

Rape and the word *Paelex*: Agency and Opprobrium

The Latin word *paelex* is used to refer to someone who has sex with a married man but is not married to him (Gellius 4.3.3; Paul. Fest. pg. 222; *TLL* s.v. '*paelex*'; de Vaan 2008; Levin 1983). It can be used in a technical and non-judgmental sense to refer to concubines or a man's informal partners; however, it is more usually used in a pejorative sense, to emphasize the inferior status of a *paelex* to a wife. *Paelex* is not easy to translate, given the variable shades of meaning (and judgment) that may be attached to the word, as well as the variable levels of euphemism with which sexual roles are often discussed. Nevertheless, its connotations are evident insofar as it is most often found in stories of romantic jealousy and competition for status. The majority of citations of the word *paelex* are in Ovid's poetry and Seneca's dramas (44 citations in Ovid, 24 in Seneca's dramas, out of about 120 citations total known to the *TLL*). In these stories, Juno and other high-status wives often use the word to degrade their husbands' other partners and evoke their desire for revenge.

Ovid and Seneca give the word an intense and specific connotation in these stories of romantic competition, strongly associating *paelex* with destructive force. Wives like Juno use the word to express their fear that a *paelex* will disrupt their marriage and impose misfortunes on them in the future. This connotation is particularly notable in rape stories. Ovid's works are known for the frequency of rape narratives therein (Curran 1978; Richlin 1992; Hejduk 2011; Murgatroyd 2000), and in such stories the word *paelex* is weaponized against rape victims: characters apply the word *paelex* to rape victims to cast the rape victims as a destructive force that will precipitate harmful consequences. This is in flagrant contradiction of the fact that within Ovid's rape stories, the *paelex* typically has no power herself, and is more often subject to the

violent power of her rapist and his wife. The use of the word *paelex* here implies that the rape victim was in fact participating in a consensual relationship with her rapist. Subsequently, the wives often enact revenge against the rape victims, in which case the word *paelex* further suggests that the rape victims deserve retribution for the damage they cause to an established relationship. Thus the word *paelex*—especially in a rape narrative—engages in complex ways with ideas of consent, agency, power, shame, and blame.

Bibliography

Curran, Leo C. "Rape and Rape Victims in the *Metamorphoses*." *Arethusa* 11 (1978): 213-242.

de Vaan, Michiel. *Etymological Dictionary of Latin and the Other Italic Languages*. Leiden: Brill, 2008.

Hejduk, Julia D. "Epic Rapes in the *Fasti*." *Classical Philology* 106 (2011): 20-31.

Levin, Saul. "Hebrew pi(y)légeš, Greek παλλακή, Latin paelex. The origin of intermarriage among the early Indo-Europeans and Semites." *General Linguistics* 23, no. 3 (1983): 191-7.

Murgatroyd, Paul. "Plotting in Ovidian Rape Narratives." *Eranos* 98 (2000): 75-92.

Richlin, Amy. "Reading Ovid's Rapes," in *Pornography and Representation in Greece and Rome*, edited by Amy Richlin, 158-179. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992.