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**Reading Rape in Ovid’s Metamorphoses: A Test-Case Lesson**[[1]](#footnote-1)\*

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My decision to teach a test-case lesson on how best to handle issues surrounding rape was inspired by the roundtable discussion “Teaching Rape Texts in Classical Literature” at the 2009 APA annual meeting. My participation in the dialogue turned out to be well timed; I was in the middle of preparing a course on gender and sexuality in the ancient world for the upcoming spring semester. As I was teaching a course that was concerned with relevant subject matter, I decided that rather than ignore the question of rape, I would dedicate a lesson slot to discussing it. This would give me an opportunity to implement some of the suggestions made at the roundtable, as well as to explore my own ideas about how to approach the issue. Like many classicists, I was not able to structure my course to accommodate a substantial project or unit specifically dealing with rape. Indeed, it is often not appropriate for us to do so; for instance, while a four-week unit may make sense in a class on women and war in the ancient world, it feels out of place in Mythology 101. That does not mean, however, that we cannot make space for explicit discussion in the classroom. This paper describes the way I approached this situation, and my students’ reactions to the lesson I taught; I hope it will provide some suggestions of how, even in a single lesson, we can help our students engage with a controversial and sensitive topic.

Several considerations informed my lesson planning. As my class was taught out of the history department at Rutgers-Newark, I would not be teaching classics students; most of my students had little or no background knowledge about the ancient world. They could also come from any year and any major, as there was no prerequisite for the class. This was a teaching challenge in itself, and meant I had to be very selective with my material and goals. I also had to consider the diverse student classroom I would be facing. Rutgers-Newark was declared the most diverse national university in the United States for the twelfth consecutive year in the *U.S. News and World Report* of “America’s Best Colleges 2009”; my students would bring a wide range of different racial, religious, and cultural backgrounds to whatever text I gave them. I also had to be prepared for the possibility that a survivor of rape might participate in the lesson. I wanted the lesson to be scheduled at a point in the term when the class had become comfortable as a group, and when they were not concerned about term papers or other major assessments.

I decided that the most efficient way to focus a discussion would be through translations of two episodes from Ovid which would catch the students’ imagination: the story of Procne, Philomela, and Tereus, and the account of the rape of Proserpina.[[2]](#footnote-2) I scheduled the lesson immediately after students had read excerpts of Ovid from the *Amores* and *Ars Amatoria*, so they had some familiarity with him as an author. Since the session was the twenty-first out of twenty-eight in the course, the students had become accustomed to each other and had created a cooperative and respectful classroom environment. In preparation for the class, I read widely through pedagogical literature dealing with questions both of how to teach difficult texts successfully and how to educate students effectively about rape; a short list of articles and books that I found helpful is footnoted at the end of this article.[[3]](#footnote-3)

To prepare students for this class, at the end of the previous class I announced that we would be discussing sensitive material, and that I expected them to behave like adults. The class topic was also clearly marked on the course schedule as “Rape in Latin Poetry,” so students were aware from the start of term that the course would cover these issues. For each set of primary readings, students were required to answer questions posted on the course Blackboard website and respond to another student’s answers; this was part of their grade, and also a reasonably effective way of making sure the preparatory reading got done. The questions posted for this particular lesson included, “What motivates Pluto and Tereus? What are the differences between the two rapes? Is there a difference between what Ovid writes and what Ovid thinks?” These questions were designed to get students thinking about the ground I wanted to cover in the lesson, and to raise the issue of whether a writer automatically approves of what he writes about.

We began the lesson with a strong reminder that I expected students to engage in discussion respectfully and maturely. I next asked my students to think about how their own background and history had formed their reactions to the readings, and then to share that response with the person sitting next to them. After a few minutes, I invited students to share feedback with the whole class. This meant students had a chance to examine their own reactions to the text without the vulnerability of scrutiny by all their peers; but it also meant that we could begin to analyze what sorts of assumptions about rape they were carrying with them. This exercise also highlighted the diversity of the class and the way in which the intersections of different cultures help to reveal the social constructions we ourselves inhabit. For instance, one student spoke about the provocative way that women dressed in her Puerto Rican culture, and her mother’s warnings to her about how her dress and behavior could be misinterpreted when she went out dancing with her friends. Another student raised the point that rape could happen to anyone, which gave me an opportunity to explain that although the assigned texts dealt solely with female rape, male rape was recorded and recognized at Rome. The discussion connected the texts to the students’ own experiences, but did not put any students under pressure to share potentially sensitive information with the entire class or open themselves to public scrutiny.

After the general discussion, we focused on the rape of Proserpina. We examined the description of the rape itself, which Ovid leaves allusive:

One day, Proserpina, Ceres’ daughter, was there in the woodland,

happily plucking bunches of violets or pure white lilies,

filling the folds of her dress or her basket in girlish excitement,

vying to pick more flowers than her friends—when Pluto espied her,

no sooner espied than he loved her and swept her away, so impatient

is passion. In panic, Proserpina desperately cried for her mother

and friends, more often her mother. Her dress had been torn at the top,

and all the flowers she had picked fell out of her loosened tunic,

which only served to increase her distress, poor innocent girl!

Her abductor was off in his chariot, urging the horses forward,

each by his name, and shaking the rust-dyed reins of their long-maned necks.[[4]](#footnote-4)

(5.391–404)

We summarized what exactly was being described in these lines, and how to interpret the information about torn clothing and spilling flowers. I then asked the class if they thought this was rape. Students were confused about why this would be called the rape of Proserpina if it were *not* rape, so we began working out what the word meant for us. This gave students the space in which to share their own definitions of rape without being judgmental of others, and highlighted some areas of confusion and differing opinion. I made sure that we specifically discussed the New Jersey definition of rape, which states that rape is committed when stated affirmative consent has not been obtained, and this led to a helpful discussion of what stated affirmative consent looks like.[[5]](#footnote-5)

Having established the modern parameters of the word, I explained the etymological root of rape from the verb *rapio* and set out the Roman legal definition; criminal prosecution for *per vim stuprum* or intercourse by force could be brought under the *lex Julia de vi publica*, instituted during the dictatorship of Julius Caesar, and Augustus’ morality laws included many other sexual offences in *stuprum*, not all of them violent. We then returned to the Proserpina passage and examined what was motivating Pluto, the reactions of Ceres and Jupiter to what had happened, and who was in control of the situation. This analysis raised the issue of Proserpina’s agency or lack of it.

We then moved on to the story of Procne, Philomela, and Tereus, which sparked lively discussion. One student felt that Philomela had “asked for” her treatment by Tereus because of her behavior when he first saw her:

As Tereus pursued his wicked designs, he passed

for a model husband; his infamous treachery stood to his credit.

What’s more, Philomela supported his pleas. She tenderly fondled

her father’s shoulders and begged him to sanction this voyage to her sister’s,

a voyage for the good of her health, she said – for her ruin, more likely!

As Tereus watched, his hands strayed mentally over her body.

Her every action served to provoke, to inflame and to feed

his lust. Each time Philomela embraced her father, he wished

that she were *his* child—though his thoughts would not have been any less sinful.

(6.473–482)

This was not a popular interpretation among other students. We took a close look at the text, examining how Philomela is portrayed as a dutiful and pure daughter, and how Ovid gives us Tereus’ interpretations of her actions rather than an objective account of their interaction. This debate fed into our reading of Livy’s account of the rape of Lucretia later in the semester, where we revisited the theme of a woman’s virtue inflaming a man’s lust. We also had a heated discussion about why Tereus cuts out Philomela’s tongue—again, the phrase “she was asking for it” was used, but was fairly comprehensively dismissed through an examination of what other options Philomela had. We also talked through Tereus’ attitude to the consequences of his actions and his abuse of power, and how the class felt about Procne’s retribution. This discussion picked up on previous analysis of power dynamics that had appeared elsewhere in the course—for instance during the introduction of the penetrator/penetratee model of ancient sexuality—and thus helped to tie the discussion together thematically.

We closed class by thinking about three round-up questions that I projected onto the classroom screen: How does the Roman world differ from our world? Why does Ovid write these stories? What is your responsibility as a reader? Students raised issues such as the differences between the ancient and modern definitions of rape, the modern acknowledgment of the female experience, and the kinds of punishment we would expect to see as opposed to the ones found in the ancient sources. Some suggestions for reasons why these violent texts might have been written included the attempt to explain the mindset of a rapist, and to convey the idea that the gods can get away with what man cannot. Responses to the final question about the reader’s responsibility were particularly interesting—students commented that readers cannot turn away from stories like this or discount them, or try to underplay what happens in them, and that it is the reader’s responsibility to fight against a recurring human problem. I took this opportunity to mention that the word rape only started being used to describe these stories in the 1960s and 1970s.[[6]](#footnote-6) My comment gave a student the opportunity to close the class by sharing her own experience of reading this Ovidian sentence: “Even after this crime [cutting out Procne’s tongue], though the story is scarcely believable, / Tereus debauched that bleeding body again and again,” (6.561–562). She had to look up the word debauched, to find that the dictionary said it meant “seduced”—which was not what she thought was going on in the passage at all. This engagement with the translation suggests an alternative method for teaching these texts; by comparing two or three translations of the same passage side by side and considering the choices made by translators in passages that describe rape, students can be sensitized to the power of language in discussing difficult topics. Such an exercise could also encourage students to consider their own language, and the cultural constructions of rape built up around them by society.[[7]](#footnote-7)

At the end of all my classes, I ask students to fill out a note card with the clearest and the muddiest point from that day’s discussion, and they often use that venue as a way to communicate how they felt about the day’s material. Comments from this class included “After this class I really grasped the importance of acknowledging rape and how it affects the reader’s views—very deep discussion,” and “Today’s discussion was very interesting and very important to raise awareness among the class.” I also circulated a feedback form among a random selection of my students to find out how well prepared they felt for the material, and their overall opinions of this specific class. Students who responded to this form unanimously agreed that the course structure had prepared them for the themes and ideas that emerged in this class; the Blackboard responses had helped them prepare for discussion; the class environment had felt safe and respectful; and the discussion was meaningful and relevant to them. One student identified herself on her feedback form as a survivor of assault, and said she felt the small groups had provided a less threatening space in which to discuss difficult issues.

I should also mention that the responses from students of each gender were equally positive. I had been concerned, especially following some stories shared at the 2009 APA roundtable, that my male students would feel alienated or personally accused by the discussion. In fact, exactly the reverse happened–some of the most thoughtful and engaged responses, especially to the questions about a reader’s responsibility, came from my male students. Focusing discussion so closely on the ancient text seemed to provide them with a safe space to consider the actions depicted there without feeling attacked or unable to participate.

Of course, there are things that I would like to have done differently. This was the first time I had taught a class that dealt with these texts, so I did not cut off some of the red herrings in discussion when I should have. One student, for instance, asked whether we would consider Cupid a rapist in this story, because of his role in shooting Pluto with the arrow that made him fall in love with Proserpina. This question led to a lengthy digression on who Cupid was, his allegorical function, why this was not an allegorical reference to hormones, and notions of personal responsibility in the ancient world. The need to provide background for non-majors, and the time required to do that, also meant that I could not explore some of the more allusive elements of the texts, for instance examining how the gaping of the earth when Pluto snatches Proserpina is a metaphorical rape that echoes Proserpina’s suffering.

I had expected the idea of “date rape” to appear, as much modern literature around rape is concerned with that phenomenon, but neither I nor the students mentioned it. I do not know if it would have helped to mention it or not, although one possible approach would have been to point out that both Proserpina and Procne were raped by men whom they knew. One thing I do wish I had done was challenge some of the students’ suggestions in the discussion that it was women’s responsibility to prevent rape—comments like “be careful how you dress, because people won’t interpret it the same way as you do” could have been challenged by asking why women rather than men should monitor their behavior to prevent a crime where woman are the victims.

Dealing with the topic of rape in the classroom requires careful and detailed planning, and a level of social awareness that few other topics in the ancient world demand. My experience has demonstrated that it is possible to raise these questions safely without making either the instructor or the students vulnerable in the classroom, an issue of particular relevance to graduate-student instructors and other untenured faculty. We have a responsibility to our students and our campus communities to use the opportunity offered by our subject to explore this issue within a comparatively safe space, and to use the time available in our classes as best suits our courses. Even a single class offers the opportunity to reflect and deliberate on this serious topic that is so often neglected in our teaching.[[8]](#footnote-8)

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2. I deliberately decided not to assign the story of Hermaphroditus and Salmacis. Although it does include the rape of a man, I felt that the characterization of Salmacis as sexually rapacious and the emasculating effect of the rape upon Hermaphroditus raised questions I did not feel comfortable addressing in a single class. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. I should mention that as part of this literature review, I also looked at the winter 2009 issue of *CW*, since it included a special Paedagogus section about teaching Ovid. None of the four articles, however, addressed the question of sexual violence. Indeed, hardly any of the articles and books I found useful in preparing for this class were written by classicists. Clearly the field needs more resources for teaching texts that handle rape and other difficult subjects. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. D. Raeburn, tr., *Ovid Metamorphoses: A New Verse Translation* (London 2004). All translations come from this edition. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. For further discussion of the 1992 case in which the New Jersey Supreme Court reaffirmed the value of affirmative consent, see S. Caringella, *Addressing Rape Reform in Law and Practice* (New York 2009) 76–77. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. If you search *L’Année Philologique* for “rape Ovid,” the first article that is found comes from 1965, and discusses the “rape of the Sabines” in the *Ars Amatoria*—a usage that occurs in much earlier texts. The next article was not published until 1977, and is provocatively called “Techniques of Rape. Variety of Wit in Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*” (B. E. Stirrup, *G&R* 24 [1977] 170–84). Here the term implies a modern understanding of rape. Yet despite the confrontational tone of the title, the article concentrates mainly on the stylistic ingenuity Ovid uses within his rape narratives rather than considering the motivation behind those narratives. Z. Packman (“Call it Rape: A Motif in Roman Comedy and its Suppression in English-Speaking Publications,” *Helios* 20 [1993] 42–55), explores the question of euphemism in translations of Roman literature dealing with rape at greater length. S. James provides an Ovidian discussion of the issue in “Slave-Rape and Female Silence in Ovid’s Love Poetry,” *Helios*  24 (1997) 60–76. For a wider discussion of rape and the ambiguity of language in Greek tragedy, see N. S. Rabinowitz, “Greek Tragedy: A Rape Culture?” *EuGeStA* 1 (2011) 1–22. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. I thank Susanna Braund for suggesting that it might be fruitful to compare translations in the discussion following the presentation of a version of this paper at the APA 2010 meeting in Anaheim. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Here are some helpful bibliographic references: D. Bloom, “Moving beyond Naturalism: Using a Discussion of ‘Miss Julie’ to Educate Students about Date Rape—and More,” *Feminist Teacher* 16 (2006) 238–51; S. R. Ezzedeen, “Facilitating Class Discussions around Current and Controversial Issues: Ten Recommendations for Teachers,” *College Teaching* 56 (2008) 230–36; J. D. Foubert, J. L. Tatum and G. A. Donahue, “Reactions of First-Year Men to a Rape Prevention Program: Attitude and Predicted Behavior Changes,” *NASPA Journal* 43 (2006) 578–98; J. F. Gardner, *Women in Roman Law and Society* (Bloomington 1986); G. Gibbs, S. Habeshaw and T. Habeshaw, *53 Interesting Things To Do In Your Lectures* (Bristol 1992); S. Gunne and Z. B. Thompson, “‘Why not choose a happier subject?’,” *Times Higher Education* (Dec. 3, 2009), <http://www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/story.asp?sectioncode=26&storycode=409300>; S. James, “Feminist Pedagogy and Teaching Latin Literature,” *Cloelia* 38 (2008) 11–14, <http://www.wccaucus.org/cloelia_fall2008.pdf>; M. Kahn, *Why Are We Reading Ovid's Handbook on Rape?: Teaching and Learning at a Women's College* (Boulder 2005); H. Littleton and C. R. Breitkopf, “Coping with the Experience of Rape,” *Psychology of Women Quarterly* 30 (2006) 106–16; T. Pugh, “Chaucer's Rape, Southern Racism, and the Pedagogical Ethics of Authorial Malfeasance,” *College English* 67 (2005) 569–86; R. Stradling, M. Noctor and B. Baines, *Teaching Controversial Issues* (London 1984). [↑](#footnote-ref-8)