

Addressing Campus Rape as a Classicist

Concerns around rape of students attending college have stimulated significant regulatory, administrative, and legislative reforms during the last several years, as well as public debate over the wisdom of some recent measures, such as the requirements of the 2011 directive of the US Department of Education Office of Civil Rights that universities adopt “preponderance of evidence” standards in adjudicating allegations against students, state legislation requiring “affirmative verbal consent” among students, and the evolution of administrative procedures for adjudicating rape claims that deny basic constitutional rights to the accused. Studies by the American Association of Universities and many individual university systems, including my own, have suggested that as many as “one in five” or “one in four” female undergraduates has experienced “unwanted sexual conduct.” However, some faculty caution that over-zealous Title IX surveillance by universities has resulted in regulations designating faculty as “mandatory reporters” of personal issues students communicate to them in confidence, as well as cases where expression of heterodox opinion on sexual matters may become subject to Title IX regulation.

Given the complexity and timeliness of these evolving social and legal issues, what do we as classicists have to contribute? In Spring 2016 I designed and taught an undergraduate Classics/Honors seminar on “Mythologies of Rape,” convinced that dominant cultural myths and archetypes (Lucretia, the Sabine Women, Phaedra, the Trojan Women, Ovidian metamorphosis after metamorphosis) contribute to embedded modern constructions of rape and can open the door to a historically contextualized conceptual archaeology. Our discipline depends on demonstrating its continuing relevance to issues that our students confront both in the news and their own lives.

The bulk of my paper will describe the course syllabus and think piece assignments. Susan Brownmiller's classic *Against Our Will: Men, Women and Rape* (1975) served as a basic textbook for the course, not because it is up-to-date or theoretically informed, but because it remains the most synoptic and historically oriented treatment and had tremendous influence at a critical point in the feminist movement. Classical evidence can contribute to many of the issues Brownmiller highlights as modern concerns: rape in war, rape propaganda to justify racial hatred, pederasty and statutory rape, false rape accusations, the aestheticization of rape and violence against women. Side by side with the relevant classical texts, students were asked to read representative modern scholarship from the fields of law, psychology, criminology, and gender studies. As the capstone experience of the course, I sponsored a conference bringing to my institution legal scholars, social scientists, activists, and humanists from multiple sides of the recent controversies to examine the relevant issues in an interdisciplinary fashion.

I also wish to discuss some of the challenges to achieving my goals in teaching such a course. Ideally, a class about how men and women interrelate should have a rough balance of male and female students to share perspectives, but classes on gender seldom do; most faculty teaching such courses are female, and most male students regard gender-related classes as a systemically hostile environment. Engaging male students constructively and sympathetically is essential to changing the environment and attitudes that perpetuate rape, but if the males are not there, nothing will change. The mostly female students who choose to enroll in such a course, among the wide array of electives available to them, tend to come into the class with strong preconceived positions, based on negative personal experiences they or close friends have had with the issue. As a male teacher of a topic that has traditionally been gendered as a "female concern," I faced some suspicion both from students and colleagues who should have been more

cooperative. For a male to promote critical thinking about the wisdom of some activist-inspired legislative and administrative remedies can too easily be dismissed as denying the seriousness of the problem. A female teacher utilizing the same syllabus and readings might elicit a different reaction. A more successful approach might be to integrate rape as a topic in more general courses on mythology or classical civilization that are less sex-segregated.