Greek Tragedy: A Rape Culture?

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Twentieth and twenty-first century feminism has brought a great deal of attention to the topic of rape. That attention in turn inspired work on antiquity, e.g. the volume on rape edited by Susan Deacy and Karen Pierce1, along with the monograph by Rosanna Omitowoju2, Froma Zeitlin’s anthologized essay in an early collection on rape3, and Mary Lefkowitz’s essay on heroines4. In this essay, I will first sketch in some (mostly U.S.) feminist approaches to rape, and then look at Greek tragedy through this lens. Let me state at the outset that I am interested in the fact that there are multiple feminist approaches to the topic, and in the fact that there is considerable ambiguity in the ancient material.

Feminist political work in the 1970’s and 1980’s focused first on changing the legal definition of rape, which until then went back to Blackstone’s “carnal knowledge of a woman forcibly and against her will”5, that is, a woman other than a man’s wife, since there was no rape within marriage. Struggles to change that definition sought 1) to include

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1 — Deacy 2002; Pierce 1997.
2 — Omitowoju 2002.
3 — Zeitlin 1986.
4 — Lefkowitz 1993.
wives and 2) to exclude the requirement that the rapist have used force and that the survivor offer physical resistance to demonstrate lack of consent, and thus to win a conviction in court. A second set of concerns centered on changing the process of seeking legal redress, seeking protection for women who brought charges of rape and sensitivity training for the police, so that a woman would not feel that she was raped all over again when she reported a case to the authorities. Third, feminists emphasized prevention, teaching women self-defense.

In all these instances, forcible rape was the center of attention, and even in feminist discussion of self-defense, the emphasis was on rape by a stranger. Feminist theorists also offered accounts of rape in which it was seen not as the aberrant behavior of a few men, but as the way in which men in general wielded power. Thus, the U.S. in these analyses was perceived as constituting a “rape culture”, because forcible sex was not actually a crime but part of “business as usual”. In 1971 Susan Griffin wrote a classic article entitled “Rape: the All-American Crime”, in which she outlined many features of what would come to dominate feminist analysis. Women’s fear of rape, she argues, leads them to seek male protection in an instance of the fox watching the chicken coop. Because it is useful in supporting male power, she maintains that rape is actually taught in U.S. society. Although sexual violence is against the law, in reality the socialization of men and women into masculinity and femininity encourages it: “in our culture, male eroticism is wedded to power”. According to Griffin, rape is not only an act of aggression but also “the symbolic expression of the white male hierarchy... the quintessential act of our civilization”.

Susan Brownmiller was crucial in popularizing some of these themes, in particular, the notion that rape is violence not sex, that it is based on biology (men rape because they can), and that it is about all men and all women (see below, on Suppliants). She commented:

“Man’s discovery that his genitalia could serve as a weapon to generate fear must rank as one of the most important discoveries of prehistoric times, along with the use of fire and the first crude stone axe. From prehistoric times to the present, I believe, rape has played a critical function.

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6 — Smart (1989: 33) points out the masculinist perspective, arguing that the “consent/non-consent dyad is completely irrelevant to women’s experience of sex".
7 — Schulhofer 1992; Estrich 1987; Temkin 1986 on relationship to other forms of activism; Dripps 1992: 1783 n. 18, 19.
11 — Ibid., 313. The relationship of rape to masculinity has become part of masculinity studies; in classics, see Cartledge 1998, Fisher 1998.
It is nothing more or less than a conscious process of intimidation by which all men keep all women in a state of fear.\textsuperscript{12}

Thus, in her view, biology and not culture is the source of rape, though she also argues that women are trained to be passive and to be raped; she consequently analyzes some fairy tales as well as the ideology of femininity and masculinity as factors in women’s relationship to rape.\textsuperscript{13}

While Brownmiller stressed rape as violence, Catharine MacKinnon, along with other “radical feminists”, emphasized it as a form of sex.\textsuperscript{14} She argues further that perhaps all heterosexual sex is rape.\textsuperscript{15} Writers like Adrienne Rich and other lesbian feminists saw rape as but one instance of “compulsory heterosexuality”; they perceived a continuity between non-consensual and consensual forms of heterosexual relationships, and rape was, as in Brownmiller, interpreted as part of a “male protection racket” – fear of rape by a stranger leads a woman to need the protection of other men.\textsuperscript{17}

Brownmiller’s study of fairy tales dealt with the socialization of men and women, but MacKinnon went further, analyzing the ways in which hegemonic power creates the impression of or the reality of desire in subordinate groups, thus obviating the need for coercion and constructing apparent consent and even desire. Duncan Kennedy brilliantly sums up this point of view:

“It [abuse] goes beyond simple coercion because the particular character that men enforce through abuse is one that embraces rather than merely submitting to male domination. At a first level, men make women weak and passive, even in their virtues, by abusing them. At a second level, women embrace their own domination as part of an unequal bargain. At a third, men and women eroticize the relationship of domination so that it is sustained by (socially constructed) desire.”\textsuperscript{18}

MacKinnon’s totalizing view is intriguing but hard to accept wholesale.\textsuperscript{19} For one thing, women don’t simply accept men’s point of view;

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{12} Brownmiller 1975: 15.
  \item \textsuperscript{13} Ibid, 309.
  \item \textsuperscript{14} MacKinnon 1987: 89.
  \item \textsuperscript{16} Rich 1983.
  \item \textsuperscript{17} On tolerance and the protection racket, see MacKinnon 1987: 15, n 37 citing Susan Rae Peterson, “Coercion and Rape: The State as a Male Protection Racket”, in Feminism and Philosophy 360 (1977): 239, note 16.
  \item \textsuperscript{18} Kennedy 1993: 151.
  \item \textsuperscript{19} We can easily see, as Martha Nussbaum argues (2000: 267), that this so-called “dominance model” is overwhelming, and that there could have been no progress if women were totally imprisoned in ideology as MacKinnon (1987, 1989) and Andrea Dworkin (1987) seem to maintain.
\end{itemize}
in particular, as Martha Nussbaum points out, surveys document men’s and women’s differential perceptions of rape and consensual sex. Mieke Bal uses the narratological notion of focalization (a more nuanced version of perspective) to underline the significance of gender difference in constructing rape narratives.

More recently, the emphasis in writing on rape has shifted to two other forms of rape – so-called acquaintance (or even date) rape and genocidal rape. When the complainant knows her attacker, the questions tend to be more about the consent – did she perhaps not say no or not convey her lack of consent? Was she too drunk to give her consent? These are some of the questions asked today at U.S. colleges and universities. After an assault, a victim may give in to social pressure and not report; she may well not call it a rape (as the book entitled *I Never Called It Rape* makes clear). Alternatively, she might make a false accusation, as happened in a much-publicized 2006 case involving Duke University athletes. Acquaintance rape scenarios minimize the component of force or violence and put the emphasis on subtleties of consent; thus, they raise the question of the similarity of rape and other experiences of intercourse.

Wartime rape, on the other hand, raises the violence into prominence. Internationally there is evidence of rape used to humiliate the women defeated in war, the men having already been killed. It is true that men who are taken prisoner are also subject to sexualized violence (witness the atrocities in Iraq under US occupation). Rape in wartime had already been studied by Brownmiller, but in the 1990’s, attention was newly drawn to those situations. In the example of Sudan, the rape of the women is arguably a tool of the ongoing war, as it was in Bosnia. Rape is considered a war crime under the *Geneva Convention*.

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Kennedy critiques the model as well (1993: 157-62) also on the ground of its oversimplification; cf. Abrams 1995. For post-structuralist feminism’s approach to sexual violence as offering a way out of second wave feminism’s simplifications, see Haag (1996).

22 — In one study of unwanted sexual encounters, not focused on a college-age population, only 4% of the respondents reported being forced by a stranger (Laumann 1994: 338) while 22% knew the attacker, 19% were acquainted with the attacker, 46% were in love with the attacker, and 9% were married to the attacker.
23 — Alcohol may still be seen to make a woman invite rape, however. In August 2008, the *Guardian* reported cuts in payouts to women who had been drinking. Rachel Williams, *The Guardian*, Wednesday August 13 2008. “The Criminal Injuries Compensation Authority yesterday refused to automatically review the cases of at least 14 rape victims who had their payouts cut because they had been drinking when they were attacked, despite admitting the reductions should never have been made”.
25 — The glaring instances of violence are also interwoven with less extreme examples, presenting startling contradictions. While the eye witness accounts at the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY) make it clear that the women were tortured, the judgment focuses
Scholarly analysis of rape in literature from the earlier period often included a call to action, more or less subtle. In the introduction to their 1986 volume simply entitled *Rape*, Tomaselli and Porter asserted that rape is “an abomination” and alluded to the problem for modern critics, and especially classicists, in the “overwhelming presence of rape in the birthplace of our civilization”. Sarah Projansky discusses the ubiquity of representations of rape in contemporary American popular culture; she points out that narratives of rape “are themselves functional, generative, formative, strategic, performative and real”. For Projansky, naming the rape as such is one feminist tool for undoing the cultural work done by such texts. In an important essay on the subject, the “Voice of the Shuttle”, Joplin asserted that we can “remember the embodied, resisting woman. Each time we do, we resist our status as privileged victim; we interrupt the structure of reciprocal violence”. Thus she too assumes that a way of reading can be a way of taking action.

But what should that action be? Second wave U.S. feminism, as I have summarized it, would encourage us to label what happens in tragedy as rape and to oppose it in some way. But as early as the sexuality debates, summarized in the title of a volume published in 1984 after a 1982 Barnard conference, feminist thinkers had problematized the relationship between “Pleasure” and “Danger”. Ignoring this complexity in the second wave and its sex positive aspect, some “third wave” feminists have simplistically objected to their “foremothers” emphasis on heterosexuality as rape. In their quest for a more positive attitude to sexuality, they tend to focus on women’s desire, their agency rather than victimization. This view of feminism might question naming some acts as rape, and instead celebrate signs of women’s power in their sexuality. Then, too, post-colonial and post-modern feminism give one pause about the validity of assuming that we (present day westerners) know best, asking who we are to judge people from other times and other places.

How do we take this complex feminist concern into account when studying ancient literature? Martha Nussbaum is an interventionist in on elements that are to some extent indistinguishable from women’s ordinary lives; thus, for instance, evidence of the women’s forcible detention was based on the argument that the women “had nowhere to go” (International Tribunal 2001 Trial of Dragoljub Kunarac, ii.740). Consent was presumed absent because of the coercive circumstances of war (Halley et al 2006: 380).

26 — Tomaselli 1986: xi.
31 — Vance 1984; on second wave and feminism, see also Franke 2001. In fact second wave feminism was pro-sex, as Gerhard 2001 points out (esp. 11).
32 — Levy 2006.
international affairs and committed to universal human rights, but when she looks back to the ancient Greeks, she takes them as a model, dismissing the misogyny or rather declaring that the misogyny does not disqualify the whole culture from having something to teach us, in particular about sexual attitudes and mores. David Konstan asserts that we would be mistaken in “project[ing] onto the Greeks attitudes inveterate to our own culture.”

The extreme position makes no sense – of course we are not going to throw out these ancient plays, nor are we going to project ourselves onto the Greeks. Nonetheless, we should be cautious in how we present the so-called classics, in particular to our students, since both the text and our reading of it do things to readers. I am persuaded by Mieke Bal’s method. She recommends placing the contradictions between past and present under scrutiny:

“...it seems pointless to accuse the biblical culture, three thousand years after the fact, of a violation of human rights and feel better about our own behavior. Yet, the alternative is unacceptable to me. Rather, in the awareness and acknowledgment that the term is ‘ours’ – and leads to a lot of disagreement in the culture I live in – I would like to take a closer look at the contested term, ‘rape’. In other words, I want to confront the phenomenon through the word we would use if we were to speak ‘ethnocentrically’ and see what happens. That confrontation, that collision, might be the most productive attitude toward the dilemma.”

These problems surely face us when we turn to antiquity. First, though we know that sexual assault could be prosecuted under laws prohibiting the use of force (βία) and assault (ὕβρις), there is no one-for-one correspondence between the English word, rape, and any single Greek term. Moreover, the documentary evidence about the ancient laws regarding sexual offenses is slim and comes from partisan presentations in the courts, as Edward Harris argues.As a result of the problems of terminology and evidence, Omitowoju prefers to speak of a “narrative of sexuality as told by the judicial process or the often essentially economically motivated arena of the media.”

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34 — Konstan 1994: 229. Konstan, however, is ignoring evidence of ancient attitudes – e.g. Athenian law required that a man divorce his adulterous wife and prohibited her from participating in civic religious rites ([Demosthenes] 59.87; Just 1991: 69-70; Lacey 1968: 36).
36 — Aeschines 1.15-17.
37 — Harris 2006 [1997]: 283-95.
Finally, given Athenian norms of women’s life, as seen in the orators or Xenophon’s *Oeconomicus* for instance, it might seem anachronistic to use our concept of rape as sex without consent39. Greek women were married without consent; they were given in marriage by their fathers. There has even been scholarly debate as to whether seduction (where courtship leads to consent) was in fact seen as a worse crime than rape, as Lysias 1 would seem to indicate40; that possibility opens up the wide gap between past and present ideas. Omitowoju argues convincingly that in oratory and comedy consent was not the determining element for a charge of rape because in the fourth century “women are denied the ability to consent as well as the right to withhold consent”41. Ogden and Omitowoju argue further that in antiquity rape cases depend more on status than on consent42; for instance, in Old Comedy, the rape victim is never a free woman43.

I would insist that though there are different standards and different ways in which consent is deployed depending on status, it is important to think about status and consent since they are mutually constitutive44. In what follows I will argue that in tragedy, rape is present, and it is often based on a simple lack of consent as well as on force. Moreover, these “rape” narratives raise questions typically seen as central to tragedy – about the nature of human choice, given the power of the gods and other outside forces, and about family relations. To emphasize the latter at the expense of the former may lead to ethical difficulties, especially in the classroom because the plays’ attitudes toward the rape represented have an impact on the audience. Given the cultural power of these canonical

40 — See Harris (2006 [2004]: 297-32), on anachronism see 299; he sums up well the complicated laws regarding rape and seduction, and gives the relevant bibliography (see also Harris 2006: 283-95 for the reprint of his paper arguing that rape and seduction were equally punishable before the law). Carey (1995: 407) notes the confusion; contra Harris, he retains the traditional view (based on Lys.1) that seduction was the more serious sexual crime.
44 — I touched on the issue of rape and slavery in “Slaves with Slaves”, and at the end of that article I raised some concerns about “the blind spots I cannot yet recognize” (1998: 66). One of those blind spots was obvious to me: because of the interest of the main characters, an essay about slavery ended up focusing on upper-class women who are newly enslaved instead of the women who were always their servants (or even slaves). Now I see that I also did very little with the question of rape: every time we choose a focus, we bring certain elements to light but obscure others. On slavery and war, see Gaca 2010.
works, it behooves us as readers to understand their ideological effect, if we can.

Part of the problem of disentangling the ancient attitude is that “rape” is crucially—and this is my main point—rendered ambiguous in the sources. We do not get a clear cut and consistent point of view. I will focus on that ambiguity as we look at the representation of rape in the plays where it seems most clearly at issue. In my conclusion, I will return to the question of what, if anything, we should do with these plays given what we have discovered. Are they “bad for us” because they represent rape ambiguously, or are they “good for us” because they represent the real ambiguity that we still live with? Do they then offer us a way to think through the issues that confront us today?

The words βία and ὁβρίς (the terms specifically used in lawsuits to refer to assault, sexual or otherwise) as well as ἄρπάζειν appear in tragedy with sexual meaning. Like the English word rape, which is etymologically related to theft and does not have to have an explicitly sexual meaning, these words do not denote sexual penetration per se: ἄρπάζειν can be a synonym for seizure or theft, while βία and ὁβρίς refer primarily to violence. The sexual content must generally be inferred from the context. Lack of consent, as opposed to physical violence, can be seen in the language of willing vs. unwilling sexual encounter.

Aeschylus’ Suppliants takes as its subject forced marriage; the fifty daughters of Danaus attempt to avoid marriage to the fifty sons of Aegyptus, their father’s brother; they seek asylum from Pelasgus in Argos. Although we are told repeatedly that what the men want is marriage, they are defined as rapists from the women’s point of view. The maidens see the Egyptians as violent and hubristic; the men persist in the face of the women’s reluctance (30). The attackers are associated with ὁβρίς (e.g. 81, 104, 426 [vs. the women’s ἀιδοῖος 455], 487, 528, 817, 880-81) and force rather than persuasion (798, 821). When the Herald comes

45 — In the vast corpus of red-figure Greek weddings, several make a connection between rape and marriage—the base contains an image of pursuit, taken to be symbolic of force, while the main portion of the pot contains imagery of the adornment of the bride (Sourvinou-Inwood 1987, Stewart 1995). Some of the plays (like Trojan Women for instance) foreground this conflation, raising for the modern reader the question of the similarity of rape and marriage (on terminology in historical writings, see Rihill 1995).


47 — In the OED, the sexual definition is the third one for both the noun and the verb “rape”; interestingly enough, “to carry away by force” is exemplified by Helen.

48 — The debate over the placement of this play in the trilogy affects the debate about the Danaids’ motivation; Sommerstein (1995) notes the ambiguity (111) and argues that their opposition was created by the father’s hostility in the first play and that he is committing a “great wrong against his daughters”.

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on stage, the verbal violence is embodied as he physically threatens the Danaids; at that point he stands in for the Aegyptiads, making it clear that the women were right to fear force, i.e. rape. But the marriage theme is there nonetheless.

That is not the only source of ambiguity. The Danaids’ motives for rejecting their suitors are also unclear – the men may be too closely related to them, or too different from them, not civilized enough. Cousin marriage would have been practically de rigueur in Athens if these were ἐπίκληροι, yet the women consider it an unholy marriage (γάμον... ἀσεβῆ). What makes it unholy? The main issue seems to be that the women don’t desire this marriage (they would go to these beds unwillingly, ἀεκόντων). Gilbert Murray suggested that the women want a marriage of equals, which is not possible, and thus in effect they reject all marriage. The lack of clarity about what is wrong with the Aegyptiads can lead us to read the play as an indictment of all men and of the institution of marriage as being based on force, in line with the MacKinnon position outlined above. It is significant in this regard that the Danaids are compared to the Amazons: like the Amazons these women don’t want to be married at all (143-152). But while an eager feminist reader might emphasize that element of the play, the interpretation is undermined because in the overall plot Athenian men protect the women from rape by Egyptian men. Thus, all men are not problematic. Perhaps this is an ancient instance of the “protection racket”!

Moreover, the rhetoric of the play introduces a softer note. In order to make a successful suppliant claim, the Danaids must establish their relationship to Pelasgus. They do so by proving that they are Argive, though dark (154-5) and foreign (287), like Amazons, because their lineage goes back to Epaphos, the son of Io and Zeus. And the inclusion of that story heightens the ambiguity surrounding marriage/rape. In Suppliants the union seems almost consensual (it is described simply as “the mixing of mortal and immortal”, 295), and the metamorphosis of Io into a cow as well as her painful wandering are due to the jealous rage of Hera. The Danaids’ desire for Zeus’ help is clear from the beginning of Suppliants; they call on him as god of suppliants, Ζεύς μὲν ἀφίκτωρ (1). They avoid naming the god as a rapist and villain, even though that could strengthen their claim on Pelasgus by strengthening their parallel to Io – like her they avoid forced sexual encounters. Instead, they emphasize Zeus’

49 — As combat scene, see Bachvarova 2001: 72.
52 — Murray 1958.
gentle touch (sexual intercourse) that led to Epaphos, and ultimately to
themselves. Thus they base their claim to Pelasgus’ help in a way that
covers up the violence done to their ancestor, leading to a lack of clarity
about their own situation.

This plot, which seems so much about marriage resistance (even to
the point of murder), contains another instance of accommodation as
well: the transformation of one of the Danaids, Hypermnestra, from killer
to bride. We cannot tell much about why she does not kill her partner
without the rest of the trilogy, but in the Prometheus Bound, Aeschylus
says that “desire softened (or enchanted) her so that she did not kill her
bedmate” (853-56).

The Suppliants then represents undesired marriage as rape, and all
marriage as undesirable from the point of view of Amazon-like maidens;
yet that extreme position is softened by the construction of the good
Athenian men, the gentle god, and the exceptional woman. Therefore,
48 it does not enable the reader or spectator to take a simple position on
the marriage or on the Danaids as noble marriage resisters. Does that
ambiguity also make it supportive of rape? Does Hypermnestra show the
desirability of violent pursuit? Or does it, as third wave feminists might
say, reveal the reality of desire between some men and some women, the
power of feminine attractiveness, in the case of Io?

Euripides’ Ion oscillates between scenarios of rape and desire. Creusa,
raped by Apollo years ago, conceived a child and abandoned him; she has
come to Delphi with her husband Xuthus, seeking information about
whether they will have children. Xuthus hears that he will meet his own
son when he exits the temple. Encountering Ion, who is in fact Creusa’s
child by Apollo and who is serving the god at the temple, he, with good
reason, claims him as his own. Creusa is about to kill Ion when she rec-
ognizes him as her own; it requires Athena to resolve the mystery of his
birth and give a successful ending to the tragedy.

For the purposes of this paper, I have to address the question of
whether Creusa was in fact raped by the god. Hermes mixes the terminol-
ogy in the prologue; he asserts that the god Apollo “yoked the daughter
of Erechtheus in marriage (γάμοις),” but he also says “by force (βίᾳ)”
(10-11). Ion later (1524-25; cf. 341, 325) wonders whether Creusa was
really raped, or whether she was just alleging that the god took her by
violence to cover up an indiscretion of her own – a similar situation could
be imagined in our own day, where false allegations may arise from young
girls’ fear of confessing consensual relations to their parents.

54 — Murray 1958; Lefkowitz 1993. Lefkowitz argues that women tend to cooperate in their
seduction by a god.
While it might seem obvious that Ion is simply wrong, there is the further implication that though Apollo raped Creusa, she also desired him. We can hear Creusa’s active desire in the language of her description of Apollo, in which he seems very attractive with his shimmering golden hair (887-9). It is possible, however, to be attracted to someone and yet to resist penetration, as Creusa did at the time by calling on her mother (900-1). Her attraction does not mean that she was not raped, but it does add some support to the position that Ion takes.

A modern reader or critic tends to make an argument about what the text really says, creating stability where the text does not supply it. Thus, I see the “attractiveness” of the god as the poet’s mystification of rape, whereas a critic like Anne Burnett sees the rape charge as Creusa’s misrecognition of the god. MacKinnon’s analysis would urge us to see that perhaps Creusa desired the god’s strength and power. Thus the story of Creusa and Apollo, and the “happy ending of Ion”, may be part of the way in which Greek myth, like contemporary U.S. culture, creates women’s desire to be “mastered” or “taken”. Of course, much will depend on the performance. If Creusa is shown to be sarcastic and resistant, the play may reveal the ways in which women are coerced into complicity.

While the possibility that Creusa was lying is raised in Ion, Euripides’ Hippolytus confirms men’s worst fears about false allegation. In this play, Phaedra displaces her desire onto Hippolytus in order to defend her reputation. For the audience, there is no ambiguity, only a deadly lie. While Suppliants and Ion center on issues of choice and will, the way that Euripides tells this story focuses on woman’s honor; Phaedra lies to protect her good name – and in order to forestall Hippolytus’ telling the truth. When Theseus responds to her suicide note, his language is telling: “he touched my bed” with force (885-6) not “he violated her”. So the primary sin is not against the woman but against the husband/father. Later Theseus says that Hippolytus dared to act with ὑβρίς (ὑβρίζειν) against his father’s wife (1073). Here the relationship of rape to ownership is quite explicit. In the overall structure of the drama, Theseus’ complete περιπέτεια depends on the theme of late-learning; he uses what

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56 — Rabinowitz 1993: 189-209.
57 — In modern cinema, this interpretation is made prominent in a film like Clint Eastwood’s western, High Plains Drifter (1973), where the protagonist strides into town and has his way with a woman who approaches him first; it is never clear whether she approached him out of sexual desire or for some other reason. The camera brings the audience into town with the stranger, so we are encouraged to take his point of view, but in Euripides’ play we have multiple speakers and points of view (most recently, see Pedrick 2007).
59 — Thanks to the anonymous reader for this observation.
Athenians might have recognized as a husband’s right to exact immediate punishment, but by rushing to action, he causes his own greatest loss.

In these examples, the larger questions considered typical of tragedy are raised through women’s experience of forcible sex, which brings to the foreground the nature of choice and the power of the gods. Did these women have a choice? They are represented as resisting in *Suppliants*, but they are dependent on men in order to do so effectively, and they have to prove themselves worthy of that protection by establishing their status as members of the Argive community. Looking at this situation in the fifth-century context, we see that it is only respectable free Greek women who have a hold on Pelasgus; if the Danaids can establish that claim, then they have a right to withhold consent. In modern terms, we see that the Greek myth plays a role in insisting that women establish their respectability before they can be rape-able, that is, able to make a claim of rape. As a result, women must placate some men and exonerate others, as the Danaids beseech Pelasgus and whitewash Zeus. To read (and teach) these plays with attention to the complexities of the sexual dynamic does not detract from their value; rather, it might add to our understanding of the ways in which sex, desire, and rape interconnect with power and gender.

The *Ion* too uses a rape narrative to address issues of choice and divine limits. Creusa experiences the power of the gods; she most definitely has choices to make, but not where sex with Apollo was concerned – we are told by Hermes that he used force. The unambiguity of the prologue does not, however, preclude the possibility that Creusa felt desire for the god, for Euripides is successful in portraying the allure of the god through her description (887-9). Instead of simply taking this story as evidence that women really like to be raped (by gods at any rate) or recoiling from that suggestion, we might see it and others like it as evidence of how cultures construct women so that forcible sexual encounters can become their desire. We can only do so, however, if we take seriously the ways in which Creusa is represented as wanting Apollo.

Phaedra’s story also reveals the relationship between choice and constraint. On the mortal plane, she is represented as having choice and full consciousness of her moral agency. Her story, however, takes place within the parameters set by the gods – Aphrodite and Artemis, as well as Poseidon; the play is therefore useful in revealing the power of the divine, worked out here through the woman’s body. The modern reader, acknowledging Phaedra’s complicity and manipulation of the rape narrative, must address the fact that women can use the cry of rape to their advantage. These are still difficult issues for us today: on the one hand, Euripides creates a plot structure that may make it likely that women won’t be believed when they accuse men of rape; on the other hand,
he may reveal an underlying truth that we have to face squarely – that women can misuse their status. Euripides may or may not take the extreme position of his character Hippolytus when he says that women are all counterfeits (616-17) and wishes for another way to procreate, but he does allow his character to give voice to that possibility, and he uses Phaedra’s rape story to support it.

The Helen story, especially when it is told in the context of the divine Beauty Contest, similarly raises issues of choice, will, and the power of desire (or the goddess Aphrodite). The question of whether Helen went freely with Paris, indeed went with him out of desire, or whether she was forced, recurs frequently in the literature. Was she raped or seduced? The imagery in the Agamemnon implies that she went willingly, “leaving lightly” (403-07, λιποῦσα and ῥίμφα), but then again, the herald says she was seized, using the word ἁρπαγή along with another word for theft (534).

While Aeschylus presents Helen both as having been stolen and as having chosen to go, the Euripidean retelling of the story in Iphigenia at Aulis explicitly connects the Trojan War and Iphigenia’s willing sacrifice with the mission of protecting Achaian women from seizure or theft by barbarian men (1265-6, 1274-75, 1380-1). This version thus corroborates the notion that Helen was seized. Meanwhile, Cassandra and Hecuba in Trojan Women mock her claim that she was forced (e.g. 373, 998-1000; Menelaus agrees 1037-8). In other words, there is variation depending on who the playwright and speaker are. We cannot assume the authority of any single point of view. Again, we can see that as the sexism of ancient culture; at the same time, it can help us to recognize that the difficulties we face in identifying rape have deep roots.

The story of Helen turns on choice (seduction vs. rape), and may thus conjure up stories of acquaintance rape (as does the story of Creusa); the women of Troy reveal the ongoing fate of women in wartime. After the fall of Troy, the city’s women are enslaved. They have no choice; therefore, what happens to them is without doubt forced sex. Euripides’ Trojan Women takes place in an ancient prison of war camp: the city has fallen, and the women are grouped together waiting to hear which Greek leaders will choose them. Nonetheless, this play and the other representations in tragedy of Cassandra and Andromache interweave elements of force, male desire and marriage, making it difficult to say whether or not

61 — Gorgias in his Encomium of Helen gives three possible reasons for why she might have gone with Paris, and frees her from all blame: “How, then, can blame be thought just? Whether she did what she did by falling in love or persuaded by speech or seized by violence or forced by divine necessity, she is completely acquitted” (20). See Stafford (2000: 130-8) on Helen and Peitho, force and seduction.

these women are simply sexual slaves. And that may be interpreted as a deliberate obfuscation, or as a reflection of a reality that continues into the present.

On the one hand, the language of force, and therefore of rape, is deployed from the beginning of *Trojan Women*\(^{63}\). Scamander is echoing with the cries of the spear-won women who are waiting to be allotted their masters (28-9); Poseidon further speaks of the force that Agamemnon impiously uses to marry Cassandra in a shadowy bedding (βιαίως 43-44). Athena adds that her ire was inspired by the ὁβρίς against her when Ajax forced Cassandra from her temple (69-70)\(^{64}\). So the key terms are force and outrage (βία and ὁβρίς), used interchangeably here against Apollo’s priestess and against the goddess Athena. The slavery that awaits these women is thematic, from first to last (158, 165 [labor, μόχθων], 192, 277, 422, 492, 507, 600, 678, 1271, 1280). The sexual element is explicitly correlated with labor at line 202: “I shall have greater labors than these, either approaching the beds of the Hellenes (may that night and its spirit disappear) or as a pitiful servant”.

The assertion of force and slavery is countered, on the other hand, by the frequent appearance of words for marriage and bride. One of the significant indications of Cassandra’s supposed madness would seem to be her “mistaking” her sexual slavery for a legitimate union, calling it “a royal wedding”, and “blessed” (311-13); she ends her speech calling her captor “husband” with the unambiguous term πόσις (340). But how mad is she? In fact, she is not alone in her view. Cassandra has accepted an interpretation that is suppressed in the rape visualization. We are told that Cassandra has been chosen especially by Agamemnon (248) not as slave to his wife (250) but as the shadowy bride of his bed (νυμφευτήτρια 251). From Talthybius’ perspective, this is a great thing (μέγ’ αὐτῇ 259). He leads her off, calling it once again a marriage (νυμφευμα 420), and she echoes his language, hurrying to her wedding in Hades, claiming her bridegroom (νυμφίῳ γημώμεθα 445). Hecuba draws the connection explicitly: “I never thought that you would make such a marriage at the point of an Argive spear” (346-7). It is a marriage, albeit one made by force. Cassandra was not given by her father in lawful exchange.

Andromache’s case points out the ways in which sexual slavery becomes like a marriage. First, Andromache was especially desirable to the Greek soldiers because she was virtuous and a good woman/wife to Hector (661). As a result of her fine reputation, she will be a slave in the house of Neoptolemus, the son of Achilles, her husband’s brutal murderer. Second,
she points out that “they say” it only takes one night in bed for a woman to get over her anger. She understands that she must choose between Neoptolemus and Hector; if she gets used to her new man, she is a traitor to Hector. Her mother advises her to make Neoptolemus love her, but Andromache has already said that she loathes women who are disloyal. So like other women slaves, she will live in division against herself. We can see a similar dynamic in modern slavery, for instance, in the U.S. south, where female slaves were eroticized and taken as sexual partners or even mistresses by slave owners.

Euripides correlates the fall of the city with the rape of the women, the Greek victory with the appropriation of the reproductive labor of Trojan women. The women of the chorus have been taken by violence (the spear) and will make children for the Greeks, leaving pain for their Trojan fatherland. Moreover, their song leads into the entrance of Andromache on a cart piled high with the other spoils of war, valuable objects, holding her son. The scene culminates in the sentencing to death of Astyanax, making explicit that death is the fate for men and boys, while slavery and rape are the fate of women. There is no future for Troy – in part because Andromache’s other children will be owned by the enemy, as in modern instances of ethnic cleansing.

Euripides puts Andromache at the center of his play by that name; here she is in residence at the home of Neoptolemus and Hermione. She is a favored companion and has a son; Hermione, in contrast, is infertile and blames Andromache for her situation. Nonetheless the force with which the concubine was taken is not overlooked; Andromache stresses the fact that she unwillingly cohabits with her husband’s murderer and reaf⁄rms her absence of desire for Neoptolemus. Not only does she insist that she was forced, a specially chosen prize of the spear, but she emphasizes her Asianness which would mark her as the ethnic other, an appropriate slave in fifth-century Athens. The play opens with her summary of her past life – the child-bearing wife of Hector, having seen her child Astyanax killed, and, in contrast, now bearing a son to her master.

Yet Andromache has been with Neoptolemus for some time and has the capacity to arouse Hermione’s jealousy. She seems to have taken

65 — Scodel 1998 points out that sexual relations lead to feelings, emphasizing the role of concubinage.
66 — On the sexual dynamic of U.S. slavery, see Davis 1983: 172-201.
67 — Rehm (2002: 182); cf. Persai 190, where the two cities are yoked together as women are tamed sexually.
Hecuba’s advice and gotten used to her situation in his bed. The wife mocks the concubine as a slave and war prize (155), but at the same time implies that Andromache likes sharing a bed with the son of her husband’s killer (171-73). The ambiguity of the word ξυνεύδειν comes from the fact that a bedmate can be a wife or a concubine, and of course, either can be won in war. At the same time, Hermione accuses Andromache of being uncivilized: Like a barbarian she has the audacity to bear children for him (172-3). But actually Andromache has become a spokesperson for Greek patriarchal values, basically instructing Hermione on how to make herself attractive to her husband. When Andromache gives Hermione advice about how to keep a man, she does so not only on the basis of her marriage to Hector, but also on the basis of her “successful” relationship with Neoptolemus.

Is their sexual life still rape? Not entirely. Andromache has, as I say, accommodated herself remarkably well. The play reveals the thinly veiled hostility in the sanctioned marriage of Neoptolemus and Hermione, but it also suggests the possibility that what starts as rape may not continue to be rape throughout a relationship. Since at different points in Athenian history a concubine could bear legitimate children, there was reason for Andromache to be compliant, even though she ridicules the idea – asking why she should want to bring up slave children and if it were likely that they would rule if Hermione did not have children.

In these Trojan War plays, then, rape is explicitly a factor. Violence and ὑβρίς, as well as the women’s unwillingness, are clear indicators of what counts as rape. At the same time, the plays reveal the differences in point of view: what the women experience is also portrayed as desire from the male point of view. Moreover, the women themselves sometimes use the diction of marriage; as a result, the violence sometimes merges into normative heterosexual relations. These plays reflect at least two self-evident truths: one, that there is more than one point of view on any event; and two, things change; people get used to things.

I will conclude by returning to the question of what the plays do and what should we do with them. First, the prominence of rape in the heroic corpus may have the effect of normalizing rape, that is, it may construct what I have called a “rape culture”. Second, the lack of clarity of definition may have the effect “the ideological effect” of making rape less problematic by assimilating it to desire. Thus, it may be of a piece with the effect of rape itself, the control of women. The violence is revealed but also to some extent covered over in the plays. Furthermore, if as teachers and scholars we return to these plays and ignore the sexual violence, we

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68 — Lysias 1. 30-31; cf. Demosthenes 23.
may end up unwittingly endorsing these practices. But, the ambiguity may also be revealing. It points to a similarity between normal marriage and rape, and the lack of women’s choice in general. The language may also point out that not all unwanted sexual contact is horribly violent.

These effects are significant today for many reasons. As I have said, rape is still a major concern. It is a serious problem for young women on college campuses in the U.S. in particular; it is still a tool of war in many regions of the world. Indeed the plays attest the long history of the connection between militarization, masculinity and violence against women. The other side, however, may help us to understand non-western marriages, which can be very successful.

How then should we study and teach these texts? Not by saying there wasn’t rape in antiquity because there was no one word for it, or by saying that it is an anachronism to call it rape because women in antiquity didn’t have the possibility of refusing consent. We can gain new life for the tragedies by making our students aware that the modern problems of wartime rape were elements of Greek culture, in particular epic and tragedy, and that this is part of the western heritage, too. We can also use our teaching to model the ways in which ethical choices must be faced, by both the characters and ourselves: listening before rushing to judgment and being open to multiple interpretations.

Works cited
Greek plays are cited from the Oxford Classical Texts, except where otherwise noted. Translations are my own.


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