and he suffered a kind of humiliation that was akin to death.⁷⁸ Some have seen an agenda of self-rehabilitation in Abelard's choice to have Dinah argue lenience for Sicheu.⁷⁹ Joy Schroeder, for instance, heard Abelard argue his own innocence when Dinah, "the violated maiden excuses her attacker, blames herself, and reproaches those who enacted vengeance".⁸⁰ Juanita

⁷⁴ THIBODEAU 1990, 204–23.

⁷⁵ DRONKE 1968, 54–55. Recently, Martin Irvine has underscored the how much of a public crisis Abelard's castration was, and Joy Schroeder, highlighting the highly rhetorical nature of this letter, has cast doubts on its utility as a record of what happened. See IRVINE 1997, 89–106 and SCHROEDER 2007, 249 n. 81.

⁷⁶ Heloise's age at the time of her sexual relationship with Abelard is contested. RADICE 1974, 16 gives the traditional younger age of "about seventeen", while WARD – CHIVAROLI 2000, 58 suggest that she was in her twenties.

⁷⁷ This is sometimes spelled Astrolabius.

⁷⁸ The story of Abelard's castration was well-known in his time. His former teacher, Roscelin of Compiègne, of whom he had run afoul, suggested in a letter to him, that his castration had reduced him to the status of a nothing: *sed forte Petrum te appellari posse ex consuetudine mentieris. certus sum autem, quod masculini generis nomen, si a suo genere deciderit, rem solitam significare recusabit* (But perhaps you lie when you say that I can call you Peter, as is customary. I am sure, however, that when a noun of the masculine gender falls away from its gender, it no longer means what it used to mean). See IRVINE 1997, 91–92.

⁷⁹ CLARK 1989, 123–24.

⁸⁰ SCHROEDER 2007, 29.

Feros Ruys agreed that Abelard sought to exonerate himself in the poem,⁸¹ but she also saw it as a particular kind of self-promotion. By emphasizing Sichem's desirability as a match⁸² and their non-biblical offspring (*nostris... posteris*, 12),⁸³ Abelard may have been suggesting that, like Sichem, he too maintained his masculinity even after his mutilation.⁸⁴ This would then be one more attempt towards the "remasculinization" that Martin Irvine thinks Abelard tried to achieve in his writings between c. 1132–1140.⁸⁵ The parallels between the lives of Abelard and Sichem cannot have eluded the poet, but Peter Dronke's estimation is probably right:⁸⁶ there must be more to it than a veiled account of Abelard's life.

Other recent critics have agreed with Dronke. Gilbert Dahan argued that the *planctus* is a sort of midrashic treatment of the *Genesis* account made possible by Abelard's rejection of the allegorical in favor of the historical,⁸⁷ and that parallels with events in the poet's life provide a deep undercurrent of personal emotion, but should not be interpreters' main point of focus.⁸⁸ Lucille Claire Thibodeau made a similar argument,⁸⁹ tracing a progression in Dinah's grief that leads from a self-centered to a universal concern. By this reading, the poem's primary aim is to defend neither Sichem nor Abelard, but to portray Dinah's carefully paced "ethical or moral conversion".⁹⁰ Eileen Sweeney saw the poem as much more ambiguous in its ending. She approached its interpretation from the perspective of Abelard's moral philosophy, which emphasizes self-examination and focuses "more on intention and commitment than on eternal acts or rules".⁹¹ Through Dinah's grief, then, Abelard exposed the kind of complexities one can explore through self-examination: such judgment is messy, and Dinah is a victim both of Sichem's actions and of her own. Sweeney also saw similarities between this approach and "the model of analysis and exposure of conflict developed by Abelard in the *Sic et non*".⁹² In other words, Abelard's Dinah presents conflicting arguments for her own victimhood and for Sichem's, and then leaves it to the reader to judge. These interpretations helpfully complicate traditional readings of the poem. They do not deny that Abelard's biography shaped his take on *Genesis* 34, but they consider what the poem could have done beyond rehabilitating the poet's persona.

These interpretations nevertheless omit some important considerations. First, it is important to remember that Abelard's poem is part of a collection. Ruys saw Abelard in the poem's Sichem, but she built her interpretation on the relation of the *planctus Dine* to the other five laments on themes from the Hebrew Bible that were copied with it.⁹³ In her view, this collection builds from Dinah's dysfunctional and highly gendered love towards an ideal, spiritual one, as illustrated in David's lament over Jonathan and Saul. This, she argued, was the type of love that Abelard hoped to share with Heloise, independent of the "dramas of

⁸¹ RUYS 2014, 82–83: "Abelard's Dinah is not a young woman purporting to speak from her heart and lament her lost love, but a man using a female figure to think through and offer justifications for events earlier in his life."

⁸² This *iuvēnis* ("young man," 29) is a *princeps terre* ("prince of the land," 28).

⁸³ This could refer either to Asenath, Dinah's child in Jewish tradition, or to young Astralabius.

⁸⁴ RUYS 2006, 6.

⁸⁵ IRVINE 1997.

⁸⁶ DRONKE 1968, 54–55.

⁸⁷ DAHAN 2008, 263–64.

⁸⁸ Ibid. 267.

⁸⁹ THIBODEAU 1990, 238–40.

⁹⁰ THIBODEAU 1990, 227–29.

⁹¹ SWEENEY 2016, 109.

⁹² Ibid. 99.

⁹³ Most scholars have thought the *planctus* were meant for Heloise alone, though some saw them as liturgical texts. See MEYER 1890, 357–74, whose conclusions led DREVES 1905 to include the poems in *Analecta Hymnica* 48: 142, 223–32; LAURENZI 1911, 18–20 and 52–60; VECCHI 1951, 13–17 and 29.

physical embodiment".⁹⁴ Whether or not it makes sense to read such conclusions back into Abelard's biography, Ruys's work is helpful for setting the poem in its immediate literary context.

Now I would like to place Abelard's work in a different context, aside the other Latin poems concerning *Genesis* 34, in order to understand which of his choices already existed in the poetic-exegetical koine and which represented his own intervention. Interpretations that lean heavily on comparison to Abelard's life tend to focus on the poem's censure of Dinah and defense of Sichem. Analysis of other Latin poems about Dinah, however, reveal that these could have been natural choices for any well-informed Christian poet. All of the other poems under consideration blame Dinah in some way. Moreover, Cyprianus, Orientius, and Marbod defended Sichem. Only Peter Riga, the *Liber prefigurationum*, and Peter of Blois, who took Sichem as a type for the devil, did nothing to rehabilitate the Hivite. Abelard, then, could have chosen to blame Dinah and to present a mixed appraisal of Sichem because these were conventional positions to take. Other aspects of his poem, though, were less conventional and so merit a closer look.

Abelard's is the only work to take Dinah as its speaker and to put the events of *Genesis* 34 in such heavily conflicting terms. Before Abelard, the *planctus* was an established genre,⁹⁵ in which a poet commemorated an important contemporary person. His innovation was to focus on biblical figures instead of contemporary ones.⁹⁶ It is worth asking why Abelard chose Dinah as his speaker. If he began by choosing *Genesis* 34 as the material for a lament, it would have been intuitive to set it in Dinah's voice.⁹⁷ Alternatively, the desire to cast her as a speaker could well have been the motivating factor in his choice of source text. Abelard was interested in matters concerning women,⁹⁸ and such a choice could relate to this interest, but Ruys read no particularly feminine point of view in the poem.⁹⁹ Whatever Abelard's motivation was for choosing Dinah as his speaker, analysis of how paradox, and the related features of antithesis and oxymoron,¹⁰⁰ suffuse the poem can help deduce its meaning.

These features underpin the poem's opening, in which Dinah grieves her own situation and blames herself for it. She is both the offspring of Abraham (*Abraha proles*, 1), the first to circumcise himself,¹⁰¹ and the plunder of an uncircumcised man (*incircumcisi viri rapina*, 3).¹⁰² Despite her descent from the eminent blood of the patriarchs (*patriarcharum sanguine clara*, 2), she becomes the loot of an unclean person (*hominis spurci facta sum preda*, 4). She leaves her holy clan (*generis sancti*, 5) to visit an enemy one (*plebis adverse*, 6) and at their *ludis* ("games," 6) she is *illusa* ("humiliated," 6). Abelard underscored this paradox by paronomasia, using derivatives of *ludo* for both the Hivites' festivals and her attack. He did something similar with the dual meanings of *cognoscere* in line 9: *quam male sum cognita volens has cognoscere!* ("how wickedly was I known when I wanted to get to know these [Hivite] women!"). Abelard's predominance of paradoxical expressions underscores Dinah's perplexity at her situation.

⁹⁴ RUYS 2006, 17.

⁹⁵ See COHEN 1958.

⁹⁶ WEINRICH 1969, 304.

⁹⁷ She survives the episode, while Sichem does not. Alternatively, Abelard could have summoned a communal speaker as he did in the *Planctus virginum* and the *Planctus Israel* (see RUYS 2014, 71–74), or he could have chosen a less intuitive alternative to mourn Sichem, such as the Hivite women or Dinah's brothers after they lost their father's blessing.

⁹⁸ Whether or not Abelard evinced some kind of medieval feminism is controversial and beyond the scope of this article. For his views on women, see among others, BLAMIRE 1997; NEWMAN 1990; McLAUGHLIN 1972.

⁹⁹ RUYS 2014, 80–83.

¹⁰⁰ This cluster of devices is also characteristic of late antique Christian Latin poetry. See HARDIE 2019, 163–87, following ROBERTS 1989.

¹⁰¹ Gen. 17:23.

¹⁰² Who would also circumcise himself, but in vain (*frustra*, v. 14).

The second part of the poem, in which Dinah laments Sichem's fate, also hinges on these devices. Sichem is both born to destroy those who bore him (*Sichem, in exitium nate tui generis*, 11), and produced as a disgrace to those whom he produced (*nostris in obprobrium perpes facte posteris*, 12). Even though he circumcises himself, Sichem cannot remove the foreskin of his own disgrace (*frustra circumcisio... non valens infamie tollere prepucium*, 14–15). Further etymological wordplay underscores paradoxical nature of the rape itself: Sichem is *raptus* ("ravished," 17) by Dinah's beauty, and so is forced to rape her (*coactus me rapere*, 17).¹⁰³ In this way, Sichem's situation is as perplexing as Dinah's.

In the third part of the poem, Dinah tries to make sense of her brothers' reaction. Clearly any judge would have ruled in Sichem's favor (18), but Simeon and Levi still kill him (19). They are at once cruel and pious (*crudeles et pii*, 20) and slaughter both the innocent and the guilty (*innocentes coequastis in pena nocenti*, 21) in one fell swoop (*in eodem facto*, 20). Dinah enumerates reasons why it would have been just to spare Sichem,¹⁰⁴ but her just outcome never materialized. Abelard's phrase *quovis... iudicio* ("by any judgement whatsoever," 18),¹⁰⁵ his use of the verb *debut* ("should," 26), and the gerundive phrase *lenienda fuit* ("should have been lessened," 27) all point to this gap between justice and reality.

The refrains that punctuate this poem drive home the paradox of its tragedy. At first Dinah laments her own fate, which she attributes to her decision to expose herself (*per memet prodite*, 7 and 10). Then she laments Sichem's, whom she accuses of destroying himself (*per temet perduto*, 13 and 16). The same event brings both to ruin, and both are to blame. Abelard underscored their complicity through his choice to make their refrains lexically and rhythmically parallel. The final words are nearly the same in spelling, except for the exchange of *per-* for *pro-*, and the metathesis of *e* and *o* sounds. Abelard's choice to rely on paradox, antithesis, and oxymoron in Dinah's lament achieves at least two things. First, it draws out the complexity of inner strife that one can investigate through the kind of introspection that Sweeney has discussed.¹⁰⁶ Second, it highlights the kind of helplessness and tragedy that can come from sexual love, as Ruys argued.¹⁰⁷ That this poem has more to offer than a true-life acquittal of its author is clear, especially after considering its place in the contexts of the collection and the other poems that treat Dinah's rape.

Conclusion

Genesis 34 omits Dinah's perspective and leaves difficult interpretive questions. Since antiquity, exegetes responded by filling in gaps and moralizing, but Dinah's voice rarely emerged. Interpreters minimized her experience and created rape scripts from her story that either turned her into a moral *exemplum* or made her into a *figura* for the human soul. In late antiquity and the Middle Ages, poetry stood aside prose as a powerful guide in faith to medieval audiences,¹⁰⁸ but there has been no systematic study of the numerous surviving Latin poetic interactions with the rape of Dinah. This has been my goal. In examining works from late antiquity through the twelfth century, I have found some patterns in poetic approaches to Dinah's story.

¹⁰³ Marbod makes a similar point in *DRD* 15–16 (see above).

¹⁰⁴ These include the *amoris impulsio* (force of love, 23); *culpe satisfactio* (reparations for his crime, 23); *levis etas iuvenilis* (foolish youth, 25); the honor of offering to marry her, despite her being a foreigner (*princeps terre ducta peregrina*, 28). Once again Abelard suggested paradox through etymological wordplay, claiming that his impaired judgement (*minusque discreta*, 25) deserves a lighter sentence from those who can judge (*minus a discretis debuit in pena*, 26).

¹⁰⁵ Of course, except for the crucial judgement of Simeon and Levi.

¹⁰⁶ SWEENEY 2016.

¹⁰⁷ RUYS 2006; RUYS 2014.

¹⁰⁸ DINKOVA-BRUUN 2008.

Most blame Dinah in some way for her rape, and many try to win sympathy for Sichem. Those that take Gregory's approach to the biblical passage focus on Dinah, but only insofar as she can function as an allegorical container for a more valuable meaning. Abelard's *planctus*, though, was different. It was the first work to give Dinah a voice. The fact that this is such a remarkable poem becomes clearer when it is set against its predecessors and the others of its day.

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Sexual Violence Against Men in the Bible¹

CHRIS GREENOUGH

Introduction

What does the Bible have to do with sexual violence against men? The Bible is a text which holds crucial importance in the faith traditions of Judaism and Christianity. Aside from its function in religious life, it holds a certain import in public life – people “swear on the Bible” in common parlance and literally swear oaths to truth-telling in court and legal settings. John Barton notes how “this does not necessarily mean that people read the Bible very much: it is an icon rather than an object of study”.² Given its leverage as a cultural icon, people are often shocked to learn that the Bible contains lengthy accounts of violence in both of its testaments. Biblical scholar David Clines observes how “on average, there are more than six instances of violence on every page of the Hebrew Bible, including more than one of divine violence”.³ There are passages that narrate harrowing and shocking experiences, including war, murder and sexual violence.

Critical studies into sexual violence experienced by men remain relatively scarce compared to scholarship exploring the rape and sexual violation of women. This is undoubtedly due to the fact that women experience sexual violence on a much greater scale than men. Indeed, a focus on male victims of sexual violence does not seek to deter conversation away from female victims, but rather to draw on the same toxic elements of patriarchy, power and toxic masculinity that underpin rape cultures. As I will argue, male gender performativity and social expectations of “real” men are so historically and culturally ingrained that we can trace back examples in the Bible itself. Toxic masculinity, generated through patriarchy, heteronormativity and misogyny, is at play in the Bible.

The flourishing critical examination of studies exploring the Bible, religion and rape culture can be seen as a response to the urgent need of such scholarship in contemporary contexts.⁴ Yet, it would be highly misleading to attribute the surge in scholarship to the #MeToo movement, as feminist biblical scholars have been exploring rape culture for quite some time. Just some iconic examples of such work worthy of note include Phyllis Trible’s influential book, *Texts of Terror: Literary Feminist Readings of Biblical Narratives*,⁵ in which she explores the tragic stories of four women in the Hebrew Bible: Hagar, Tamar, an unnamed concubine, and the daughter of Jephthah. J. Cheryl Exum resists androcentric readings and instead goes in search of the fragmented texts of women’s stories in *Fragmented Women: Feminist Subversions of Biblical*

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² BARTON 2019, 6.

³ CLINES 2018, 3.

⁴ The Shiloh Project is a hub of scholarship and practical activities that explore religion, rape culture and the Bible. For more information, see www.shilohproject.blog.

⁵ TRIBLE 1984.

Narratives.⁶ Caroline Blyth explores the sexual violation of Dinah in *The Narrative of Rape in Genesis 34: Interpreting Dinah's Silence*.⁷ Likewise, Susanne Scholz's *Sacred Witness: Rape in the Hebrew Bible*⁸ critically confronts biblical stories of rape. More recently, and in light of #MeToo, we see the publication of a three-volume series exploring interdisciplinary, biblical and Christian perspectives, entitled *Rape Culture, Gender Violence, and Religion*⁹ and Johanna Siebert's *Rape Myths, the Bible, and #MeToo*.¹⁰ My own book, *The Bible and Sexual Violence Against Men*,¹¹ to my knowledge, is the first book dedicated exclusively to an exploration of sexual violence against men and the Bible.

One charge levied at work such as this would be an accusation that it commits the inexcusable sin of anachronism in biblical studies – that my reading of the biblical texts moves away from the authors' original intentions or ancient contexts in which they were written. I am less concerned with speculating on authorial intentions or anticipated meanings, but as a contemporary sociologist, I am interested in how the Bible functions, operates and holds status and an authority of its own in the contemporary world in which we live. Its use, function and impact in contemporary society form the basis for this article. Similarly, Caroline Blyth observes how biblical texts reflect the attitudes, contexts and experiences of the communities in which they were written, but she highlights how “they have the potential to validate and endorse these same ideologies, values, and assumptions within the communities in which they are read”.¹²

In this article, I argue how sexual violence is systemic, and while men are often perpetrators, they are also victims. A secondary aim is to highlight how all sexual violence – including assaults against men – is grounded in misogyny. As will be discussed, in the biblical accounts of the ancient world, the submissive sexual position is associated with women and is viewed as undesirable for men, as women's status was lower than that of males. To be forced to take up this position through sexual violence threatens both masculinity and status. Accordingly, sexual violence functions as a conduit for male competition and a tool to uphold patriarchy. This article is organised into three short sections. The first is concerned with exploring shame and stigma surrounding the theme of abuse against men, alongside feminist research that has paved the foundations in this area. Next, attention turns to the Hebrew Bible specifically: I examine what can be read as actual cases of sexual violence against men. The concluding section confronts one contentious issue which is of vital importance when exploring sexual violence against men in the Bible: the stripping of Jesus at his crucifixion.

The shame and stigma of sexual abuse against men

Hegemonic masculinity is a practice that gives status and authority to a man's dominant position in society, to the exclusion of women and other marginalised masculinities, including bisexual and gay men, as well as queer and transgender people. Raewyn Connell's extensive contributions to the study of hegemonic masculinity notes how it is socially, culturally and politically institutionalised, and regulated by ridicule, intimi-

⁶ EXUM 2019.

⁷ BLYTH 2010.

⁸ SCHOLZ 2010.

⁹ BLYTH – COLGAN – EDWARDS 2018.

¹⁰ STIEBERT 2019.

¹¹ GREENOUGH 2021.

¹² BLYTH 2010, 7.

dation and violence.¹³ Hegemonic masculinity creates social rules by which men are expected to perform masculinity, and men who fall foul of these standards are emasculated. Furthermore, there is undeniably a culture of stigma associated with sexual abuse against men. At least one in six men have been sexually abused or assaulted; the charity “1in6” use the statistic to denote men’s “unwanted sexual experiences”, noting how many men do not want or are not ready to label such experiences as sexual abuse or assault.¹⁴ Such toxic cultures of boyhood and masculinity mean that male victims tend not to see or report their abuse as sexual. The late, great bell hooks observed how men’s emancipation is actually part of feminism too, as men are also harmed by normative gender roles and patriarchy.¹⁵

There are a number of depictions and enactments of hegemonic masculinity in the Bible. In David Clines’ lecture entitled “The Scandal of a Male Bible”, he uncovers how masculine performativity is constantly at play throughout biblical texts, where male values are upheld and any deviation from these social scripts has negative consequences for the men involved. The dominant culture of masculinity sets out narrowly defined social and cultural expectations of manhood. The rules for being a man are learnt from an early age, then are enforced and regulated through microaggressions, bullying and shame. Clines proposes that the male values bolstered by biblical texts include strength, violence and killing, physical size, honour, holiness, womanlessness, totality thinking, and binary thinking. Clines offers numerous examples of how these values are played out by biblical men.¹⁶ There is congruence here with the similar set of male characteristics offered by Susan Haddox, who names the following masculine attributes: military might, bodily integrity, honor, virility, provisioning and spatiality.¹⁷ In relation to men being victims of sexual violence, Haddox’s analysis of bodily integrity epitomises the cultural anxiety regarding men as victims of sexual assault. Haddox states:

Because the appearance of emasculation creates anxiety about a loss of power and prestige, males in power, or aspiring to power, strongly assert their dominance in defending their bodies from penetration or other abuse. While asserting one’s role as the active partner in heterosexual intercourse was necessary, it was far more important in homosexual relations. The insertive partner can maintain or even increase his masculinity, because he is penetrating another man, but the masculinity of the passive partner is compromised. The passive partner loses status by being placed in the female position.¹⁸

In ancient Israelite culture, relationships and activities that we would today associate with the term “heterosexuality” were prioritised. In ancient Judaism, human masculinity was associated with progeny, as men received the divine instruction to multiply (Genesis 1:28). The metaphors of marriage and sexuality are replete in the Hebrew Bible, with God as the husband, Israel as the wife. Howard Eilberg-Schwartz problematises the relationship between ancient men and the male deity, noting how men become feminised as wives of God. Eilberg-Schwartz argues that the rituals of the ancient Israelites were intended to suppress any homosexual urges:

¹³ CONNELL 1995.

¹⁴ www.1in6.org.

¹⁵ HOOKS 2000.

¹⁶ CLINES 2015.

¹⁷ HADDOX 2016.

¹⁸ HADDOX 2016, 180.

The denial of homoeroticism takes two significant forms: a prohibition against depicting God (veiling the body of God) and the feminization of men. By imagining men as wives of God, Israelite religion was partially able to preserve the heterosexual complementarity that helped to define the culture. But this also undermined accepted notions of masculinity.¹⁹

Heterosexuality is core to hegemonic masculinity, in ancient and contemporary contexts. Therefore, there is no clear, neat, binary distinction between ancient and contemporary norms of masculinity; to attempt to segregate them into two organised categories would erroneously rupture the lineage of patriarchal and toxic masculine norms that have transferred from historical cultures to today. More notably, an attempt to explain ancient norms of masculinity as grounded exclusively in their own time and contexts elides their evolution into contemporary settings. In assessing the role of hegemonic masculinity in perpetuating sexual violence against women, Barbara Thiede puts this astutely:

[T]he biblical hegemonic masculinity we encounter in the Hebrew Bible is not so very foreign to us [...] If we assess biblical hegemonic masculinity and sexual violence against women as phenomena of their time (which they were, of course), without judgement or censure, we have *de facto* agreed to ignore them in our own”.²⁰

For me, the task of reading ancient texts with contemporary eyes allows for a more holistic critical engagement with biblical texts, and speaks back to sexual violence and rape culture in the social and cultural worlds in which we live today. Now, my attention turns to exploring sexual violence against men in the Hebrew Bible specifically.

Sexual violence against men in the Hebrew Bible

(A) Joseph and Potiphar’s wife (Genesis 39)

In Genesis 39, Potiphar, an Egyptian who is one of Pharaoh’s officials, is master to Joseph. The narrator emphasises three times how Joseph was put in charge of the household (v. 4, 5 and 6). His looks draw attention – “Now Joseph was well-built and handsome” (v. 6)²¹ – and his master’s wife asks him to come to bed with her. Joseph resists, displaying his reserve and the mastery of his own sexual urges, noting how to do that would be to wrong his master and God (v. 9). While Joseph resists, Potiphar’s wife persists: “She spoke to Joseph day after day, he refused to go to bed with her or even be with her” (v. 10).²² In verse 11, she makes a pass at Joseph, again asking him to go to bed with her; then, she catches his cloak in his hand and retains it. In verse 14, Joseph is falsely accused of making sexual advances at Potiphar’s wife. When Potiphar learns of this, he is enraged and puts Joseph in prison. Potiphar’s wife breaks gender expectations, and in her pursuit of Joseph takes the active role usually reserved for men (compare, for example, with David’s infatuation with Bathsheba).

The reception of this text often commends Joseph for his self-restraint, sexual morality and control, rather than portraying him as a victim of sexual assault and false rape allegations.²³ The story can be therefore interpreted as a scene that depicts the importance of chastity, focusing on Joseph’s virtue rather than Potiphar’s wife’s crime. Yet, the nature of abuse is twofold: the wife’s persistence in lavishing unwanted

¹⁹ EILBERG-SCHWARTZ 1996, 37.

²⁰ THIEDE 2022, 5.

²¹ וְיֹסֵף יָפֶה-וְתָאֵר וְיִפְהַ מְרָאָה All English translations are from the New International Version (NIV).

²² וַיְהִי כִּדְבַרָּה אֱלֵי-יֹסֵף יוֹם יָגוֹם וְלֹא-שָׁמַע אֵלָיָהּ לְשֹׁכֵב אֶצְלָהּ לְהִנּוֹת עִמָּהּ:

²³ LEVINSON 1997.

sexual attention on Joseph and her false allegations of attempted assault against her when her advances are rebuffed. The unwanted sexual attention is further exacerbated in the power relationship, as Joseph is enslaved by Potiphar and is considered the property of the household.

Johanna Stiebert offers a balanced critique of the portrayal of characters in Genesis 39, drawing on scholarship that has attempted to redeem Potiphar's wife's actions, and noting how her ethnicity as an Egyptian has been used to malign her. Stiebert discusses scholars' tendencies to draw attention to Potiphar's infertility to justify the actions of his wife.²⁴ She furthermore compares Joseph's good looks with the stories of Sarah and Bathsheba whose beauty renders them vulnerable to sexual assault, while also making them sympathetic victims. More importantly, Stiebert's astute linguistic analysis of Genesis 39 creates echoes with 2 Samuel 13: the rape of Tamar. Not only does Genesis 39 demonstrate distinct abuse of power, but the scene is also overlain with racist assumptions about the sexual dangers posed by foreign men, as Potiphar's wife refers to Joseph as "the Hebrew". Joseph, therefore, is sexually and culturally "othered".

One of the myths of masculinity is that a man is "lucky" to receive such unwanted sexual attention, and if he does not respond to it, then his heterosexuality and masculinity are questionable. Sexual experiences with girls and women, especially older women, are a way of manifesting "real" manhood. Joseph's rejection of Potiphar's wife's advances, and his subsequent punishment for her false allegations, serve as an example of an abusive, coercive and exploitative sexual experience. This in itself can lead to a diminished capacity for trust and intimacy, as well as further emotional and psychological disturbances – which, in Joseph's case, could be further enhanced by his imprisonment.

Following Joseph's imprisonment, what happened to Potiphar's wife? There is no immediate consequence to her actions: no punishment whether familial, legal or divine. Readers note how Potiphar's wife has no name of her own, she is referred to as property of her husband. Joseph is not the only victim of her crime, but her betrayal to her husband is also a side product of this transgression.

(B) The Attempted Rape of Men (Genesis 19; Judges 19)

Genesis 19 narrates the story of Sodom and Gomorrah, which has been more broadly used to discuss religious institutions' disavowing of homosexuality than to examine the attempted rape of men. In the narrative, two angels arrive in Sodom; Lot meets them and convinces them to stay with him and eat with him. (vv. 1–3). Before they go to bed, all the men from the city, of all ages, come to Lot's house and surround it (v. 4). "They called to Lot, 'Where are the men who came to you tonight? Bring them out to us so that we can have sex with them'" (v. 5).²⁵ Lot goes outside to speak with them, and shutting the door behind him, he pleads with the men: "Don't do this wicked thing" (v. 7).²⁶ He offers up his two virgin daughters instead, saying "let me bring them out to you, and you can do what you like with them. But don't do anything to these men, for they have come under the protection of my roof" (v. 7).²⁷ When the men persist at the door, the two angels tell Lot to get everyone out of his house so they will destroy the place (v. 8). The next morning, Abraham is witness to the smoking cities that have been destroyed.

Judges 19:22–24 tells an almost parallel story of attempted male-male rape, in which a woman is brought in as a bargaining tool in exchange for protection of the men. The story shows the efforts of a host to protect a Levite who is a guest in his house from being gang raped by the wicked men of Gibeah, who

²⁴ STIEBERT 2019.

²⁵ וַיִּקְרְאוּ אֵלָיו וַיֹּאמְרוּ לוֹ אֵתָה הָאֲנָשִׁים אֲשֶׁר-בָּאוּ אֵלֶיךָ הַלַּיְלָה הַזֶּה וְנָדָעָה אֹתָם:

²⁶ אֲלֵי-נָא אֶתֵּי תַרְעֻנוּ:

²⁷ הִנֵּה-נָא לִי שְׁתֵּי בָנוֹת אֲשֶׁר לֹא-יָדְעוּ אִישׁ אוֹצִיָּאהָ-נָּא אֶתְהֶן אֲלֵיכֶם וַעֲשׂוּ לָהֶן כְּטוֹב בְּעֵינֵיכֶם וְלֹא לְאֲנָשִׁים הָאֵל-אֶל־תַּעֲשׂוּן דָּבָר כִּי-עַל-כֵּן בָּאוּ בְּצֵל קַרְתִּי:

shout to the old homeowner, “Bring out the man who came to your house so we can have sex with him” (v. 22).²⁸ The homeowner pleads, “No, my friends, don’t be so vile. Since this man is my guest, don’t do this outrageous thing”;²⁹ “Look, here is my virgin daughter, and his concubine. I will bring them out to you now, and you can use them and do to them whatever you wish. But as for this man, don’t do such an outrageous thing” (vv. 23–24).³⁰ The Levite’s wife is taken, raped and abused throughout the night (v. 25).

Both texts depict attempted male-on-male rape. Lot goes to extreme lengths to prevent the rape and offers his two virgin daughters instead. The hospitality shown to relative strangers is sharply contrasted with Lot’s treatment of the girls who are offered as substitutes, without their consent. Remarkably, the responses from Lot in Genesis and the Levite in Judges are almost identical – do whatever you want with these girls, but “don’t do this wicked thing” (Genesis 19:6) and “don’t do such an outrageous thing” (Judges 19:24). Both of these narratives are testimony to how the men were honoured and revered in Israelite cultures, and sexual abuse against women was deemed less harrowing than sexual abuse against men. Moreover, male rape was seen as shameful, as it demoted the penetrated victim to the position of a woman.

The legacy of the story of Genesis 19 has served to fuel anti-homosexual debates both within and outside of religious settings. The text is weaponised and used to condemn same-sex relationships and activities, despite the fact that the text does not speak directly to these themes: it is a story about *the attempted rape of men*. As gay and bisexual men form marginalised identities in relation to hegemonic masculinity, it is clear to see how society and culture – both ancient and contemporary – seek to place value on heterosexuality, and search for scriptures that can be interpreted to justify such positions. Contemporary readings of this text are still used to bolster arguments against homosexuality in religious and public spheres. James Harding observes how the text “is part of the genesis of the symbolic violence of Jewish and Christian homophobia”.³¹ In similar ways, the text does not only denote violence against men as described in the text, but it points to the violent uses of the text in the contemporary world. As Michael Carden notes,

[M]ale rape in Genesis 19 and Judges 19 is an act of homophobic violence signifying the abuse of outsiders and the breach of the community of Israel. Male rape serves to reinforce the heterosexuality of the insiders by inscribing outsiders as queer and queers as outsiders.³²

J. Cheryl Exum’s analysis of Judges 19:22 highlights significant points from the text in relation to male rape culture. In dispelling the myth that acts of male rape are connected to homosexuality, she asks:

Does this mean that all these men of Gibeah are homosexuals? Hardly. Rape is a crime of violence not of passion; homosexual rape forces the male victim into a passive role, into the woman’s position. The men of Gibeah want to humiliate the Levite in the most degrading way.³³

Exum describes the substitution of the men for the woman as “androcentric ideology” noting how “homosexual rape is too threatening to narrate”.³⁴ Male rape is unimaginable, and therefore impossible to describe

²⁸ הוצא את־האיש אשר־בא אל־ביתך ונגדענו

²⁹ אל־אחי אל־תרעו גא־אחרי אשר־בא האיש הזה אל־ביתי אל־תעשו את־הנבלה הזאת

³⁰ הנה־בתי הבתולה ופילגשהו אוציאנהן אותם וענו אותם ועשו להם השוב בעיניכם ולאיש הזה לא תעשו דבר הנבלה הזאת

³¹ HARDING 2018, 159.

³² CARDEN 1999, 47.

³³ EXUM 2016 [1993], 145.

³⁴ Ibid. 146.

by the narrator. Significantly, even though the level of violence throughout the Hebrew Bible is high, it appears that to narrate a male rape would be a step too far. While the exchange of victims is undoubtedly part of the economy of hospitality, the apparent interchangeability of victims (from men to women) in both scenes is indicative of the underlying cultural attitudes regarding rape and sexual violence: rape is more about power and control than it is about sexual desire. However, in religious traditions, these stories have been adopted and misused to argue against same-sex relations in general. Traditional heteronormative interpretations muddy the readings of these texts in Jewish and Christian traditions, to the extent that non-consensual male-rape becomes erroneously conflated with any consensual same-sex act.

(C) Lot and His Daughters (Genesis 19:30–38)

In the same chapter, following the burning of Sodom and Gomorrah, we have a short story about Lot's escape with his daughters from the burning city; in this narrative, Lot becomes a victim of sexual abuse. We are told that he lived in a cave with his two daughters in the mountains. In the isolation, the eldest daughter was concerned about being unable to have children, as there were no men about. She concocts a plan with her younger sister to get their father drunk on wine and then to sleep with him to preserve the family line. Once he is drunk, the eldest daughter sleeps with Lot, who is not aware of it at the time or when she gets up (v. 33). The next night, the scenario is repeated with the younger daughter, and again, Lot is not aware of it (v. 35). The plan is a "success", in that both daughters are impregnated as desired. The older daughter has a son, Moab (who becomes ancestor of the Moabites) and the younger daughter also has a son called Ben-Ammi (who becomes ancestor of the Ammonites).

A number of crimes, transgressions and taboos take place in the story of Lot and his daughters: forced sexual acts on the father, incest and inbreeding. Moreover, the daughters' deception does not honour the father. Attempts have been made to account for, and potentially justify, the actions of Lot's daughters. The first case in support of Lot's daughters views the sexual violation as a revenge strategy; as discussed above, where Lot offers his daughters up for gang-rape in Genesis 19:6–8. The daughters have clearly experienced a quick succession of traumatic events – the presentation for rape, the loss of their mother who was turned into a pillar of salt (v. 26), and the burning of their city (vv. 23–25). Kirsi Cobb reads the story through the lens of trauma theory, highlighting through textual evidence how Lot's daughters repeat and invert their earlier trauma.³⁵ The second case in support of Lot's daughters' is linked to fertility, noting how their actions are not fuelled by a sexual motive but by their desire for procreation, a noble aim in ancient settings. Progeny is paramount. Moreover, their sexual assault is almost celebrated through the generative achievement of their plan and the birth of their sons. Martin Kessler and Karel Deurloo describe the event as one of "emergency incest".³⁶ Meanwhile, Benno Jacob sees the actions as nothing but heroic, as the daughters "sacrifice" themselves in order to preserve their lineage.³⁷ Finally, J. Cheryl Exum draws on the work of Elke Seifert to offer a third possibility: that Lot commits incest and rapes his daughters, but as the text is grounded in patriarchal ideology, the biblical writers make an attempt to protect him by telling the story with the daughters as perpetrators. Exum claims that this is a male author's fantasy.³⁸

Cobb's reading is the most plausible in my view, as it does not rely on speculation outside of the text. While Exum's claim is astutely aligned with the "DNA" of the Bible as a patriarchal text – for men,

³⁵ COBB 2022; see also LOW 2010.

³⁶ KESSER – DEURLOO 2004, 120.

³⁷ JACOB 1934, 464–65; translated and cited in STIEBERT 2013, 134.

³⁸ EXUM 2000 [SEIFERT 1994].

about men, read by men – it relies on speculation and critical analysis that is not supported by the text itself. Of course, Exum's view is a possibility, and that would signify that Lot's status shifts from victim to perpetrator. I hesitate to make this shift, as this would be a major barrier to recognising sexual abuse against men – pretending it does not really happen. Moreover, this theory would feed into the myths of male sexual abuse – that the assault must have been desired or wanted by the male victim. My reading seeks to amplify the voices of male victims, noting how patriarchal systems of hegemonic masculinity – including those narrated in Genesis 19:1–29 – are ultimately damaging to men, too.

It is worth noting that Lot's daughters perpetrate sexual assault against their father once they have got him drunk with alcohol. The text speaks to contemporary rape culture in which alcohol is associated with sexual assault in a high number of cases in order to disinhibit or incapacitate the victim. Research shows how over half of all sexual assaults are linked to alcohol use, either by the perpetrator or the victim, or both. Rape culture is also ubiquitous in media articles that seem to suggest that the victim is somehow to blame if they have exposed themselves to rape through alcohol consumption – these narratives reinforce flawed stereotypes about people (especially women) who drink. Such myths are problematic and perpetuate rape culture by shifting responsibility away from the perpetrator to the victim. Lot's unconsciousness through drink renders him entirely inactive; there is no lengthy description of him taking a role that was usually reserved for women. What we have here is a narrator, and subsequent interpreters, who share a reluctance in naming the event by what is described: an act of sexual assault against a man. This reluctance participates in perpetuating a social and cultural blindness to sexual assault experienced by men.

In a final example from the Hebrew Bible, 1 Samuel 18, we see how Saul grows fearful of David. In exchange for allowing David to marry his daughter Michal, Saul requests a price of one hundred Philistine foreskins, in order to take revenge on his enemies. Saul's hope is that David would be killed by the Philistines. Instead, David goes out and kills two hundred Philistine men and returns with their foreskins. Traditional focus of the text has not shone a light on the men who are genitally violated by David and his troops, whether before or after their murder. There are numerous other examples in the Hebrew Bible of men being assaulted – physically, metaphorically and socially. For example, Noah, Ham and the Curse of Caanan (Genesis 9:20–27); Ehud and Eglon (Judges 3:12–30); Jael and Sisera (Judges 4); or Samson and Delilah (Judges 16).³⁹ Moreover, each time a woman is raped, a man – usually the father or the husband – is also deemed to be violated as it is a man who holds the rights to the woman's body and sexuality. The cultural code of not being man enough to be able to protect one's property speaks back to contemporary cultures of hegemonic and toxic masculinity.

Having considered explicit examples of sexual violence from the Hebrew Bible, the violence in the New Testament is just as stark. In the next example, I explore the sexual violence of Jesus' enforced nudity at the crucifixion.

Jesus Too? Masculinity, sexuality, purity and power

The master narrative of Christianity emerges out of the world's most popular story of excruciating abuse: the crucifixion. The Passion scenes described in the gospels narrate episodes of crippling physical violence and emotional abuse towards Jesus at the hands of the Roman authorities. Moreover, the crucifixion renders

³⁹ See GREENOUGH 2021 for further discussion.

Jesus involuntarily nude. Michael Trainor notes how at the crucifixion “Jesus is not only subject to physical abuse [...] He is now subject to sexual abuse. The exposure of his penis, the symbol of sexual power and identity, is the ultimate act of shaming and abuse”.⁴⁰

In the Roman Catholic Church, the Stations of the Cross depict the gospel accounts of Jesus’ Passion and death. Station ten depicts “the stripping of Jesus”. In Matthew’s gospel, we find an account of Jesus’ trial and crucifixion where the high priest tears Jesus’ clothes (26:65), he is stripped (27:28) and a scarlet robe is put on him while he is mocked by the soldiers.⁴¹ After he has been crucified, Jesus’ clothes are divided up (27:35), indicating his nudity at the time of crucifixion. Indeed, Michael Trainor highlights how “there is often no mention of Jesus’ nudity because nudity would have been presumed”.⁴²

The shame and stigma associated with nudity would have been instantly recognisable to the audiences. Martin Hengel, in his examination of crucifixion in the ancient world, observes the scandal of the cross: “By the public display of a naked victim at a prominent place [...] crucifixion also represents his uttermost humiliation”.⁴³ The scene is one where the abuse is physical, emotional, sexual and public, as Trainor notes:

Everything associated with crucifixion totally degraded and abused its victim: public trial, compulsory march to the place of execution, carrying the cross beam, confiscation of clothing and forced nudity, physical mutilation, being impaled or transfixed to the beam of sometimes quirky and comical crosses, the entertainment this provided for onlookers, physical deformation, loss of bodily control, enlargement of the penis, breaking of limbs to hasten lingering death and, finally, denial of an honourable burial as the corpse became the food for scavenging animals and carrion birds.⁴⁴

At Jesus’ trial, he is reported to have been silent in response to the authorities (Matthew 27:12, Mark 15:3–4, Luke 23:9). In the face of his accusers and knowing what fate lies ahead of him, Jesus is silent. He does not speak out against his abusers, even though elsewhere in the gospels he calls out injustices. One of the main theological questions that emerges from engagement with the gospel accounts is why did Jesus not speak out?. His silence has been interpreted as dignified, stoic and even heroic. However, we could also approach this question from the viewpoint of silence as it operates around sexual violence against men today. Despite the huge contrasts between the cultural contexts of the ancient Jewish and Greco-Roman settings and the world of today, silence around male victimisation seems to have been passed on through millennia.

Even though the gospel accounts are clear that Jesus was publicly humiliated and shamed, his victimisation has been hidden and silenced in Christian thought and traditions. It is important to draw attention to the limitations of biblical interpretation in contemporary theological contexts. Namely, that while the biblical text is explicit about Jesus’ enforced nudity and his humiliation, it is the torture and the physical abuse that are given attention in theology and artistic representations. In seeking to navigate the space between the biblical text and theological discussion, it is time for Jesus’ sexual abuse to be taken seriously, and David Tombs has pioneered work in this area.⁴⁵ However, it is a contentious issue to conceive of Jesus as a victim of sexual abuse, as this would inevitably attribute him with the shame associated with

⁴⁰ TRAINOR 2014, 148.

⁴¹ TOMBS 2023.

⁴² TRAINOR 2014, 25.

⁴³ HENGEL 1977, 87.

⁴⁴ TRAINOR 2014, 24.

⁴⁵ TOMBS 1999, 2018, 2023.

victims. Jesus as a victim is disempowered, emasculated and exposed. Indeed, Katie Edwards and David Tombs make the observation that women are identified as sexual, and therefore their abuse is more readily recognised. They state, “If Christ was a female figure we wouldn’t hesitate to recognise her ordeal as sexual abuse”.⁴⁶

The notion of Jesus as a co-sufferer with marginalised groups, especially the poor and oppressed, is one of the motifs of liberation theology, emerging in Latin American contexts. Yet, here, the social scripts of silence, shame and stigma alongside myths about sexual violence against men all prevent us from thinking about Jesus as a victim of sexual violence. Moreover, no religion wants to perceive their deity as disempowered, emasculated and exposed. Jayme Reaves and David Tombs detail how the work in this area has been met with some ambivalent responses:

The stigma and expected loss of respect may be why the statement that Jesus was a victim of sexual abuse is often fiercely resisted. The operating assumption appears to be that, if it were true, it would lower Jesus in the eyes of decent people. Respectable church members wish to defend Jesus from such a fate, and to protect the Christian faith from such a concession.⁴⁷

Tombs⁴⁸ and Reaves and Tombs⁴⁹ argue that the naming of Jesus as a victim of sexual abuse may help churches to deal more effectively with the sexual abuse scandals they have failed to address. They contend that effective pastoral responses can be found in readings of the Passion narratives that recognise the abuse against Jesus, as they state “Naming Jesus as a victim of sexual abuse therefore matters far more than is obvious at first. It is not just getting the historical record correct, it can make a real difference to how survivors see themselves and how they are perceived and treated by others”.⁵⁰ In a similar quest to gain constructive pastoral responses to the sexual abuse scandals that beset the Catholic Church, Trainor discusses the relevance of gospel accounts today. He suggests that “the story of Jesus is fundamental to a church that seeks to discern how it is to act and respond authentically in this difficult and scandalous moment”.⁵¹

One limitation of the biblical texts is that there are no insights into Jesus’ emotional and psychological responses to his abuse as it occurs, or in the immediate aftermath. Trainor sees the limitations of using the gospel narratives in any attempt to mirror contemporary experiences. He expresses concerns against any theology of suffering or trauma that wrongly interprets the gospels as describing Jesus as emotionally strong and as someone who consents to receive his abuse and suffering. Trainor remarks how contemporary victims “would recoil from such a Jesus who appears strong and embraces, or even encourages, victimization”.⁵²

Moreover, Jesus’ abuse was a one off-event, whereas sexual assaults can be repeated over a sustained period of time: the duration and frequency of abuse, age at the onset of abuse, relationship to the offender, and the nature of the abuse are all significant factors that impact disclosure and recovery.⁵³ The gospels share the brutality and violence of Jesus’ physical, emotional and sexual violations, yet Jesus was delivered from

⁴⁶ EDWARDS – TOMBS 2018.

⁴⁷ REAVES – TOMBS 2019, 23

⁴⁸ TOMBS 1999, 2018.

⁴⁹ REAVES – TOMBS 2019.

⁵⁰ Ibid. 25

⁵¹ TRAINOR 2014, 6.

⁵² Ibid. 9.

⁵³ ROMANO – DE LUCA 2001.

his abuse quite quickly. Trainor continues, “The divine power accessible to Jesus seems inaccessible to ordinary human beings and especially the abused”.⁵⁴ Jesus’ situation therefore is in contrast with the emotional and psychological impact that follows abuse survivors.

Shedding light on Jesus’ abuse in this way impacts on social and cultural perceptions of other male victims of sexual abuse who, like Jesus, are also often ignored or not seen. Moreover, choosing to ignore or failing to acknowledge Jesus’ abuse or, indeed, sexual abuse against men, serves to perpetuate myths around sexual violence and contributes to further abuse through its silencing and hiddenness. Quite simply: blindness to the sexual violence Jesus endured has led to a blindness to sexual violence against men in general.

Conclusion

The simple aim of this article was to shed light on the hiddenness of sexual violence against men in the Bible, and to connect it to contemporary society. We read the literal text, but traditionally, the sexual violence has been overlooked. Hegemonic masculinity, heteronormativity and misogyny obfuscate sexual violence against men. The underlying myth is that for a man to be a victim of sexual assault means that male power and patriarchy are threatened. Sexual violence against men remains a social, cultural, legal and religious issue that urgently needs addressing. Attitudes are slowly changing.

In my own settings, the most prolific rape case in UK legal history is one of male rape, with an estimation of 190 victims near where I live in Manchester, UK. Chronic underreporting is prevalent with questionable support from authorities in place. Generating a visible discussion about sexual violence against men may encourage boys and men to disclose their own abuse, report it and seek support. Despite this increased awareness, attitudes and expectations regarding men and masculinity shown in the examples of sexual violence against men in the Bible still remain. Men are to be “real” men, to avoid showing their emotions, to be strong and powerful, to be penetrators, and therefore perpetrators. Indeed, men are designated as penetrators exclusively in religious teaching about sexuality where the purpose of sexual activity should equate to procreation.

In reality, ideals of masculinity are impossible and harmful to masculine identities. The practical task that lays ahead for us is to continue with the dismantling of ideologies and practices that continue to be harmful to women, men and LGBTQ+ individuals. The interdisciplinary exploration of contemporary social and cultural attitudes towards sexual violence against men and the biblical texts may prove to be challenging for some individuals. But it is a task which is entirely necessary in order to dismantle some of the harmful interpretations of the biblical texts, and the damaging ideals they are often purported to support. In response to situations where such critical discussion has caused shock, outrage and disgust, we must acknowledge that these are among the same emotions experienced by victims of sexual violence. I agree with Thiede who boldly states, “If scholars cannot name the nauseating moments in this literary collection, they contribute to making the world sick”.⁵⁵ If we try to hide the stories of sexual violence against men in the Bible or explain them away as belonging to ancient cultures or contexts, we hide the victims and place a silence on them too. That silence has reigned for far too long.

⁵⁴ TRAINOR 2014, 10.

⁵⁵ THIEDE 2022, 5.

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ANCIENT RAPE CULTURES ON THE CONTEMPORARY SCREEN

From Antiquity to Screen: Sexual Violence in Greco-Roman Art and its Modern Representations in *Caligula* (1979) and *Spartacus* (2010-2013)

BRIANA KING

Introduction

For those curious about sex in ancient Greece and/or Rome, a common starting point is a simple Google Image search, which provides the quickest, and often most impactful, first impression. Several repeating Greek vase paintings, Roman wall paintings, and Roman sculptures depicting explicit sexual engagement appear. These images regularly feature nude men with exaggerated genital proportions copulating with nude women, likely prostitutes, frequently with violent physicality and dubious mutual consent. Some portray mythical figures straining against one another as the male figure forcefully attempts to sexually subdue the female. Some even feature bestiality. These depictions dominate the non-specialist, modern perception of ancient sexual behaviors and gender performance in a heteronormative sexual context and shape how modern multimedia portrays the “debauched,” and at times violent, ancient sexual landscape.

Sex in the ancient world has long possessed a unique enticement for specialists and non-specialists alike. Continued public consumption of ancient sex is largely driven by exploiting, and not always negatively, this helpless fascination. A concern arises, however, when the exceptionally small percentage of sexually explicit images with either overt or more subtle sexual violence are the basis upon which modern appropriations of ancient cultures, which reach a wider (non-specialist) audience, represent ancient sexualities. Among the consequences of repeated contemporary iterations of this so-called “depraved” ancient sexual landscape are: the clichéd and limited portrayal of Greco-Roman sexualities, and the legitimization of the acceptance of sexual violence in modernity.

In the first half of this article, I analyze examples from a small percentage of ancient Greek erotic vase paintings as well as examples of Roman erotic art depicting what modern viewers would consider varying degrees of sexual violence and depravity. These representations are imitated in television and film to perpetuate notions of a transgressive ancient sexual landscape as well as to support the contemporary weaponization of gender and sex. I examine the portrayal of ancient sexualities and sexual violence in two contemporary examples, an infamous film about the Roman Emperor Caligula, *Caligula* (1979), and a popular television series about the Roman slave-cum-rebel hero, Spartacus, *STARZ Spartacus* (2010-2013).

In the second half, I examine the negative effects of viewers’ exposure to sexual violence in film and television historical dramas. I highlight that the sexual violence featured in films like *Caligula* and television series like *Spartacus* contribute to the pillars of modern rape culture. The Greco-Roman backdrop rests on the premise of respecting “historical authenticity,” though these dramas may draw their visual inspirations of Greco-Roman sexualities from a limited archaeological record which paints an incomplete picture. The fascination with sex in the ancient world continues to be entrenched in limited portrayals of Greco-Roman sexualities to the detriment of both modern perceptions of the sexual nuances of the Greco-Roman world, and of contemporary gendered, sexual power dynamics.

Ancient evidence: erotic Greek vase paintings

Greek vase paintings and well-known Roman erotic art are repeatedly isolated in modern contexts to encapsulate the whole of ancient sexualities, including a limited number which convey ancient, gendered hierarchies defined by acts of sexual violence. This is not to suggest that the ancient artistic evidence I discuss is the specific material upon which film and television shows base their sex scenes. There is far more than the visual repertoire to attest to sexual violence in ancient Greece and Rome. However, given the popularity of certain images, it is reasonable to suggest that films and television draw on such visual materials for inspiration, often conflating the evidence from both cultures to represent sexuality in one or the other. These examples are presented not to deny the pervasiveness of sexual violence in the ancient world, but to show that the artistic evidence thereof is not as recurrent or as indicative of ancient sexual norms as these examples would have modern audiences believe.

I begin with examples of Greek vase paintings which I refer to as “violent erotica,” the criteria for which includes depictions of non-consensual sexual engagement and/or pursuit, forced single or double penetration, and “foreplay” which involves physical abuse (such as slipper beating and hairpulling). Of the 30,000–40,000 surviving Athenian pots, Sutton notes that an estimated 150 depict figures engaging in explicit sexual activity; there are far more numerous (“two thousand or more”) scenes depicting male drinking parties which feature a strong sexual element if not explicit copulation.¹ Chronologically, the explicit erotica is restricted almost entirely to the period 575–450 BCE, and there is a marked drop after 480 BCE, few after 405 BCE, and only one example from the fourth century.² This exceptionally small percentage of the total surviving pots demonstrates what Robson describes as a “broad range of sexual activities from group sex and sadism to fellatio, anal sex and masturbation, in both heterosexual and homosexual contexts.”³ Of this estimated 150, the violent erotica represents a still smaller percentage.

The first example is a well-known Athenian red-figure kylix by the Pedieus Painter (c. 510–500 BCE, **Fig. 1**).⁴ Side A depicts an orgy including three-way copulation, what appears to be forced fellatio, and slipper beating; side B continues the orgy with women performing fellatio and heterosexual couples engaged in rear-entry sex. The women in these scenes are presumed to be older prostitutes. Their limbs are outstretched and their mouths are depicted with stretch marks on the sides, suggesting their discomfort in trying to accommodate the oversized penises. The manner by which the male youths aggressively physically handle the women (one using a slipper to beat a woman, another holding a woman’s head in place, and all of the women being penetrated simultaneously from behind by another man) evidences the violent tone of the scene as a whole. Scenes such as this one exemplify the sexual exploitation of women, particularly prostitutes.

But not all prostitutes were the same. Keuls considers the idea of the “refined *hetaera*,” embodied by the well-known Aspasia, the Classical period Athenian prostitute who gained notoriety for her intelligence more so than her sexual appeal, as the “fabrication of the male mind”⁵ in direct contrast to the type of prostitute depicted in this *kylix*. In the post-Classical period when the collection of unsophisticated witticisms attributed to prostitutes (but intended for men’s humorous appreciation) was disseminated as ravenously as

¹ SUTTON 1992, 7. Cf. also ROBSON 2013, 133.

² SUTTON 1992, 7.

³ ROBSON 2013, 133.

⁴ The literature on this *kylix* is extensive, and the present context not suitable for further elaboration. Cf. the Beazley Archive via the Classical Art Research Centre (CARC, University of Oxford), vase number 200694, for bibliography.

⁵ KEULS 1985, 198–99.



Fig. 1. Athenian red-figure kylix depicting erotic scenes. Pedieus Painter, c. 510–500 BCE. Musée du Louvre, G13. Photo: Les frères Chuzeville. © RMN-Grand Palais / Art Resource, NY.

it was consumed, Keuls argues that, “Athenian men were at pains to construct an image of witty, prosperous *hetaerai* in order to gloss over the fact that their principal sex outlets were debased and uneducated slaves, who were at the mercy of their profit-hungry owners, and who were almost certain to end their lives in misery.”⁶ The Pedieus Painter’s *kylix* portrays women in a degrading manner, their debasement explicit in the aggressive sexual intercourse the men subject them to combined with the excessively proportioned penises. This image and ones like it suggest that any “glossing over” was fleeting.

The second example is an Athenian red-figure cup by the Brygos Painter (c. 490 BCE, **Fig. 2**) which continues this portrayal of sexual degradation and violence committed against certain women for the purpose of male dominance procured by sexual gratification.⁷ It depicts what Keuls considers the “crassest illustration of the motif of men battering prostitutes into submission to their specific desires.”⁸ On side A, left, a man pushes a prostitute’s head down to perform fellatio while another man penetrates her from behind, putting his arm on her upper back and head to hold her in position; to the far right, an agile man has lifted a girl off her feet, her legs over his shoulders; in the centre, a man wielding a stick threatens the prostitute kneeling before him. The woman in the central scene is crouched down and appears startled, making pleading gestures with her hands as the bearded man with a large erection approaches her with the likely intention of forcing her to perform oral sex. On the more fragmentary side B, a woman is bent over while a bearded man holds her by the hair and also beats her with a sandal. The graphic erotica on this and similar vases borders the sadistic to a contemporary viewing audience.

A third and final example is an unattributed Athenian red-figure cup (c. 490–470 BCE, **Fig. 3**) portraying an ithyphallic man threatening a woman splayed beneath him with a sandal.⁹ The man also forcibly grabs the woman by her hair. The woman’s gestures are the critical elements suggesting that this encounter is arousing for the youth but assuredly frightening for her. With her left hand open against his right thigh and her right hand lifted and open in a gesture common in scenes of pleading, the woman’s body language conveys her attempts to stop the man’s actions, and the downward curve of her mouth suggests that she opposes what is being done to her, and that the hair-pulling the man is subjecting her to is considerably uncomfortable if not painful.¹⁰

Ancient evidence: erotic Roman art

As far as Roman erotic art, many are familiar with the Pompeian wall-paintings and frescoes, especially those from the suburban baths, depicting explicit sexual engagements. Some notable fresco depictions from the suburban baths include a kneeling man performing cunnilingus on a woman reclining on a bed, a threesome between two men and one woman, and two women engaging in sex in a traditionally heterosexual position, with one woman standing between the raised legs of another woman, the latter reclining on a bed. This erotic art was likely meant to have been humorous,¹¹ and it sets a different tone than those examples of Roman erotica which modern audiences would consider transgressive and/or indicative of sexual violence.

⁶ Ibid. 199–200.

⁷ This cup has also been extensively analysed. For bibliography, cf. the Beazley Archive/CARC, vase number 203929.

⁸ KEULS 1985, 198–99.

⁹ For bibliography on this unattributed cup, cf. the Beazley Archive/CARC, vase number 275962, esp. KILMER 1993.

¹⁰ KILMER 1993, 113.

¹¹ CLARKE 2014. Similar to the erotic Greek vase paintings discussed here, the evidence for these types of explicitly sexual depictions in Roman frescoes and wall paintings is also limited.

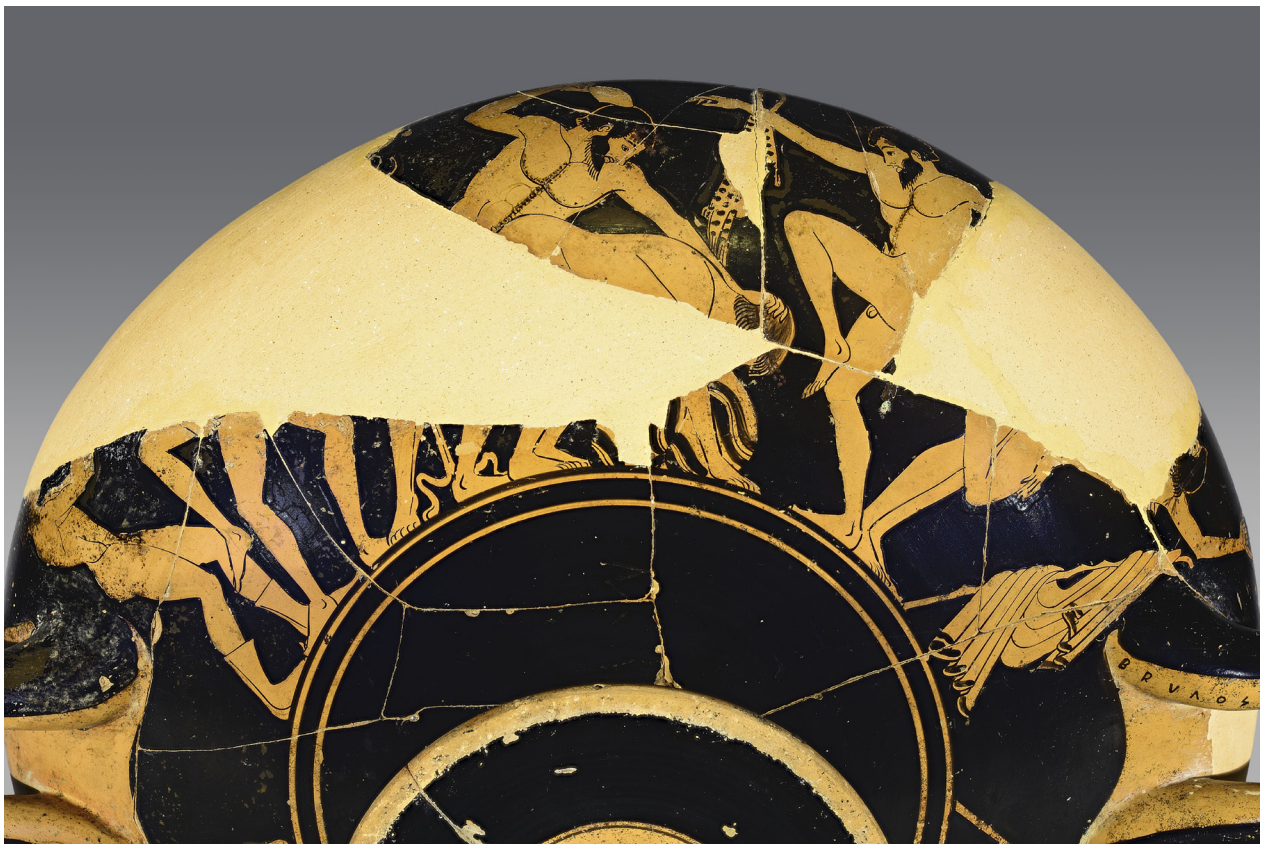


Fig. 2. Athenian red-figure cup depicting erotic scenes. Brygos Painter, c. 490 BCE. Florence, Museo Archeologico Etrusco, 3921. © Museo Archeologico Nazionale di Firenze, su concessione del Museo Archeologico Nazionale di Firenze (Direzione regionale Musei della Toscana) [with the permission of the National Archaeological Museum of Florence (Regional Directorate of Museums of Tuscany); further reproduction or duplication by any means is prohibited].



Fig. 3. Athenian red-figure cup, interior. Youth attacking naked woman with sandal, c. 490–470 BCE. From Cerveteri (RM), Necropolis of Monte Abatone. Inv. A 0.9.8037. © *Comune di Milano – Civico Museo Archeologico* [further reproduction or duplication by any means is prohibited].

One of the most famous examples is the marble statuette depicting the god Pan copulating with a female goat (**Fig. 4**). The goat is on her back, one hoof on Pan's shoulder. Pan, visibly aroused, holds onto her back leg with one hand and her beard with the other. They appear to be gazing into each other's eyes. Modern audiences are often startled by the composition, the semi-bestiality both difficult to look at and difficult to look away from. Greek bestiality existed primarily in mythological fantasy, whereas in Rome, it could be taken out of its figurative context, where mock bestiality was a form of sexual roleplay, and used in reality as part of mythological rape reenactments in public entertainments involving real animals and real women.¹² But sex with animals was considered, permitting the modern term, "taboo" in Rome. Clarke's analysis of "illicit sexual acts," including cunnilingus, fellatio, and male penetration of another male, which are depicted in the previously mentioned wall paintings of Pompeii's suburban baths, suggests that "taboo" sex was associated with humor in that laughter had an apotropaic function to ward off evil.¹³ Thus, Pan copulating with the goat would have been understood to be sexually abnormal. However, to a non-specialist, Pan and the goat appear to evidence the depravity of sex in ancient Rome.

Another example of Roman erotic sculptural art is the satyr and hermaphrodite group, closely related to the satyr and nymph group (**Fig. 5**). The example here is one of the Dresden type, a group tentatively associated with the Satyr-Hermaphrodite *symplegma* type ("entanglement"; after Pliny on the Hellenistic

¹² BARROW 2018, 152, 158; Martial lists the enactment of the Pasiphae myth as one of the shows held during Titus' inauguration games at the Flavian Amphitheatre (cf. *Spectacula* 5). Cf. BARTON 1993, 68; GUNDERSON 2005, 235.

¹³ CLARKE 2002; BARROW 2018, 161.



Fig. 4. Marble statuette of Pan copulating with a she-goat. From the rectangular peristyle, Villa of the Papyri in Herculaneum. 1st cent. CE. © Museo Archeologico Nazionale, Naples, su concessione del Ministero della Cultura – Museo Archeologico Nazionale di Napoli - foto di Luigi Spina [with the permission of the Ministry of Culture – National Archaeological Museum of Naples - photo by Luigi Spina] (Inv. 27709).



Fig. 5. Roman marble group of satyr and hermaphrodite, copy of a Hellenistic original, from the Natatio of the Villa Poppaea in Oplontis, 1st cent. CE. © Parco Archeologico di Pompei, su concessione del Ministero della Cultura – Parco Archeologico di Pompei [upon authorization of the Ministry for Cultural Heritage and Environment; further reproduction or duplication by any means is prohibited].

sculptor Kephisodot, *nat.* 36,4,24). The Dresden type satyr-hermaphrodite group is known through more than 30 Roman replicas in varied media, traditionally (though not always) found in domestic contexts, and the example here is from the Villa Poppaea in Oplontis, discovered in-situ near a pool. It depicts a satyr and hermaphrodite struggling against one another, with the seated satyr grasping the hermaphrodite from behind, restraining them between his legs; the hermaphrodite strenuously twists back to push the satyr's head away with one hand while grasping his foot with the other. The hermaphrodite's right foot locks the satyr's leg, with some suggesting that this indicates they do not intend to escape the embrace in truth, although it could also be attempting to overpower the satyr in order to flee his unwanted grasp.¹⁴

This sculptural group and ones like it raise questions about consent and coercion. As one scholar notes, it is no accident "that of the many images of lecherous male figures grappling with unwilling females",¹⁵ most involve satyrs and nymphs, or satyrs and hermaphrodites, as opposed to "normal" human men and women. That this group involves a mythical and/or hybrid creature makes the composition almost comical, but it also allows human observers (ancient and modern) to contemplate the possibilities of greater sexual freedom, even at the expense of others, outwith the constraints of societal norms. The sexual submission of the hermaphrodite reiterates male sexual dominance, and this is evident in the Pan/goat group as well where Pan physically dominates the she-goat for sexual purposes. Modern audiences to these types of compositions, Pan and the goat especially, gain the impression of a transgressive and depraved Roman sexual landscape, where physical force was not uncommonly used to gain sexual satisfaction.

Depictions such as those portrayed by these erotic Roman works and by the previously examined Greek vase paintings are often considered, particularly by non-specialists, to illustrate the whole of sex in the Greco-Roman world, partially due to their frequent appearances in publications that are suited to specialist and non-specialist audiences alike.¹⁶ The examples discussed here, while certainly graphically indicative of some aspects of sexuality in the Greco-Roman world, are not all-encompassing of the nuanced sexual landscape that existed, nor are they necessarily documentary of realities. Features of Greek and Roman sexualities that remain overlooked, oversimplified, or misunderstood to a wider audience because of this hyper-focus on the more lurid and explicit erotic art include (but are not limited to): the institution of pederasty, the apotropaic function of certain sexual images and/or nude symbols (such as herms, *tintinnabula*, and the Pompeian suburban bath frescoes), how nudity reflected gender conceptions, the role of the divine, and, more broadly, how sex and sexuality contributed to one's socio-political identity. Consequently, a complex facet of the Greco-Roman world is reduced to one that is frequently characterized by debauched and occasionally violent orgies, decadence, and moral transgression, despite the limited ancient visual evidence thereof. As we shall see, the film and television series discussed below continue this characterization to the detriment of modern viewership.

¹⁴ RETZLEFF 2007, 459.

¹⁵ VOUT 2013, 177.

¹⁶ Select examples of specialist and/or non-specialist publications wherein these three analyzed vase paintings appear, separately or together, and are either discussed briefly or extensively include: JOHNS 1982; KEULS 1985; KILMER 1993; STEWART 1997; SUTTON 1992 – 2000; SKINNER 2005; TOPPER 2012; ROBSON 2013; VOUT 2013; HUBBARD (ed.) 2014; GLAZEBROOK – TSAKIRGIS (eds.) 2016. Select examples of publications featuring the Roman wall-paintings, frescoes, and/or sculpture groups include several of the previously identified: JOHNS 1982; CLARKE 1998 & 2003; SKINNER 2005; VOUT 2013; other select examples include VARONE 2001; RIDGWAY 2002; BARROW 2018; LEVIN-RICHARDSON 2019. These examples do not include the numerous academic articles published on similar/identical topics.

Ancient sexual violence in film and television

In the past decade alone, there has been a marked increase in television and film using sexual violence, specifically rape, as a narrative trope.¹⁷ This trope is not limited to modern depictions of ancient Greece and Rome, instead appearing partial to historical period dramas in general, including historical fantasy. The list of recent period drama series which feature sexual violence and rape, primarily targeted against women by men (though not exclusively), is extensive. To name a few: *Rome*, *Outlander*, *Vikings*, *The Last Kingdom*, *Black Sails*, *Downton Abbey*, *Poldark*, *Versailles*, *Bridgerton*, *Westworld*, and *Game of Thrones*. Period drama films are no exception: *Braveheart*, *Rob Roy*, *Robin Hood*, *Gladiator*, *300*, *The Last Duel*, and *The Nightingale* (which caused a cinema walk-out at its Australian premiere in Sydney due to its egregiously brutal and repetitive rape scenes).¹⁸

The ancient sexual landscape, buoyed by the previously discussed Greek and Roman evidence of violence and debauchery, provides a convenient excuse to depict sexual violence in dramas set in Greece or Rome. Here, I discuss examples of this modern appropriation from two period dramas, one film and one television series: the 1979 film, *Caligula*, and the STARZ series, *Spartacus* (2010–2013). In focusing on two contemporary examples over three decades apart in production and release, I highlight the pervasiveness of a repetitive portrayal of Greco-Roman sexualities in modern contexts spanning a notable length of time and featuring few variations or attempts to broaden the modern audience's understanding of Greco-Roman sexualities, with limited exceptions. A consequence of this enduring portrayal of sexual violence and debauchery in the Greco-Roman world is its contribution to the contemporary weaponization of gender and sex both on and off screen.

Caligula (1979)

The 1979 pornographic historical drama *Caligula* is a film about the rise and fall of the Roman Emperor Caligula. The Penthouse production, which was steeped in its own drama between the original screenplay writer, the producer, and the directors, was deemed utterly lacking in any “redeeming social value.”¹⁹ One reviewer described it as “sickening, utterly worthless, shameful trash.”²⁰ One review upon the film's release ironically noted that, “incest is the only face-saving relationship” throughout the “anthology of sexual aberrations” featured.²¹ Producer Bob Guccione, the founder of *Penthouse* magazine, believed that the Roman world “was a more sexually authentic one,” and he made it his mission to portray pagan Rome in all its decadent, sadistically violent, and sexually-depraved glory.²² The film frequently depicts Roman orgies, and the central love story is the incestuous relationship between Caligula and his sister Drusilla, often depicted as romantic despite being transgressive. Their relationship contrasts sharply with that between Caligula and his wife, Caesonia, which is not always sexually consensual.²³

¹⁷ Several online articles have addressed the prevalence of rape scenes in recent television dramas and films, questioning why this sudden surge in portraying sexual violence is occurring and at what point a line should be drawn; select examples: DOCKTERMAN 2014; HELDMAN – BROWN 2014; WEINMAN 2014; LINTON 2015; THOMPSON 2016; VANSTONE 2016; WILLIAMS 2017; LEVIN 2022.

¹⁸ HARTE 2019.

¹⁹ JOHNSON 1980, 51.

²⁰ EBERT 1980.

²¹ WERB VARIETY 1979, 24.

²² GUCCIONE in LUI 2007; SOUTHON 2017, 198.

²³ SOUTHON 2017, 197–200.

Guccione began publishing *Penthouse* during an era of increased interest in, and distribution of, adult films. The 1960s/70s saw a notable rise in erotic films which emphasized sex and violence for an increasingly diverse demographic of viewers desirous of “more inventiveness” to maintain their interest in erotic pleasures, including orgies, bestiality, torture, masochism, sadism, and multiple penetration.²⁴ For example, prior to *Caligula*, the 1976 film, *In the Realm of the Senses (Ai No Corrida)* (directed by Nagisa Ōshima) explored the relationship between death and eroticism, a theme which proved critical to *Caligula*.²⁵ Several historical literary sources also served as the narrative basis, including Tacitus’s *Annals*, Suetonius’s *The Twelve Caesars*, Josephus’s *Antiquities of the Jews*, and Cassius Dio’s *Roman History*. These historians were not without their own prejudices and objectives when writing about Caligula, but from them we get descriptions of Caligula’s reign which seemingly featured, among other things, sexual depravities (including accusations of incest)²⁶ and severe mental instability often leading to excessive cruelty²⁷ – two prominent themes which clearly influenced the 1979 film’s characterization of the Emperor and his court.

Given the backdrop of the 1960/70s pornographic film industry and combined with the historical sources on Caligula, Guccione’s *Caligula* results in an envisioning of both Caligula and Caligula’s Rome which abuses the historical character of the former, and exposes and intensifies the sexual flagrancy of the latter. Given the increased demand for more explicit and transgressive sex in film, as well as the unflattering portrayal of Caligula by ancient historians, I would argue that erotica from the Greco-Roman period, which had already been long available for public consumption, would have only served to heighten the film’s justification for its explicit, often sadistic sexual acts set in the Roman Imperial period and largely perpetrated by Caligula himself.

Of all the sexually graphic scenes in *Caligula*, one of the most infamous occurs when Caligula covets Livia, the woman engaged to one of his most loyal soldiers, Proculus. The intense violence and perversity of this scene alone suffices to make it the primary example from this film for the purposes of this discussion. Caligula and his entourage interrupt Proculus and Livia’s wedding party, then Caligula lures the bride and groom to the kitchen. After separating the couple from the party, Caligula forces Livia to undress. Caligula examines the nude Livia, then lifts her onto a table and forces her legs apart. Caligula questions whether she is truly a virgin, then grabs the crying Livia’s face, commanding that she open her eyes while he fondles her. He then rapes her, remarking on how lucky a girl she is to lose her virginity to a direct descendant of the goddess Venus. He commands a distressed Proculus to watch him rape Livia, the latter visibly and audibly in pain. Caligula, once finished, inspects the blood from Livia’s body, surprised that she was indeed a virgin, then asks Proculus if he too is a virgin. When Proculus responds that he is not, Caligula comments on the unfairness of it, and commands Proculus to disrobe and sit on the table with the sobbing Livia. Inspecting Proculus’ anus, Caligula muses that Proculus was lying, and that he is a virgin too. Caligula then smears Proculus’ backside with lard, dips his fist and forearm in the lard, commands Livia to open her eyes again while a crying Proculus trembles above her, then aggressively anally fists Proculus. The scene ends with a

²⁴ HAWES 2008, 37–38.

²⁵ Ibid. 38–39.

²⁶ Suet. *Calig.* 24,1; 24,3; 24,36; 41,1; Dio 59,3,6; 59,11,1; 59,26,5; Joseph. *AJ* 19,204.

²⁷ Tac. *ann.* 13,3,2; Suet. *Calig.* 11; 50,2; 51,1; Dio 59,26,5; Joseph. *AJ* 18, 277; 19,1; 19,193. See also: Sen. *ira* 1,20,9; 3,18,3; 3,19,3; 3,21,5; Philo *leg.* 76,93; Plin. *nat.* 36,113.

laughing Caligula suggesting that they should be grateful that he exhausted himself to make their wedding holy, then gives his blessing as he departs, the nude and desolate Livia and Proculus remaining on the table.²⁸

The scene combines the rape narrative implicit in the satyr and hermaphrodite sculpture group as well as the outwardly, sexually transgressive nature of the Pan and she-goat sculpture. However, whereas the hermaphrodite physically rebuffs the aroused satyr and attempts to prevent him from copulating with her, Livia is helpless to prevent Caligula from raping her. And while Pan copulating with a she-goat would have been understood as abnormal to its original audience, the additional sexual violation of Proculus by such brutal means exacerbates the modern impression of Roman sexual depravity which the bestiality already accomplishes. The scene also heavily abuses the infamy of the historical Caligula while perpetuating common contemporary perceptions of a depraved and immoral sexual landscape throughout Caligula's Rome, especially amongst its elite.

***Spartacus* (2010–2013)**

As with *Caligula*, the executive producers of the STARZ television series, *Spartacus*, relied on the historical literary sources which describe Spartacus and the Third Servile War, also collaborating with historical consultants from UCLA.²⁹ Little is known about the historic Spartacus, and his story and the rebellions that followed are pieced together by fragmented narratives, including Appian's *The Civil Wars*, Frontinus's *Strategemata*, and Plutarch's *Life of Crassus*. These sources, among others, were used as the basis for the narrative, and Magerstädt notes that the series "is often closer to the classical sources (primarily Plutarch and Appian) than the arguably more high-cultural interpretations of the subject, such as Fast's novel or Kubrick's film".³⁰ Of the series' representations taken directly from the literary sources, we can include its portrayal of Spartacus as a free man working for the Roman auxiliary,³¹ the rebels' escape from Mount Vesuvius using vines growing along the mountaintop to weave ladders,³² and the filling of the ditch (with the bodies of the deceased) that had previously trapped Spartacus' forces on the mountain ridge near Sinuessa.³³

Along with the historical episodes, there are innumerable examples of sexual violence and/or debauchery throughout the four seasons of *Spartacus*.³⁴ The seasons progressively push the boundaries of sexual explicitness, including sexual violence, often for what feels like nothing more than shock-value, such as the rape of Julius Caesar (the inclusion of whom in the series is an historical expansion)³⁵ by Marcus Crassus' (fictional) son, Tiberius. Asked in an interview whether the series would explore sexualities given that the story was "set back in a time when sexuality was a lot more open",³⁶ one of the executive produc-

²⁸ This incident is reminiscent of what Suetonius describes as Caligula's lack of respect for his own chastity and anyone else's (Suet. *Calig.* 36,1). In the film, Caligula considers Livia's chastity a commodity that was his for the taking regardless of her marriage to another, in the process disrespecting her husband by making a spectacle of his wife's sexual violation.

²⁹ JUE 2011.

³⁰ MAGERSTÄDT 2019, 174.

³¹ App. *B. civ* 1,14,116; Plut. *vit. Crass.* 8,2.

³² Plut. *vit. Crass* 9,2–3; Frontin. *str.* 1,5,21.

³³ Frontin. *str.* 1,5,20.

³⁴ Reviews of the series were initially unfavorable, with the excessive sex and nudity being one of the chief criticisms; it was also often compared to the HBO series *Rome* and found lacking in quality, style, and execution. Cf. LOWRY 2010; STASI 2010; GOODMAN 2010. However, as *Spartacus* developed its characters and narratives, later seasons were more well-received, though the gratuitous sex was often remarked upon, sometimes even as one of the main draws to the show. Cf. WIEGAN 2012; O'NEILL 2013; JONES 2013.

³⁵ Cf. KLIMA 2015.

³⁶ LOGGINS 2010.

ers, Robert Tapert, replied, “Oh brother are we. We’ve had things that you wouldn’t even imagine. The guys at Starz have invited us to push the borders... [they] said we feel that you guys can go further sexually.”³⁷ Executive producer Steven DeKnight commented that, “I don’t want to have sex just for sex’s sake... The sexual act is part of a bigger story. Something vital to the story is going on here.”³⁸ Allowing that (some of) the depictions of sexual violence in the series serve a narrative purpose, the often explicit degrees to which these scenes are filmed still warrant speculation as to their necessity. The series certainly “pushed the borders” of sexual content, taking advantage of Rome’s reputation for having a more open and liberated sexual landscape.

Gods of the Arena is the prequel season which aired between the first and second seasons and follows the rise of the House of Batiatus as a prominent *ludus* in Capua through mostly unsavory means. The third episode includes what is perhaps the most disturbing depiction of sexual violence throughout the series. Diona, a virgin slave girl, is chosen by Cossutius, a high-ranking Roman who had heard about the pleasurable offerings at the House of Batiatus, to have sex with his formidable gladiator, Rhaskos. Cossutius watches Rhaskos brutally rape Diona, even fondling her while she is being raped. Cossutius uses the opportunity to explain to Diona that the grotesque and divine are two parts of the same coin, and to further demonstrate his point, he then rapes her anally while Rhaskos continues to rape her vaginally. Throughout, Cossutius’s enjoyment of this cruel violation of an innocent slave girl is palpable; his wry amusement and arrogance add insult to excessive injury. Diona’s pain and degradation are both horribly clear, not unlike the woman in the unattributed Athenian red-figure cup frightened by the ithyphallic man forcefully grabbing her hair and threatening further violence as she makes pleading gestures. The scene’s brutality is extreme, and it ends with a broken and battered Diona limping away, the devastation in her eyes unmistakable. Diona is forced into the position of victim of sexual aggression like the hermaphrodite. Like Livia in *Caligula*, however, Diona is also powerless to prevent her sexual violation.

In the first episode of the second season, a brothel scene enables the show to glory in Roman sexual debauchery. The scene follows an unnamed, wealthy Roman man as he takes in the array of sexual acts. There includes several pairs of men and women vigorously copulating, a man performing oral on a female prostitute while another female prostitute penetrates him with a strap-on dildo, and chained female prostitutes having sex with men – including one woman chained to a ceiling beam while two men bodily lift her, one man penetrating her and the other appearing about to join. This trio is highly reminiscent of the cup by the Brygos Painter, as well as the Athenian erotic red-figure *stamnos* (c. 430 BCE, **Fig. 6**) by Polygnotos which depicts two aroused symposiasts lifting a *hetaira* between them to shoulder-height, the man on the left holding her by her left thigh and right knee, and the man on the right holding her under her right armpit and abdomen. The *hetaira* raises her left leg to rest on the shoulder of the man on the left; with her right hand, she strokes the head of the man on the right while with her left she reaches down to stroke his penis.³⁹

In the brothel scenes, one group of revelers, however, appears to be engaging in a gang rape. Four nude men forcefully grab a female prostitute, throw her onto a pallet, restrain her, and force her to perform fellatio on one man while another man beneath her penetrates her vaginally, and a third man penetrates her anally; the fourth man cheers on his male friends while helping to restrain the prostitute. The prostitute appears and sounds frightened, her distressed cries audible, and her lack of bodily autonomy suggests that she is not entirely a willing participant, the expectations of her profession aside. This segment is strongly remi-

³⁷ TAPERT in LOGGINS 2010.

³⁸ DEKNIGHT 2011, cited in STRONG 2013, 168.

³⁹ Louvre CP274/CP9682 (Beazley Archive/CARC 213398); cf. MATHESON 1995, 57–58, 287.



Fig. 6. Athenian red-figure stamnos depicting an erotic scene. Polygnotos Group, c. 430 BCE. Musée du Louvre Cp274/Cp9682. Photo: Christian Larrieu. © RMN-Grand Palais / Art Resource, NY.

niscent of the red-figure *kylix* by the Pedieus Painter. The discomfort of the prostitute is difficult to overlook, and the men's forceful physicality clear.

In the fifth and eighth episodes of season 3, two rapes scenes are notable. The first, in episode 5, sees the slave girl Kore, the love interest of the Roman general Marcus Crassus, raped by Crassus's son Tiberius in an act of vengeance against his father's commands which saw the death of one of Tiberius's friends. When Kore protests and tries to fight back, Tiberius coldly reminds her that she is but a slave and must therefore submit to his control, then proceeds to rape Kore. In the eighth episode, Julius Caesar, a lieutenant at the time and rival of Tiberius, confronts Tiberius over the rape of Kore, blackmailing Tiberius's questionably-gained position in Crassus's army. The two brawl, with Caesar easily besting Tiberius until Tiberius orders his guards to restrain Caesar face-down over a table. Tiberius then anally rapes Caesar and threatens to

spread word of it should Caesar disclose Kore's rape to anyone, especially Crassus. The rape of Caesar is shocking, no less so because it is not only the first explicit scene of a man raping another man, but also a Roman man raping another prominent Roman man rather than a slave. Added to the fact that the man being raped is Julius Caesar, whose character carries the historical gravitas of the real historical figure, the scene is altogether unexpected on the one hand, and viscerally jarring on the other.

But *Spartacus* portrayed other facets of Roman sexualities besides sexual violence. A pleasant surprise throughout the series is how progressive it was as far as depicting the fluidity of sex in ancient Rome, as well as how sex is depicted more generally speaking in modern television. The normality of homosexual relationships was refreshing; the sexual preferences of men, Roman or slave, had no bearing on their capabilities within the arena or outside of it, and this far more accepting sexual environment is truer to the acceptance of sexual preferences in ancient Rome.⁴⁰ Additionally, the unapologetic and frequent full male nudity balanced the scales of gendered nudity on screen.⁴¹ An array of empowered female characters also went beyond the tired trope of scheming Roman woman and/or the weaker female companion in constant need of rescuing from the male hero.⁴²

Spartacus and *Caligula* do, however, heavily abuse the film and television cliché of Roman decadence characterized by political corruption and sexual debauchery. *Spartacus* uses this distinctly Roman reputation to unambiguously distinguish the villains from the heroes, in this case the Romans from the slaves.⁴³ The hyper-explicit nature of the sex scenes reinforces the theme of the bad Romans versus the good slaves, with the villainy of the Romans, illustrated as in *Caligula* by oppressive political power going hand in hand with sexual depravity, contrasting sharply with the loving sexual relationships between the slaves.⁴⁴ While the intent of the series and film may have been to depict sexual violence as morally unacceptable, it nevertheless perpetuates for modern viewers the idea of Roman sexualities being predominantly transgressive, harmful, and violent on the one hand, while on the other, the glamor of television makes it still yet titillating, consequently idealizing harmful sexual behaviors in a contemporary context.

Moreover, a number of the sex scenes from *Spartacus* and *Caligula* closely imitate if not nearly duplicate the ancient visual materials previously discussed. The graphic and overtly aggressive orgy scenes depicted by the Pedieus Painter and the Brygos Painter as well as the violent sexual abuse in the unattributed red-figure cup all find emulation in similarly constructed sex scenes in *Spartacus*, while the sexual subdual and moral transgression conveyed by the Roman satyr/hermaphrodite and Pan/she-goat sculptural groups both find echoes in *Caligula*. Ancient art, including erotic Greek vase paintings and erotic Roman sculptural works, can thus more convincingly be considered a framework, or even a blueprint, for modern portrayals of sex and sexuality within ancient backdrops.

Impact of ancient sexual violence in modern multimedia

Many creators justify scenes of sexual violence by pointing to "authenticity," citing the historical past and the realities thereof, most especially for women, and claiming that not depicting sexual violence would be

⁴⁰ PIERCE 2011, 41–42; PIERCE 2017, 247; DICKSON – CORNELIUS 2015, 171, 176; FOKA 2015, 190, 190–92.

⁴¹ DICKSON – CORNELIUS 2015.

⁴² FOKA 2015, 195–200.

⁴³ Demille's *Sign of the Cross* (1932) set this cinematic stage, which is reproduced in ancient period dramas consistently thereafter: *Quo Vadis* (1951), *The Robe* (1953) and its sequel *Demetrius and the Gladiators* (1954), *Spartacus* (1960), *Gladiator* (2000), *Alexander* (2004), and *300* (2006). CYRINO 2017, 300–01; PIERCE 2017, 233–37, 240.

⁴⁴ An exception is the loving relationship between the Roman general Crassus and his slave Kore. PIERCE 2017, 245; DICKSON – CORNELIUS 2015, 175; FOKA 2015, 190–95; CYRINO 2005, 42.

misrepresentative of the past.⁴⁵ The original director of *Caligula*, Tinto Brass, explained, “It is the duty of an artist to show the danger that is implicit in power and the men of power,”⁴⁶ while the producer Guccione said of the sexual explicitness: “...we decided to show Rome exactly as it originally was. Which meant taking into consideration a new kind of morality, a kind of morality that was particular to the Romans, a part of their mores.”⁴⁷

However, distance in time does not lessen the impact of sexual violence and rape scenes on modern perceptions of gendered, sexual power dynamics. Many historical television dramas blur the line between consent and rape by playing into the “no means yes” trope, ultimately undermining the victim and occasionally outright victim blaming. As one scholar notes, “In other recent dramas the issue of consent has been ambiguous at best, especially when the act is perpetrated by the romantic male lead.”⁴⁸ Modern rape culture is still steeped in victim blaming as well as the idea that “no” actually means “yes” if “you know how to spot it.”⁴⁹ The possibility that a victim of sexual violence will not be taken seriously or even believed results in the “chronic nonreporting of rape.”⁵⁰ The Greek and Roman art certainly speaks to a lack of consent, and these portrayals are reflected in *Caligula* as well as in *Spartacus*. In *Spartacus*, a brothel prostitute is forcefully engaged in a gang rape, and a slave girl is raped by a Roman aristocrat and his gladiator. Another former slave named Naevia is also raped by a gladiator and spends much of her emotional and physical recovery coming to terms with her victimhood. In *Caligula*, Caligula rapes Livia, telling her that she is privileged to have lost her virginity to a direct descendant of Venus, undermining Livia’s trauma and arguably insinuating that Livia should not, therefore, consider herself a victim. Modern multimedia, including *Caligula* and *Spartacus*, which continues to portray sexual violence and uses the historical past as an excuse to claim educational purposes only exacerbates such pillars of modern rape culture.

Research investigating the effects of exposure to filmed sexual violence on attitudes toward rape and on the acceptance of violence against women has demonstrated that sexual violence in modern multimedia reinforces toxic gendered power dynamics and sexual power imbalances.⁵¹ Two separate but related studies from the University of Montréal and UCLA demonstrate the harmful consequences of contemporary depictions of sexual violence on modern viewers’ acceptance of rape and other forms of interpersonal violence. The University of Montréal study had a group of male and female university students watch one of four randomly assigned films, one that featured sexual aggression against a male, one with sexual aggression against a female, one with physical aggression, and one film without physical or sexual aggression.⁵² After viewing the film, all participants completed a questionnaire which measured acceptance of interpersonal violence, rape myths, and sexual aggression, then viewed a reenactment of a rape trial, followed by another questionnaire. The study’s results showed that, “males were more accepting of interpersonal violence and rape myths, more attracted to sexual aggression, less sympathetic toward the rape trial victim, and less likely

⁴⁵ This justification, along with the prevalence of rape scenes in recent television dramas, is discussed extensively, including: HORECK 2004, 18; DEACON 2014; VALBY 2014; BYRNE 2015; MARGOLIS 2017, 404; BYRNE – TADDEO 2019, 380–81; GILBERT 2021.

⁴⁶ BRASS in LUI 2007; SOUTHON 2017, 197.

⁴⁷ GUCCIONE in LUI 2007; SOUTHON 2017, 198.

⁴⁸ TADDEO 2019, 54.

⁴⁹ MEDIA MATTERS STAFF 2014; see also LINTON 2015.

⁵⁰ ALLEN 2007.

⁵¹ TAYLOR 2020; see also DAMOUR 2019.

⁵² WEISZ – EARLS 1995.

to judge the defendant as guilty of rape.”⁵³ This study also found that, “males were equally affected by a film depicting sexual violence regardless of victim gender.”⁵⁴

The UCLA study had a group of male and female university students watch one of two randomly assigned films, one with violent-sexual content and one without. A survey administered to all students, not just the study participants, which included similar measures as the first study for assessing acceptance of rape myths, interpersonal violence against women, and adversarial sexual relations, was then completed several days later as part of a wider Sexual Attitude Survey.⁵⁵ The results from this study were almost identical to the first’s: “exposure to the films portraying violent sexuality increased male subjects’ acceptance of interpersonal violence against women.”⁵⁶ In both studies, female participants were less accepting.

Like the films shown to the students in both studies, *Caligula* and *Spartacus* heavily feature sexual aggression against females, as well as sexual aggression against males. They both also feature intense sequences of violence. As such, it is not unreasonable to suggest that viewer responses to this film and television series may have been similar to the responses recorded in the University of Montréal and UCLA studies. Considering *Caligula* was released during a period of increased interest in seeing more explicit and transgressive acts in adult feature films, it likely fulfilled this viewership desire. While the sexual violence in *Spartacus* is not itself sexualized and is meant to be understood as morally unacceptable,⁵⁷ by virtue of its inclusion, the series nevertheless may have evinced similar viewership responses.

While dramas such as those shown to the study participants, and by extension films like *Caligula* and television series like *Spartacus*, claim that their intent is to educate viewers on the realities of the historical past and to change the current historical narrative, that is not always the outcome. Neil Malamuth, a psychology and communication studies professor at UCLA, studies the effects of mass media violence. Malamuth has found that exposure to sexual violence, regardless of its educational intent, is still arousing to “a small but significant percentage of young male viewers,” and that, “such sexual arousal to violence is one of the contributing predictors of actual aggression against women.”⁵⁸ For others, viewership of sexual violence causes them to become numb to it and less sympathetic toward rape victims.⁵⁹ Heldman and Brown, discussing rape culture within U.S. college campuses, note that, “In the U.S., rape is tacitly condoned through denial of the rape epidemic, denial of the harms of rape, not considering rape a ‘real’ crime, victim-blaming, trivializing rape, and the normalization of female sexual objectification and rape eroticization in pop culture.”⁶⁰ When considered in light of the examples of rape and sexual violence from *Caligula* and *Spartacus*, Malamuth’s studies, including the second UCLA study, strongly appear to confirm Heldman and Brown’s indictment of pop culture as responsible, though not solely, for eroticizing and even normalizing rape among modern viewers.

The Greco-Roman erotica depicting what modern audiences would likely consider “darker” Greco-Roman sexualities is echoed in film and television dramas which frequently use sex for narrative progression. Film and television focus on replicating the hyper-graphic, often violent Greco-Roman erotica which

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ MALAMUTH – CHECK 1981.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ STRONG 2017, 137.

⁵⁸ MALAMUTH, CHECK – BRIERE 1986. Cf. MALAMUTH – ADDISON – KOSS 2000.

⁵⁹ LINZ – DONNERSTEIN – PENROD 1988.

⁶⁰ HELDMAN – BROWN 2014.

is most commonly featured in accessible resources (such as non-specialist books and museum displays) and, therefore, is more easily recognizable to a public audience. On “history narratives” (i.e., dramatic works based on historical events) and story spaces (i.e., the world which the history narrative depicts), Munslow notes that author-historians “acknowledge that ‘what happened,’ though important, is no more important than any other feature of the story space.”⁶¹ Klima elaborates, connecting Munslow’s point to *Spartacus*, noting that this is especially true “whenever an audience consumes a history narrative with a prior understanding of ‘what happened’”.⁶² Though Klima is referring to the audience’s prior understanding of the historic figure of Spartacus and the events surrounding him, I would argue that this feature of story space extends to the audience’s prior familiarity of the sexual landscape of the Greco-Roman period, with the visual evidence thereof being a prominent source of their previous understanding. Relying on this prior familiarity, as the creators of both *Caligula* and *Spartacus* likely did, meant that the overwhelming presence of rape and sexual violence was legitimized by what viewers had theoretically already been exposed to with regard to sex in the Greco-Roman period, and could thus be further justification for respecting “historical authenticity.”

Conclusion

Not all of the feedback of the portrayal of sexual violence in modern multimedia’s historical dramas has been negative. As Taddeo notes, “Rape of course is not unique to the period drama – but by the very nature of its seriality, the period drama has the potential to go beyond the momentary act of violence for dramatic effect to delve into the victim’s trauma and possible recuperation.”⁶³ This can be seen in *Spartacus* when the series follows the emotional recovery of Naevia. After being freed from enslavement, Naevia learns how to fight in order to help her process her anger and fear, eventually slaying the gladiator who had raped her. In a credit to *Spartacus*, the series portrays Naevia’s recovery over several episodes rather than glossing over it for the sake of quicker story/character development. Dramas such as those discussed here address issues of consent, reproductive freedoms, and the impact of rape on the survivors, using the past to relate to contemporary concerns of sexual violence and rape culture, especially in the wake of the #MeToo and #Timesup movements.⁶⁴ These historical dramas reflect “our society’s effort to unearth assaults old and new, to deal with the fact that for so long rape was something swept under the rug.”⁶⁵ These dramas, including *Caligula* and *Spartacus*, also “unearth” typically overlooked victims of sexual violence, especially men.

When viewed in this way, as Taddeo further notes, “the intense criticisms of period dramas by some historians seem to hold the genre to such a high standard of ‘authenticity’ that it ultimately trivialises the viewing experiences of their consumers.”⁶⁶ While I do not suggest that dramas should be held to such a high standard of authenticity, I would argue that in cases where sexual violence is often at the forefront of male and female relationships in historical dramas, as is the case in *Caligula* and *Spartacus*, the issue is less with authenticity and more with the necessity of explicitly depicting sexual violence to the detriment of modern

⁶¹ MUNSLOW 2007, 18.

⁶² KLIMA 2015, 47.

⁶³ TADDEO 2019, 54.

⁶⁴ TADDEO 2019, 57; BYRNE – TADDEO 2022; see also WEINMAN 2014.

⁶⁵ DOCKTERMAN 2014.

⁶⁶ TADDEO 2019, 57.

viewership's understanding of the complexities of Greco-Roman sexualities on one hand, and of modern gender-based sexual violence on the other. As Vanstone remarks,

[T]he images TV uses to tell rape stories always, without exception, trump the dialogue or supposedly worthy aims of us, the writers. It doesn't matter how much rationalization or feminist rhetoric we cram into our actors' mouths. When rape is lyricized as something that happens to attractive young women, it becomes conflated with sex, which reinforces rape culture.⁶⁷

Although "dramas...and their accompanying social media platforms perform essential work, empowering viewers to translate and reimagine the past for their own present,"⁶⁸ how explicitly modern viewers need that past to be visualized in order to reconsider the past and to rewrite the present is another matter, particularly when it comes to sexual violence. For historical dramas, including those based in the Greco-Roman period, depicting sexual violence may be one way of remaining true to the historical past, but it is not the full picture of that historical past, particularly of its sexual landscape, nor is it, as we have seen, always successful in altering the narrative of gender-based sexual power dynamics.

Additionally, ancient sexual violence is not limited to film and television, but also appears in other multimedia including graphic novels and comics, such as *La Odisea* and *The Eagles of Rome*,⁶⁹ where the sexual lures of ancient Greece and Rome once again provide ample fodder for a compelling backdrop of historical-based drama. As one scholar notes, it is commonplace "that the cinematic reconstruction of history depends heavily on contemporary conceptions," where "in most instances antiquity merely serves as a framework".⁷⁰ The small percentage of Greek vase paintings which explicitly portray sexual violence and the Roman erotic art which blurs the boundaries between transgressive and socially acceptable sexualities frequently shape modern perceptions of the sexual landscape of ancient Greece and Rome. Films and television series often exploit these perceptions and viewers' prior familiarity thereof to the detriment of contemporary sensitivities to gendered sexual violence, the lure of ancient sexualities often proving irresistible.

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⁶⁷ VANSTONE 2016.

⁶⁸ TADDEO 2019, 57.

⁶⁹ NAVARRO – SAURÍ 1983 and MARINI 2015, respectively.

⁷⁰ BEIGEL 2012, 77.

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Ovid's Pygmalion and Daphne Myths in 21st-Century Body Horror Film: Pedro Almodóvar's *The Skin I Live In* and Lim Woo-Seong's *Vegetarian*

ELINA PYY

Introduction

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“The beauty of the woman as object and the screen space coalesce; she is no longer the bearer of guilt but a perfect product, whose body, stylised and fragmented by close-ups, is the content of the film, and the direct recipient of the spectator's look. [...] The power to subject another person to the will sadistically or to gaze voyeuristically is turned on to the woman as the object of both.”¹

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This quotation is from Laura Mulvey's article “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema” (1975), a now-iconic work that, in its day, opened the path for a new field of film criticism, constructed upon the combination of feminist philosophy and psychoanalysis. In this passage, Mulvey compares the works of Josef von Sternberg and Alfred Hitchcock, to demonstrate the two modes of viewing that she considers intrinsic to narrative cinema: *fetishistic scopophilia* and *sadistic voyeurism*. In the former, she argues, the erotic instinct is focused on the look alone, whereas in the latter, it is rooted in control and subjection of that which is viewed. In Mulvey's own words, the scopophilic gaze “builds up the physical beauty of the object, turning [it] into a fetish so that it becomes reassuring rather than dangerous”, while voyeurism takes pleasure in “asserting control and ... forcing a change in another person”.²

While the cinema undoubtedly is a prime medium for establishing these types of gaze, the phenomenon itself is much more ancient. The juxtaposition between the voyeuristic active/passive-male/female mechanisms in Graeco-Roman literature has been pointed out by scholars such as Patricia Salzman-Mitchell and Alison Keith, and theoretical approaches drawing from Mulvey's work have been successfully applied to study various ancient genres, such as epic, historiography and elegy.³ While the phenomenon can be observed in the works of numerous ancient authors, there is one work in particular that is outstanding in its playful alternating between the fetishistic and the voyeuristic gazes – that is, between “just looking” and profoundly *changing* the object of the gaze. I am referring, of course, to Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, a work that has been viewed by some as quasi- (or proto-)cinematographic in the ways in which it construes action and creates subject positions for the reader. Martin Winkler, for instance, suggests that Ovid's revolutionary

¹ MULVEY 1975, 812.

² MULVEY 1975, 811–12; see also O'SULLIVAN 2008, 134.

³ SALZMAN-MITCHELL 2005, KEITH 2000. For some previous studies discussing these and similar themes, see JOPLIN 1984; JOSHEL 1992; MARDER 1992; DE LUCE 1993; FREDRICK 2002.

approach to narrative progression, evident in his rapid editing and non-linear telling, in fact anticipates modern cinema – a medium which he argues to be, of its nature, an “Ovidian art” of visual metamorphosis.⁴

In addition to being proto-cinematographic, the *Metamorphoses* is arguably proto-pornographic in its approach to the feminine (or feminised) object. As Paula James points out, the narrative of the poem is continuously steered forward by “men (and gods) who take control of women and manipulate them into new forms”.⁵ The erotic pleasure implicit in the act of viewing, transforming, and controlling the object of the gaze forms the backbone of the poem, and is the key to understanding the apparent paradox between Ovid’s “sympathizing” portrayal of its many female victims, and his detailed dwelling on the markers of their suffering.⁶

In this article, I discuss some of the ways in which the *Metamorphoses* objectifies, dehumanizes and fragments the female body and, by so doing, invites the reader to possess and control it. I focus on two select narratives – the myths of Pygmalion and Daphne – which I analyze from the point of view of bodily autonomy, trauma and obsession. Furthermore, I examine how these Ovidian themes are reinterpreted in two works of twenty-first century screen fiction: *The Skin I Live In* (2011) by Pedro Almodóvar and *Vegetarian* (2009) by Lim Woo-Seong. While these films hail from rather different cinematographic and cultural traditions, they are nonetheless connected by their shared genre (psychological/body horror) and by their apparent interest in mythical tropes as instruments for discussing the themes of violence, desire and control. Furthermore, since both these movies successfully mix the two Mulveyan modes of viewing, the fetishistic and the voyeuristic, they are suitable examples to discuss in juxtaposition with Ovid’s narratives. The questions that both Almodóvar and Woo-Seong pose are the same ones that can be read between the lines of the *Metamorphoses*: What makes and defines a human being? What power do we have over our bodies (and minds)? How can one tell the Self from the Other?

My theoretical framework is based, in the first place, on Mulvey’s concepts of scopophilic instinct (pleasure in looking at another person as an erotic object) and narcissistic misrecognition (the dissolving of the difference between the object and the viewer).⁷ I will complement these with other feminist readings of the body, most importantly the one offered by Carol Adams in her groundbreaking works *The Sexual Politics of Meat* (1990) and *The Pornography of Meat* (2003). Adams discusses the conflation of the rhetorics of meat and the rhetorics of sex in consumerist culture, and views the fetishizing of women’s bodies as structurally equivalent to the systemic human violence towards animals: both phenomena require othering the object and fragmenting it into “pieces of meat”.⁸ This idea represents the posthumanist and ecofeminist strands of thinking that will be particularly useful for my understanding of the human/animal/plant dynamics, both in the *Metamorphoses* and in *Vegetarian*.⁹

There are few nowadays who would question the power of screen fiction in reimagining and reinventing ancient stories.¹⁰ While film studies have become an established part of classical reception studies, research in this field is still strongly focused on the retellings of ancient myths or ancient history (movies such as *Cleopatra*, *Troy*, or *Alexander*), and less attention has been paid on films that only implicitly borrow

⁴ WINKLER 2014, 475; See also JAMES 2011, 8.

⁵ JAMES 2011, 38.

⁶ This phenomenon was already pointed out by CURRAN 1975.

⁷ MULVEY 1975, 814–15; see also JAMES 2011, 38, O’SULLIVAN 2008, 135.

⁸ ADAMS 2020, 61.

⁹ STOBIE 2017, 791.

¹⁰ For this discussion, see e.g. WINKLER 2009, 16–20; also SALZMAN-MITCHELL – ALVARES 2019, esp. 181.

tropes from the ancient past. There is an obvious reason for this: since the popular art forms, such as cinema, have a less strongly articulated connection to the classical past than the so-called “high arts”, their allusions to it also tend to be more subtle. Indeed, sometimes they are so subtle that one is justified in asking whether they are deliberate at all – whether the contemporary author even had the ancient antecedent in mind when writing the story.¹¹

This is difficult to prove one way or another, and I suggest that trying to prove it is not the most fruitful starting point for the discussion in any case. Even when the allusions to an ancient myth in the contemporary movie do not seem deliberate, that does not automatically mean that they should be accidental. As James points out, as a result of centuries of rewriting and repetition, some ancient myths are so deeply ingrained in the culture that their central themes have a way of resurfacing in contemporary cultural texts, even if the writer was not deliberately borrowing from the Classics.¹² For this reason, instead of talking about “borrowing” or “adapting”, it might be more fruitful, as Salzman-Mitchell suggests, to ask how certain ancient and contemporary texts “employ the same archetypal pattern”.¹³ This is the approach that I adopt in this article: since neither Pedro Almodóvar nor Lim Woo-Seong has openly discussed the mythological topoi in their movies (as far as I am aware), I will refrain from seeking authorial intent for direct Ovidian references, and will instead focus on the viewer’s experience, examining how some themes shared between these films and the *Metamorphoses* mutually illuminate each other.

“This Barbie is in love with me”: Narcissistic misrecognition in Ovid’s Pygmalion narrative

In *Metamorphoses* 10, Ovid tells the story of the Cypriot sculptor Pygmalion. Pygmalion is a sworn bachelor who, after witnessing the shameful lifestyle of the women of Cyprus (Ovid discredits them with the establishment of prostitution) decides to spend his life in celibacy. However, in his longing for female companionship, he finds a way around his principle:

*niveum mira feliciter arte
sculpsit ebur formamque dedit, qua femina nasci
nulla potest, operisque sui concepit amorem.
virginis est verae facies, quam vivere credas,
et, si non obstet reverentia, velle moveri:
ars adeo latet arte sua. miratur et haurit
pectore Pygmalion simulati corporis ignes.
saepe manus operi temptantes admovet, an sit
corpus an illud ebur, nec adhuc ebur esse fatetur.
oscula dat reddique putat loquiturque tenetque
et credit tactis digitos insidere membris
et metuit, pressos veniat ne livor in artus,
et modo blanditias adhibet, modo grata puellis
munera fert [...].
ornat quoque vestibus artus,*

¹¹ See my previous discussion in PYY 2023.

¹² See JAMES 2011, 31.

¹³ SALZMAN-MITCHELL – ALVARES 2018, 11–14; see also PYY 2023, 5–7.

*dat digitis gemmas, dat longa monilia collo,
aure leves baccae, redimicula pectore pendent:
cuncta decent; nec nuda minus formosa videtur.
conlocat hanc stratis concha Sidonide tinctis
adpellatque tori sociam adclinataque colla
mollibus in plumis, tamquam sensura, reponit.*
(Ov. *met.* 10,247–58, 250–60, 263–69)

[W]ith marvelous skill he successfully sculpts snow-white ivory and endows it with beauty with which no woman could be born – and he falls in love with his own masterpiece. The appearance is that of a real girl – you would think it was alive and, if modesty did not prevent, wished to move. To such extent does art lie hidden in his art. Pygmalion marvels, and desire for the semblance of a body consumes his heart. Often, he runs his hands over the work, testing whether it is flesh or ivory, and no longer admits it to be ivory. He gives it kisses and thinks that they are returned, and speaks to it, and holds it; and, believing his fingers to grasp real limbs, fears that the pressure might cause them to bruise. Now he addresses it with compliments, now brings it gifts that please girls [...]. He also adorns the limbs with clothing, puts rings on the fingers; places long necklaces around the neck, small pearls on the ears, and ribbons hang from the breasts. Everything suits her: but she looks no less beautiful naked. He arranges her on a bed spread with cloths dyed with Tyrian seashells, and calls her his bedmate, and rests her neck against soft feather pillows, as if she could feel.¹⁴

Ovid's Pygmalion narrative has received a good deal of scholarly attention, and many have pointed out its connection to the ancient ritual practices in the Cypriot cult of Venus. Alison Sharrock and Joseph Miller argue that the story reflects, on the one hand, the *hieros gamos* between the king of Cyprus and its goddess and, on the other hand, the rumoured practice of temple-prostitution on the island.¹⁵ Furthermore, Gianpiero Rosati points out Ovid's significant debt to the earlier versions of the myth – most importantly that of the Hellenistic writer Philostephanus of Cyrene – and to other ancient stories of agalmatophilia.¹⁶ While Ovid obviously did not invent the tale, he rewrote it and visioned it anew in many significant ways: his Pygmalion is first and foremost an artist, and the object of his love is not the goddess (at least not explicitly), but rather an abstract image of the perfect woman that he has built up in his mind and brought to existence with his "miraculous skill".¹⁷

It is therefore not surprising that Ovid's story of Pygmalion has often been interpreted as a metaphorical representation of the creative process, and of the artist's narcissistic relationship with his work.¹⁸ On the other hand, it has been viewed as a philosophical discussion of the nature of "the real". Ovid describes in detail how Pygmalion gradually loses faith in his senses and his touch with reality. Jan Elsner sees this aspect of the story as exposing the deceptive nature of realistic art in general:¹⁹ Pygmalion, fully aware that

¹⁴ All translations of the *Metamorphoses* are my own.

¹⁵ SHARROCK 1991b, 170; MILLER 1988, 205. See also SALZMAN-MITCHELL 2008, 293, 298–99; LIVELEY 1999, 205.

¹⁶ Philostephanus' version has not survived, but it is referred to by Clement of Alexandria (*Protrepticus* 4,57,3) and Arnobius (*adv. nat.* 6,22). ROSATI 1983, 54–56. For other examples, see Eur. *Alc.* 348–53 and Ps.-Luc. *Am.* 13–16.

¹⁷ Sharrock discusses Pygmalion's statue as a "mortal" double or counterpart of Venus; see SHARROCK 1991b, 171–73.

¹⁸ See, e.g., SOLODOV 1988, 215, SHARROCK 1991a, 36, ELSNER 1991, 154. For "narcissistic self-absorption", see LEACH 1974, 102–42, 127; O'SULLIVAN 2008, 141.

¹⁹ ELSNER 1991, 165.

his creation cannot be real, still behaves *as if it was*. This is the very definition of a fantasy – or, as Jane O'Sullivan puts it, “a precarious path between fantasy and fullblown fetishism”.²⁰

It is noteworthy that Ovid is very brief in his description of the sculpting process itself, whereas he dwells in details when describing Pygmalion's *viewing* of the statue.²¹ Furthermore, as Victor Stoichita perceptively notes, the author actively pulls the reader into this process: “*you* would think it was alive” (*quam vivere credas*) invites the reader to identify with Pygmalion and transforms them into “a privileged witness of an erotic scenario”.²² In fact, because of the emphasis that Ovid puts on Pygmalion's looking, touching, accessorising and addressing of the statue, the reader gets an impression that what happens *after* the sculpture is finished is a much more important part of the creative (and erotic) process than the actual sculpting itself. It is, in Mulvey's words, “the building up of the physical beauty of the object” that really *makes* the ivory maiden – that makes her “real” in the mind of the viewer. Remarkably, this impression is strengthened by language: after his lengthy description of Pygmalion's veneration of the statue, Ovid says that *she* is “no less beautiful naked”, suddenly referring to the work in the feminine – as if that was the very moment when the ivory begins to come alive.²³

In reality, however, it is still mere fantasy at that point, and the actual miracle of life takes place only after a divine intervention. At the annual festival of Venus, Pygmalion bashfully pleads to the goddess to give him a bedmate “just like his ivory girl” (*similis mea - - eburnae*).²⁴ Afterwards, as he returns home to embrace his creation as usual, he finds it miraculously altered:

[...] *visa tepere est;*
admovet os iterum, manibus quoque pectora temptat:
temptatum mollescit ebur positoque rigore
subsidit digitis ceditque, [...]
dum stupet et dubie gaudet fallique veretur,
rursus amans rursusque manu sua vota retractat.
corpus erat! saliunt temptatae pollice venae.
tum vero Paphius plenissima concipit heros
verba, quibus Veneri grates agat, oraue tandem
ore suo non falsa premit, dataque oscula virgo
sensit et erubuit timidumque ad lumina lumen
attollens pariter cum caelo vidit amantem.

(Ov. *met.* 10,281–84; 287–94)

She seems to grow warm! He moves his lips over her again, and also with his hands feels her breast: the ivory softens at his touch and, losing its stiffness, yields to his fingers [...]. While the lover marvels and hesitantly rejoices, he still, afraid of being mistaken, again and again verifies the fulfilment of his prayers with his hand. It was flesh! The veins throb under his thumb. Then indeed the hero of Paphos overflows with words to thank Venus – and finally, he presses his mouth against the real lips.

²⁰ O'SULLIVAN 2008, 154; see also STOICHITA 2008, 3; SALZMAN-MITCHELL – ALVARES 2019, 193.

²¹ ELSNER 1991, 155.

²² STOICHITA 2008, 9.

²³ STOICHITA 2008, 15.

²⁴ Ov. *met.* 10,276.

The girl feels the kisses that are given and blushes; and, raising her shy eyes to the light, she sees at once the sky and the lover.

Pygmalion's fumbling and probing of the girl represents the completion of his artistic process: as Stoichita notes, his repetitive palpation is symmetrical with the act of sculpting.²⁵ Moreover, it is reminiscent of erotic petting: while Pygmalion is looking for signs of life in the body, he is simultaneously looking for signs of arousal.²⁶ Or perhaps we should read the passage as describing *his* arousal, which is merely reflected in his creation?²⁷ After all, even after she becomes flesh, the ivory girl has no subjectivity independent of her maker. As Sharrock points out, Ovid's description of the statue's awakening strongly emphasises Pygmalion's sense-perception and projects his thoughts, feelings, and wishes onto the statue.²⁸ The seductive blurring of the line between the Self and the Other, the viewer and the object, absorbs the reader into this game of narcissistic misrecognition – who is it that we are identifying with? Whose arousal arouses us?

The ivory girl's lack of subjective experiences is furthermore emphasized by the language, which – even as she becomes a person – denies her personhood and fragments her into objectified body parts. Ovid's description lingers on her lips, breasts, limbs, eyes, fingers, neck, and ears. Salzman-Mitchell entertains an interesting hypothesis, according to which Ovid's language reflects the actual process of assembling the statue out of individual pieces, as was typical of ivory constructs.²⁹ Pygmalion's perfect woman would therefore be a puzzle assembled from separate female shapes that he finds pleasing, “a sort of female Frankenstein, but pretty”.³⁰ Notably, this sort of fetishistic fragmentation of the body works towards exerting control over it: as Adams argues, in regard to pornography, “parts are less than a whole. A whole person has autonomy and individuality. A woman served into sexualized body parts cannot be whole or autonomous or an individual”.³¹

Thus, on the level both of imagery and of vocabulary, the narrative blurs the line between a human being and an inanimate object. The ivory girl's consent to sexual relations or to partnership with Pygmalion is a negligible concern, because she is not “real”, only an extension of his artistic persona. The only way she exists is in relation to him; the only way in which she can ever become alive is in his arms, and therefore, asking for her consent would be as futile as asking for a child's consent to be born. To the contemporary feminist reader, this mindset can appear problematic because, by using the female body as a narrative *locus* to disrupt the categories of “human” and “object”, the story ends up by aligning women in general with the category of inanimate objects, and implies that the female consent in general might be a trivial concern – which, of course, to some extent, it was in the Graeco-Roman world.³²

Besides blurring the line between a human being and an object, the story blurs the line between love, sex and violence in a manner that is familiar to us from Ovid's love elegies: tenderness is mixed with passionate zeal, soft kisses with fingers pressing into the limbs and bruising the skin. Like the many sex scenes

²⁵ STOICHITA 2008, 14.

²⁶ SHARROCK 1991a, 47–48.

²⁷ For further discussion, see SHARROCK 1991a, who points out an interesting feature of this passage: *salio* and *vena* both have sexual overtones, but applied to the male physique. She suggests tentatively that “[s]ince this is the story of P's self-centred sexuality, perhaps the terminology hints that arousing her arouses him”. SHARROCK 1991a, 47–48 and n. 66.

²⁸ SHARROCK 1991a, 47; SHARROCK 1991b, 172–73. See also MILLER 1988, 207.

²⁹ Note also “snow-white ivory” in Roman poetry as an erotic-aesthetic epithet that is used to refer to eroticized body parts: SALZMAN-MITCHELL 2008, 308–09. See. E.g., Prop. 2,1,9, Ov. *am.* 3,7,7; Ov. *her.* 20,59 (for *niveus*, see Tib. 1,4,12; 1,5,66; Ov. *am.* 2,4,41; 2,16,29; 3,2,42).

³⁰ SALZMAN-MITCHELL 2008, 308; SALZMAN-MITCHELL – ALVARES 2018, 431. See, also, Zeuxis' painting of Helen in Cic. *inv.* 2,1.

³¹ ADAMS 2003, 75–77.

³² For further discussion, see COHEN 1993; MOSES 1993; OGDEN 1998 [2002]; NGUYEN 2006.

in Ovid's *Amores* for example, the narrative eroticizes violence and takes voyeuristic pleasure in the helplessness of the object who – much like the ideal bride in the Graeco-Roman culture – has no character of her own, but can be molded and shaped to fit her lover's tastes.

Pygmalion's creation of the "perfect woman" would therefore seem to combine the fetishistic and the sadistic-voyeuristic approaches to the object of the gaze. While his misogynistic fear makes him forsake real women, his desire for the feared object drives him to construct a tame and compliant substitute.³³ In the end, Pygmalion is not content with the erotic pleasure driven from the act of beholding his creation, but yearns to possess and control her both sexually and socially. And yet, it is still not a "real" woman that he seeks to control – but a substitute that feels *real enough*, a projection of his own desire. According to Adams, "[w]e don't realize that the act of viewing another as an object and the act of believing that another *is* an object are actually different acts, because our culture has collapsed them into one".³⁴ In Pygmalion's case, this collapse proves fatal, as he mistakenly believes that his artistic skill has enabled him to achieve the impossible: to create out of thin air another human being. Tragically, however, what might seem like the identifiable Other is nothing more than a shadow of the Self.

"Woman", violence, and vulnerability in "The Skin I Live In"

The Pygmalion myth has excited the Western imagination for centuries: the male protagonist's obsession with an artificial woman has been a recurring topic in both visual arts and literature.³⁵ It is therefore not surprising that the cinema, too, exploited the story from its very beginning: Georges Méliès' *Pygmalion et Galathée* (1898) was one of the first movies ever made.³⁶ In the twentieth century, the fascination of the theme did not in the least diminish, and traces of the Pygmalion myth could be observed in a multitude of different cinematographic narratives. Most typically, they would appear in the so-called "make-over movies" where the male protagonist "perfects" an actual flesh-and-blood woman (*My Fair Lady*, *Pretty Woman*, *She's All That*) or in the genres of sci-fi or (comedy-)horror where the female android is built from scratch (*The Stepford Wives*, *Weird Science*, *Blade Runner*, *Bride of Re-Animator*).

In the new millennium, the rapid scientific and technological development has generated new fantasies about "the perfect woman", created by the means of human cloning, robotics, and artificial intelligence (e.g. *SlmOne*, *Her*, or *Ex Machina*). As Salzman-Mitchell and Alvares point out, this type of twist on the old tale can fruitfully play into the posthumanist and feminist discussions, leading us to question not only the gendered narrative dynamics, but our very frame of reference as a species.³⁷ At the same time, a more traditional approach that deals with the fantasy of an "imaginary girlfriend" can be observed in dramas such as *Lars and the Real Girl* and *Ruby Sparks*. As James notes, as the story of an ideal woman reappears through the centuries: she gets metamorphosed into a variety of cultural stereotypes – the range of her reincarnations displays the ever-changing face of femininity.³⁸ Importantly, the modern ivory maiden is rarely a weak-willed extension of her maker's persona – more often than not, she outgrows the role and shakes up

³³ O'SULLIVAN 2008, 134. The obvious precedent and model for Ovid's ivory woman in this respect is, of course, Pandora in Hesiod's *Works and Days* and *Theogonia*. Sharrock suggests that Ovid reproduces and intensifies the apparent misogyny of Hesiod's story, replacing the "deceptive" mind of Woman with a compliant and subservient one. SHARROCK 1991b, 174–76.

³⁴ ADAMS 2020 [2003], 7.

³⁵ See, e.g. TOMÁS – JUSTO 2005, STOICHITA 2008.

³⁶ WINKLER 2014, 471.

³⁷ SALZMAN-MITCHELL – ALVARES 2018, 183.

³⁸ JAMES 2011, 21, 30.

the Ovidian narrative by posing questions about the artist's power over his work, and about the distinction between "real" and "artificial".

The Skin I Live In (2011) is a psychological body horror movie by Pedro Almodóvar. It is loosely based on Thierry Jonquet's novel *Mygale* (1984), but Almodóvar rewrites the plot almost completely, remaining faithful only to the central themes of horror, revenge and creative obsession. The protagonist of the movie is Robert Ledgard, an aesthetic surgeon renowned for his experimental work on artificial skin. Ledgard's life takes a dramatic turn when his mentally ill daughter gets raped at a party – or that is at least what he believes to have happened. Embarking on a personal vendetta, Ledgard kidnaps the young man, Vincent, who is responsible. He holds Vincent hostage in his private mansion-clinic for six years, in the course of which time he makes the youth undergo countless surgical procedures, gradually turning him into a beautiful woman whom he calls by the name of Vera. The name strongly echoes Ovid's recurring puns on the "real" in his Pygmalion narrative – *verae*, *(vi)vere*, *re-vere(ntia)*, *(mo)veri* (10, 250–51).³⁹ Thus, from the very beginning, the movie exposes its fragile balancing act between reality and imagination, and casts its male protagonist as a version of Pygmalion, who wavers between the two.

What makes the situation even more complicated is that Vera is a spitting image of Ledgard's late wife, Gal. We never see Gal in the movie, but we are told that her face was badly burnt in a car accident, and that she killed herself after accidentally seeing her own reflection. This detail evokes gloomy associations with other Ovidian narratives: Narcissus, who meets his death as a result of "knowing himself", and Orpheus (the internal narrator of Pygmalion's tale in the *Metamorphoses*), who desperately tries to bring his wife back from death. The difference between Ovid's Pygmalion and Almodóvar's Ledgard is nevertheless meaningful: whereas Pygmalion constructs a fetishistic substitute for the abstract concept of "Woman", Ledgard's creation has a flesh-and-blood referent that he is trying to reproduce – wife as well as mother.⁴⁰ His actions are motivated in equal measure by rage, resentment, grief and love. While none of these emotions can be observed in Ledgard's cool and expressionless face, his work betrays them, since they are clearly written on Vera's features – thus, the creation truly becomes the mirror of its maker.

Since it is a slow and painstaking task to turn Vincent into Vera, Ledgard is forced to work on him piece by piece. In one scene, we see a headless female mannequin spread out on the operating table, anatomically dissected with a black marker. The camera placed in the ceiling shows Ledgard modelling a small piece of artificial skin on the mannequin's stomach. Later, we find him examining Vera's body, which is covered in faint scars that correspond to the lines drawn on the mannequin. The horror implicit in these scenes lies in the viewer's realization that Vincent must watch his body disappear piece by piece, while trying to cling to his identity and humanity. Whereas Ovid's ivory maiden only had to wake up once to find herself imprisoned in a fragmented and objectified body, Vincent goes through the trauma over and over again, since the "dismemberment" of the body works towards the same end as in the story of Pygmalion: it dehumanises the object and strips them of autonomy and subjectivity, thereby asserting the viewer's control over them.

The brutal climax of Vincent's metamorphosis is the genital reconstruction that Ledgard performs on his victim. It is an intriguing part of the narrative since, while the genitalia alone obviously does not a woman make, it does make one vulnerable to a particular type of violence that women encounter. Vera is

³⁹ See Elsner's discussion of Ovid's vocabulary in ELSNER 1991, 160.

⁴⁰ This aspect of agalmatophilia is not absent from ancient literature; in Euripides' *Alcestis*, Admetus wishes for a marble copy of his dead wife, so that he could "hold it" (Eur. *Alc.* 348–53). As for the modern rewritings, in G.W. Gilbert's *Pygmalion and Galatea*, the statue representing the perfect woman is shaped after Pygmalion's (living) wife Cynisca. For further discussion, see MILLER 1988.

vaginally raped several times in the course of the film, both by Ledgard himself and by his half-brother and antagonist, Zeca. It gradually becomes obvious that, while Vincent is held hostage in the remote mansion, the real prison is the female flesh that not only is incongruous with his gender identity but also makes him vulnerable to sexual violence. In a sadistic manner, Ledgard designs a punishment that, in his mind, fits the crime. He avenges the rape of his daughter by imprisoning the rapist in the vulnerability of the female body and by turning the aggressor into a victim.⁴¹

This particular feature of the movie once again draws into the story other themes and narratives from ancient mythology. The desire to escape the female body as the *locus* of violence is not uncommon in Greek myth, and especially in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, where bodies are fluid and everything is in a constant state of change, it is a recurring theme. Perhaps the best example is the story of Caenis, a young woman who is abused by Neptune. As an atonement for the rape, the god promises to grant her one wish. Caenis does not need long to think about it:

*"magnum" Caenis ait "facit haec iniuria votum,
tale pati iam posse nihil; da, femina ne sim:
omnia praestiteris."*

(Ov. *met.* 12,203–05)

This harm", Caenis said, "evokes a great desire to be unable ever again to suffer such a thing. Let me not be a woman: then you will have given me everything.

The story of Caenis demonstrates the rather ruthless mindset that one can sometimes observe in Ovid's stories about the interactions between men and women, gods and humans. It would seem that the main reason why women get raped is simply because they are women, and the only way to escape that fate is to not be one. This idea, while it certainly does not apply to every aspect of the ancient Graeco-Roman culture, speaks of the naturalized hierarchies and power dynamics of the ancient world – and, more alarmingly, of the contemporary world. The themes that Almodóvar lifts from the *Metamorphoses* are some of the most off-putting features of the ancient thinking around gender, and it is baffling to see how well they sit in his contemporary narrative. Although the story about a mad scientist building a bride of Frankenstein in his basement is excessive and fantastical, the points that it raises about the themes of gender, violence, and power are real and topical. The fragmentation and objectification of the female body in commercial and popular culture, the victim-blaming inherent in rape culture, and the use of rape as an instrument of anger and control are all phenomena that are strongly present in the liberal democracies of the twenty-first century. While *The Skin I Live In* can, with good reason, be accused of engaging in the fetishistic and voyeuristic traditions of narrative cinema, it uses these techniques to reveal the reality under its many layers of fantasy – a reality in which sometimes *having* a body is enough to have that body dismembered, exploited and taken away.

Rape, resistance and rejecting the body in "Vegetarian"

The themes that connect Ovid's and Almodóvar's stories about man-made women can likewise be observed in Lim Woo-Seong's *Vegetarian*, an erotic body-horror film released in South Korea in 2010. The movie is

⁴¹ This aspect of the narrative also reminds the reader of the myth of Actaeon, who is transformed from hunter to prey. See Ov. *met.* 3,138–252.

based on Han Kang's 2007 novel of the same name; however, while the novel became a critically acclaimed international bestseller upon its English translation, the movie at the time of its release received only limited attention and distribution. It is an interesting point of comparison to *The Skin I Live In*, since while both movies are based on novels, the directors' approaches to their material are very different. Compared to Almodóvar's free interpretation of Jonquet's *Mygale*, Lim Woo-Seong's storytelling remains remarkably faithful to Han Kang's prose. The plot is almost identical to that of the book, and in terms of style as well, the movie clearly strives to maintain the minimalistic and gloomy atmosphere of the book. The monotonous color palette is predominantly grey and beige, the dialogue is bare-bones and the actors' facial expressions and body language are reserved and minimalistic. This is doubtless a very deliberate approach, since it makes the sudden bursts of emotion (and the sudden bursts of color) strike the viewer more strongly.

Vegetarian tells the story of a young housewife, Yeong-hye, who appears to be living a perfectly ordinary and uneventful life, until one day she suddenly decides to stop eating meat. The reason for this is her violent dreams, the content of which she cannot remember exactly, but which cause her to feel a strong revulsion against anything to do with meat. Yeong-hye's family is anything but supportive of her decision, and they repeatedly violate her personal boundaries. When she tries to abstain from sex with her husband, he rapes her. In another disturbing scene, Yeong-hye's father violently force-feeds her a piece of meat while the entire family is watching. As a result of these humiliating experiences, Yeong-hye becomes more and more isolated from her family and the surrounding society. She responds to her growing anxiety by eating less and less of anything, hoping to turn herself from an animal into a plant.

The most obvious mythical parallel for Yeong-hye's story is, naturally, the myth of Daphne. In *Metamorphoses* 1, Ovid depicts Daphne as a nymph who, wanting to forsake the female socio-sexual role expected from her, rejects marriage and motherhood and chooses perpetual virginity instead. The narrative climax of the episode is the passage where Apollo, struck by Daphne's beauty, chases her through the forest in erotic pursuit:

*sic deus et virgo est hic spe celer, illa timore.
qui tamen insequitur pennis adiutus Amoris,
ocior est requiemque negat tergoque fugacis
inminet et crinem sparsum cervicibus adflat.
viribus absumptis expalluit illa citaeque
victa labore fugae spectans Peneidas undas
'fer, pater,' inquit 'opem! si flumina numen habetis,
qua nimium placui, mutando perde figuram!'
vix prece finita torpor gravis occupat artus,
mollia cinguntur tenui praecordia libro,
in frondem crines, in ramos bracchia crescunt,
pes modo tam velox pigris radicibus haeret,
ora cacumen habet: remanet nitor unus in illa.
Hanc quoque Phoebus amat positaque in stipite dextra
sentit adhuc trepidare novo sub cortice pectus
complexusque suis ramos ut membra lacertis
oscula dat ligno; refugit tamen oscula lignum.*

(Ov. *met.* 10,549–56)

Thus the god and the virgin run: he is driven by anticipation, she by fear. Yet he follows faster, Amor giving him wings, and denies her rest, grazes her back as she flees and breathes down the disheveled hair around her neck. Her strength gone, she turned pale, worn out by the exertion of her swift flight. Seeing the waves of Peneus, she spoke: "Help me, father! If your waters have divine power, change me and destroy this form that made me too pleasing!" Barely is her prayer finished when a heavy numbness takes hold of her limbs, thin bark circles her soft breast, her hair grows into leaves and her arms into tree branches. Her feet, so swift just a moment ago, are stuck to stagnant roots, the crown hides her face. Her splendid beauty is the only thing that is left of her. Even as such did Phoebus love her and, placing his hand against the tree trunk, could still feel her heart palpitate under the new bark. And he embraced her branches as if they were parts of real arms and kissed the wood. But the wood shunned his kisses.

In Ovid's version, one can clearly observe the idea of the female body as a prison. Daphne's anxiety is turned against her body, which she accuses of being too attractive – and, just like Caenis, she looks for a long-term solution. Escaping from the hands of Apollo is not enough, because after him, there presumably would be another man, and then another. The only way to break the circle of violence is to break out from the prison of the flesh.

Notably, Daphne's story has obvious parallels with the tale of Pygmalion: in particular, the lines where Apollo fondles the tree and seeks a pulse under the bark are structurally equivalent to the scene where Pygmalion looks for signs of life in his ivory girl. Furthermore, the two episodes are connected by deeper levels of meaning: as Salzman-Mitchell notes, the hardening and softening of bodies is a central theme in the *Metamorphoses*.⁴² Whereas Pygmalion's ivory girl turns soft and gains a human body to become a sexual object, Daphne goes through a reverse process, turning hard and thus escaping the fetishistic consumption and fragmentation of her body. This is essentially what happens to Yeong-hye, too: as her body loses its softness, it becomes androgynous, something a little less human – and definitely less of a woman. Like Daphne, Yeong-hye wants to forsake the feminine role expected from her, and in order to do so, she has to take her rebellion against the social norms to the extremes, and to turn her desperation and her willpower against her body.

Vegetarian has been viewed as a depiction of the complex interactions between the traditional norms of Korean society and "modern ethical models".⁴³ Director Lim Woo-Seong has described the movie as a "dark and uneasy portrait of the human condition", focused on the theme of patriarchal violence.⁴⁴ Indeed, Yeong-hye's relationship with her body seems to have gone astray at an early age, as result of her father's abusive behavior. The violence that she then suffers in the hands of her husband repeats and reproduces the experience of not being in control of what happens to her body. Caitlin Stobie, in her discussion of Han Kang's novel, points out how the narrative repeatedly revolves around Yeong-hye's intimate body parts – her breasts, buttocks, and crotch – that are "used as vectors through which questions of gender, sexuality, and infection are explored".⁴⁵ This phenomenon is accentuated even further in the movie, where the hand-held camera follows Yeong-hye and repeatedly zooms into her individual body parts, voyeuristically dissecting her into "pieces of meat". One cannot help but think of Ovid's Daphne narrative:

⁴² SALZMAN-MITCHELL 2008, 303.

⁴³ STOBIE 2017, 788.

⁴⁴ QUINN 2012.

⁴⁵ STOBIE 2017, 793–94.

spectat inornatos collo pendere capillos
 [...] *videt igne micantes*
sideribus similes oculos, videt oscula, quae non
est vidisse satis; laudat digitosque manusque
brachiaque et nudos media plus parte lacertos;
si qua latent, meliora putat.

(Ov. *met.* 1, 497–52)

[Apollo] gazes at her unadorned hair hanging around her neck [...] He sees her eyes, twinkling like stars, sees her lips (nor is seeing them enough!); he praises her fingers, hands, and arms, and her half-bare shoulders; and that what is hidden, he suspects to be even more beautiful.

This passage aptly captures the shift from fetishistic scopophilia to sadistic voyeurism. While Apollo devours Daphne with his eyes, *non est vidisse satis* denotes the moment when he becomes aware of his need to possess her sexually and socially, and to mold her to fulfil his needs. It is the same realization that, in the tale of Pygmalion, is expressed in the artist's bashful prayer to Venus, whereby he indirectly asks for his creation to become flesh.

In *Vegetarian*, the role of the creator-lover is played by Yeong-hye's brother-in-law who, driven mad by his passion for her "non-human" appearance, gazes at her, fantasizes about her, and finally, decides to carry out his fantasies by asking her to model for his video installation. In one of the key scenes of the movie, he covers Yeong-hye's naked body with painted flowers, while she lies on a tarp under bright spotlights. We now look at Yeong-hye through a double frame, as the film camera follows the screen of the artist's camera. The gaze of the viewer moves over Yeong-hye's entire body, never showing her entire, but focusing on detail after detail. The scene strongly evokes Ovid's account of Pygmalion, whose lustful gaze devours the fragmented body of his ivory statue, part by part, in a similar manner. Likewise, it calls to mind Ledgard's operating room in *The Skin I Live In*, where the doctor carefully cuts out pieces of skin and assembles them on Vera's body.

What is particularly interesting about these scenes is the passive receptiveness of the female body: the only parts of Yeong-hye that move, that react to the touch of the brush on her skin, are her wandering eyes and her quivering fingertips. In the Pygmalion story, as Judith Hallett notes, even when the ivory girl becomes alive, "only a small part of her body, her face, responds physically to her lover".⁴⁶ In the *Skin I Live In*, the paralysis of the female body is even more complete: although we never see Ledgard operating on Vincent, the heavy anesthetic under which he is would make him hardly more responsive than the headless mannequin (a copy of a copy, *simulatio corporis!*). In all these stories, the raw material that is "Woman" is fragmented into individual pieces on which the male creator works individually, before piecing them back together.⁴⁷ During this process, the body oscillates between life and lifelessness. Adams, who points out the blurry line between objectification and necrophilia, seems to be onto something when she notes that "making a subject into an object seems like a fetish for dead bodies".⁴⁸ In all three narratives discussed here, it is of crucial importance that the female body is alive, but not *lively* – that it is "real", but just barely.

⁴⁶ HALLETT 2009, 119.

⁴⁷ See SALZMAN-MITCHELL 2008, 308.

⁴⁸ ADAMS 2020 [2003], 132.

Adams' theoretical framework is suitable for discussing the intersections of gender and violence in *Vegetarian* in general: she perceives an intrinsic connection in the ways in which the consumerist culture normalizes, on the one hand, the objectification of women's bodies and, on the other hand, animal oppression and consumption. Furthermore, Adams views farmed animals as stand-ins for women, in that both are imputed to *desire* their own consumption.⁴⁹ A similar sort of ecofeminist reading has, in fact, been applied to *The Vegetarian* (the novel) by Stobie, who argues that the underlying reason for Yeong-hye's self-starvation is her profound understanding of the intersection of varying forms of oppression between all living beings.⁵⁰ Yeong-hye "navigates practical ramifications of using posthumanist theory to escape the structures of sexist, heteronormative, repronormative expectations".⁵¹ In other words, like Ovid's Daphne, she finds renouncing her human body the only effective way of renouncing society, its norms and prescribed roles, and its all-pervasive violence.

Transformations of rape victims (or victims of attempted rape) into non-human creatures in the *Metamorphoses* have been a topic of much academic inquiry, and very often scholars have emphasized the symbolism inherent in these episodes: the idea of rape as a dehumanizing experience, and as something that robs the victim of subjectivity and personhood.⁵² What has not been discussed in equal measure is that, from the viewpoint of posthumanist theory, this is not always necessarily a bad thing. In Daphne's case, the world of flora becomes a safe haven where the dangers and the hurt that follow from having a human body – a female body – no longer exist.⁵³ Similarly, one could ask whether Pygmalion's ivory maiden particularly benefits from turning into a live and conscious sex object, or whether she had been better off as "raw material".

The same applies to Yeong-hye in *Vegetarian*: after her sister In-hye finds out about the bodypainting sessions and the sexual relationship between her husband and her sister, the narrative develops rapidly towards the dramatic finale. Yeong-hye, whose condition deteriorates quickly, is placed in a psychiatric hospital, where she continues to starve herself. She now believes that she is truly transforming into a tree: she spends long stretches of time practicing handstands, trying to "root herself" into the ground, and claims to be able to survive on water and sunlight. On one occasion, she escapes the hospital grounds and is found deep in the woods, standing in the rain "nourishing herself". "I am not an animal anymore", she proclaims – renouncing, both in words and in actions the fetishizing and consuming gaze of the society (and of the viewer of the movie) upon her body.

Intriguingly, what seems to others a tragic case of a crumbling psyche appears to Yeong-hye herself to be a source of great relief and tranquility. I am inclined to disagree with Stobie's reading, which views Yeong-hye as "ostensibly masking" her anorexia nervosa as "mystical, ecological awareness".⁵⁴ In a story that is essentially about a woman's desperate attempt to reclaim power over her body, it seems tragically ironic that, even when breaking free from this body, Yeong-hye is unable to control the others' interpretation of it. She is clearly most at peace when she is the farthest away from her humanity – and apparently, this is

⁴⁹ ADAMS 2020 [2003], 12, 17, 112.

⁵⁰ STOBIE 2017, 794.

⁵¹ STOBIE 2017, 799.

⁵² DE LUCE 1993, 307–11; also CURRAN 1978; JOPLIN 1984. MORALES (2020, 68–69) reads these transformations as "imaginative dramatizations of the paralysis and dissociation caused by trauma".

⁵³ Note, however, that Daphne does not completely escape objectification or fragmentation in tree form, either. In Ovid's version, Apollo claims the bay tree as his sacred plant; and it is well known that in the Roman culture, parts of it (the leaves) were used to make victory crowns, symbols of civilization and conquest.

⁵⁴ STOBIE 2017, 796.

such a terrifying thought that the viewer is tempted to regard as madness what is, in fact, sanity in a mad world.

Vegetarian is a powerful and disturbing story of unresolved trauma, fragmentation of the Self and anxiety directed against the body. It is intriguing that, while the myth of Daphne historically has been one of the most popular mythical topics in Western art and literature, it has not been tackled in Western screen fiction in the past decades. Instead, in Lim Woo-Seong's *Vegetarian* these Ovidian themes are powerfully present, whether intentionally or not. To my knowledge, the director has not publicly addressed the mythological themes in his work; as for the author Han Kang, she told *Literary Hub* that the idea of a woman transforming into a plant simply "came to her".⁵⁵ Of course, as James points out, cultural influence can take either direct or unconscious forms, and the fact that it is not directly articulated does not mean that it did not exist.⁵⁶ Furthermore, it is crucial to acknowledge that classical mythology does not have a monopoly over the themes of body trauma and shattering of the Self, nor over the questions regarding the limits and definitions of humanity. On the contrary, these themes are certainly very universal, as are – sadly – the violent forms of patriarchal control and the fetishizing of women's bodies. Therefore, as Saltzman-Mitchell notes, similar plot elements can easily arise because of similar cultural realities, but independently of each other – "just as in nature different organs can evolve in unconnected species".⁵⁷ Yeong-hye and Daphne should perhaps be viewed, not so much as two trees growing from a bundle of shared roots, but rather as two trees growing on the opposite sides of the world, but sustained by a similar soil.

Conclusion

The idea of the female body as passive raw material for the creative and erotic pursuits of man is one of the features that cuts across narrative traditions from antiquity to our day. Conceiving of "Woman" as malleable material to look at, build, perfect and possess is a theme that has titillated the creative imagination of writers, artists and directors for centuries, and that shows no signs of diminishing in the new millennium. In this article, I have examined this phenomenon in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, Pedro Almodóvar's *The Skin I Live In* and Lim Woo-Seong's *Vegetarian*, seeking to demonstrate that the pleasure in looking at another person as an erotic object and the failure to distinguish between subject and object are themes that resonate in all three. In all these narratives, the female body is reduced to an object of male fantasy and imagination; it serves the purpose of reflecting the desires and anxieties of its creator, becoming an extension of his art or science. Little by little, the creative geniuses of these stories move from the sphere of fetishism to that of sadistic control, attempting to carry out their fantasies and possess the desired object. While doing so, they gradually lose their grasp of reality and tread the line between sanity and madness. In Mulvey's words, man "falls in love with a perfect image of female beauty and mystery"⁵⁸ – and, in his state of self-deception, fails to admit that, like Narcissus, he is merely glaring at the image of his own desire.

While Ovid's, Almodóvar's, and Woo-Seong's narratives are focused on delivering the viewpoint of the desiring subject, they do occasionally permit a glimpse into the psyche of the female (or feminized)

⁵⁵ PATRICK 2016. *The Vegetarian* has a background in "Fruits of my woman" (2000), a short story by Han Kang that examines the same theme but from a more light-hearted perspective. LEE 2016, 66. The book also seems to share many elements with Margaret Atwood's first novel *The Edible Woman* (1969), although no direct link between the two can be established.

⁵⁶ JAMES 2011, 31.

⁵⁷ SALZMAN-MITCHELL – ALVARES 2018, 6.

⁵⁸ MULVEY 1975, 814.

object, as well. To the objects, the female body inevitably appears as a prison of the flesh: as something that shackles them to the predestined social roles and renders them vulnerable to sexual violence and patriarchal control. This phenomenon doubtless reflects the gendered power dynamics of the societies and cultures in which these stories were written – however, the fact that the three texts are both chronologically and culturally far apart from each other perhaps says something about the universal nature of these issues. A world where the female body is routinely fetishized, sexualized and fragmented into an object of the gaze is a world that gives rise to the idea that the problem lies with the body itself, and that one might be better off without it. The reason why some of the most disturbing and dehumanizing topoi from Ovid's *Metamorphoses* fit so well with the modern body horror genre is probably that they are recognizable and relatable to the contemporary viewer. Underneath their excessive and fantastical plotlines, these stories reveal aspects of our contemporary reality that are more “classical” – that is, more violent and misogynist – than one might be willing to admit.

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