Rape and Representation

Edited by Lynn A. Higgins and Brenda R. Silver

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and

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COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY PRESS NEW YORK

Columbia University Press
New York Oxford

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Rape and representation / edited by Lynn A. Higgins and Brenda R. Silver.
p. cm. — (Gender and Culture)
Includes index.
ISBN 0–231–07266–X
1. Rape in literature. 2. Women in literature. 3. Women and literature. 4. Sex in literature. 5. Sex crimes. 6. Rape.
I. Higgins, Lynn A. II. Silver, Brenda R., 1942– . III. Series.
PN56.R24R37 1991
809'.93355—dc20 90–19351
CIP

Casebound editions of Columbia University Press books are Smyth-sewn and printed on permanent and durable acid-free paper

Printed in the United States of America

c 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

All books are collaborative: a collective effort of authors, editors, evaluators, production and marketing staffs, colleagues, secretaries, and families. Feminist anthologies (which have by now become a genre of their own) have transformed this implicit collectivity into a self-consciously dialogic mode of thinking and work. We want therefore and above all to acknowledge the crucial role each contributor played in the production of this volume, not only through their individual essays, but also by engaging us in debate about them in ways that enriched the complexity of our joint project.

In addition, we wish to thank the following:

Nancy J. Vickers organized, with Brenda Silver, the 1984 MLA panel on "Silence and the Rhetoric of Rape" that became the impetus for this work.

Nancy K. Miller (the moderator of the original panel) and Carolyn G. Heilbrun—the editors of this series on Gender and Culture—not only encouraged us to undertake the transition from papers to book but continued to encourage us throughout the process of collection and revision. Their astute comments on the various versions of the manuscript provided invaluable guidance and perspective.

Christina Crosby and the Women's Studies Program at Wesleyan University offered us an ideal audience for thinking about our introduction by inviting us to speak during Rape Awareness Week, 1988.

Jennifer Crewe, Executive Editor at Columbia University Press,

gave generous assistance and exemplary commitment that more than once kept us from abandoning the project. As Managing Editor, Joan McQuary patiently and lightheartedly steered the manuscript through the labyrinth of production.

The two (anonymous) readers asked pertinent questions and supplied detailed criticism that helped us shape both the volume as a whole and our introduction. We hope they recognize their impact and accept our thanks.

Dartmouth College, through its research funds, has made possible the endless photocopying and the research assistance associated with such a project.

Our respective families—Roland Higgins, Julian Higgins, and Paul Tobias—volunteered just enough scepticism (about whether the book would ever be done) as well as unmeasurable comic and human relief.

We want to offer special tribute to one particular contributor: John J. (Jack) Winkler, whose death during the final stages of work on the volume was an enormous loss to the entire academic and feminist community. As his colleagues David M. Halperin and Susan A. Stephens have written, "his work revolutionized several fields of classical studies and promoted a variety of feminist, anthropological, narratological, and theoretical approaches to the study of Greek and Latin texts" ("In Memoriam," *APA Newsletter*, June 1990). It also serves as a model for revisionary rereading useful to scholars in all fields of cultural studies. We are proud to include his essay in this collection, and we will miss him.

Finally, with full understanding of the complexities of metaphor not only in discussions of rape but in feminist thought in general, we wish to dedicate this book to our sisters: our literal sisters, Janice L. Anthony, Lois Keates, and Carol Starrels, and then to all those women who share, unfortunately, a form of sisterhood in sharing the threat and reality of rape, with the hope that this book may play a role in the struggle to ensure that one day we will no longer live in a rape culture.

Rape and Representation

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Introduction: Rereading Rape

LYNN A. HIGGINS AND
BRENDA R. SILVER

"What does it matter who is speaking?" For feminist literary critics confronting the entanglement of rape with representation, Beckett's question, so central to debates about the status of the subject in Western (post)modernism, demands the answer: who is speaking may be *all* that matters. Whether in the courts or the media, whether in art or criticism, who gets to tell the story and whose story counts as "truth" determine the definition of what rape *is*. Focusing on the tales told (or not told) by voices within texts, by authors, and by critics, the contributors to this collection chart the complex intersections of rape and representation, revealing their inseparability from questions of subjectivity, authority, meaning, power, and voice. The added recognition that the term *representation* cuts across boundaries of juridical, diplomatic, political, and literary discourses sustains the assumption underlying this book: that the politics and aesthetics of rape are one.

The urgency of this project derives from the fact that rape and the threat of rape are a major force in the subjugation of women. In "rape cultures" such as the United States, the danger, the frequency, and

the acceptance of sexual violence all contribute to shaping behavior and identity, in women and men alike. Within this culture, as in others, the nature and degree of oppression will vary with the historical moment and, within that, the permutations of racial, class, gender, and institutional relations of power. Nevertheless, in this volume, analyses of specific texts, when read through and against each other, illustrate a number of profoundly disturbing patterns. Not the least of these is an obsessive inscription—and an obsessive erasure—of sexual violence against women (and against those placed by society in the position of "woman"). The striking repetition of inscription and erasure raises the question not only of why this trope recurs, but even more, of what it means and who benefits. How is it that in spite (or perhaps because) of their erasure, rape and sexual violence have been so ingrained and so rationalized through their representations as to appear "natural" and inevitable, to women as to men? Feminist modes of "reading" rape and its cultural inscriptions help identify and demystify the multiple manifestations, displacements, and transformations of what amounts to an insidious cultural myth. In the process, they show how feminist critique can challenge the representations that continue to hurt women both in the courts and on the streets.

One of the feminist strategies evident in this collection is to show how art and criticism share the well-documented bias of rape law, where representations of rape after the event are almost always framed by a masculine perspective premised on men's fantasies about female sexuality and their fears of false accusation, as well as their codified access to and possession of women's bodies. Even after recent reforms meant to correct this bias, women, particularly in cases where they know their assailants, are still often put on trial and still carry the burden of proving their innocence (e.g., by demonstrating their "resistance"; men's intentions and sexual history are usually not part of the record). Whether in legal or literary criticism, unmasking the privilege accorded masculine points of view reveals how patriarchal perspectives have prevented courts as well as texts, authors, and critics from asking who is speaking, who is hearing, and in what circumstances. In the courts, the split reality that often characterizes rape cases—the recognition that such cases may well involve an event experienced as rape by the woman but not perceived as rape by the man—falls prey to the need to have a single "truth." The question then becomes how undecidability, at least in the courts, may lead to the disappearance of rape from the social text. What remains is a conspicuous absence: a configuration

where sexual violence against women is an origin of social relations and narratives in which the event itself is subsequently elided.

Over and over in the texts explored here, rape exists as an absence or gap that is both product and source of textual anxiety, contradiction, or censorship. The simultaneous presence and disappearance of rape as constantly deferred origin of both plot and social relations is repeated so often as to suggest a basic conceptual principle in the articulation of both social and artistic representations. Even when the rape does not disappear, the naturalization of patriarchal thinking, institutions, and plots has profound effects: just as victims of rape often end up blaming themselves, the texts explored below present women telling stories that echo or ventriloquize definitions of rape that obliterate what might have been radically different perceptions. The prevalence of masculine perspectives in stories told by women leads Coppélia Kahn, in her essay, to ask "who or what speaks in the character we call Lucrece?" and us to ask where, or how, critics can hear and validate another subjectivity and voice.

The stakes involved in finding answers to these questions are high: for literary and artistic representations not only depict (or fail to depict) instances of rape after or as if they have occurred; they also contribute to the social positioning of women and men and shape the cognitive systems that make rape thinkable. The essays suggest that rape and rapability are central to the very construction of gender identity and that our subjectivity and sense of ourselves as sexual beings are inextricably enmeshed in representations. Viewed from this angle, rape exists as a context independent of its occurrence as discrete event.

The process of unraveling the cultural texts that have obsessively made rape both so pervasive and so invisible a theme—made it "unreadable"—is multilayered. It involves listening not only to who speaks and in what circumstances, but who does *not* speak and why. It requires that we listen for those stories that differ from the master('s) story; that we recuperate what has too often been left out: the physical violation and the women who find ways to speak it. It also means reassessing the master('s) story itself for what it reveals about the construction of masculinity. When viewed through a feminist lens, even (or especially) the most canonical of texts—and their canonical interpretations—can, as Susan Winnett points out below, "divulge cultural secrets."

In the process of rereading rape, one crucial step taken by feminist literary critics, like feminist legal scholars, has been to trace the ways in which women (artists or characters) "represent" themselves,

whether in law, in political systems, in speech. This entails discerning where or how they break through the discourses that have circumscribed their perceptions of the causes and nature of sexual violation and contributed to what amounts to a cultural cover-up. (The insistence that "no" means "no" and not a modest feminine "yes" provides one clear example.) Here the question of who speaks and who does not leads in a different direction. Where, textually, can we find these breakthroughs and begin to locate another point of view? What are the rhetorical strategies whereby rape gets represented in spite of (or through) its suppression? Equally important, what happens to women who go public about their violation? If they escape the dominant fate of silencing and erasure, what price do they pay? Will their speech, their protest, be reinscribed in the patriarchal economy as figures of a female violence even worse than that perpetrated against them?

But the act of rereading rape involves more than listening to silences; it requires restoring rape to the literal, to the body: restoring, that is, the violence—the physical, sexual violation. The insistence on taking rape literally often necessitates a conscious critical act of reading the violence and the sexuality back into texts where it has been deflected, either by the text itself or by the critics: where it has been turned into a metaphor or a symbol or represented rhetorically as titillation, persuasion, ravishment, seduction, or desire (poetic, narrative, courtly, military). Here, the recurrent motif of disfiguration becomes significant: disfiguration both in its rhetorical and physical senses (and ways in which the first hides the second), as both textual and corporeal deformation or mutilation. In reading the violence back into texts, then, the essays in this collection reclaim the physical, material bodies of women from their status as "figures" and reveal the ways in which violence marks the female subject both physically and psychologically.

Where, if anywhere, do literary texts offer possibilities of resistance? Is there, as Carla Freccero asks below, a "feminine difference" in texts about rape authored by women, and if so, where and how is it inscribed? Do women who write of rape—and until recently, especially among white women in the Anglo-American tradition, these have been few in number—find a way out of the representational double binds confronting those women who attempt to escape their entrapment in the patriarchal story? Do women of color within the United States or "third world" women, who have addressed the taboo subject more often and more openly, offer subversive perspectives? It is also necessary to recognize the disturbing fault lines that

appear within men's texts and to ask what role male authors play in uncovering the structures that brutalize women's bodies and erase their subjectivity. Do these texts reveal traces of masculine sexual anxiety or guilt? And are even male authors who recognize their complicity in the violence of the gender system ultimately caught in its powerful meshes?

Each of the five sections in this book foregrounds a different aspect of the challenge collectively posed by these questions. The two essays in part 1, Prior Violence, highlight ways in which some of the earliest stories in the Western tradition have established precedents and left legacies that continue to animate our cultural (self-) representations. More important, both set out to confront the naturalization of "prior" erotic violence and rape in these founding tales: to reveal them as myths that simultaneously articulate and hide the socially constructed story of male and female sexuality, difference, and power that makes women "essentially" vulnerable and mute. The obsessive narrative that recurs in the volume as a whole begins with the glimpse, provided by John Winkler, of the layers of cultural work enacted by forms such as song, dance, games, and poetry in obscuring the violence they nonetheless transmit. Patricia Joplin's essay, which helped launch this entire field of inquiry, urges critics to reclaim both the hidden cultural plot and the women who tell it. The violation Joplin exposes is not just the double violation of Philomela—her rape by her brother-in-law, who then cuts out her tongue—but the subsequent appropriation of her story and her art by writers, anthropologists, and literary critics alike.

But the paradigm of rape and silencing presented in these two essays also contains the seeds of its own undoing, for the "prior violence," continually reiterated and erased, is neither lost nor left behind. Instead, it remains variously as a stain or bruise, as a gap or absence, a failed attempt at repression that ensures the violence will return. That trace or sign of imperfect erasure can have many meanings, however, and in the tension between attempt and failure to reveal violation, the story that often gets told is that of an inability to tell the story.

The essays in part 2, The Rhetoric of Elision, focus on how rape can be read in its absence. The texts here are among the most widely read white male fictions of rape—*The Marquise of O, Tess of the d'Urbervilles,* and *A Passage to India*—and the essays (by Susan Winnett, Ellen Rooney, and Brenda Silver) foreground the most striking recurrent motif in the collection: the elision of the scene of violence in male texts about rape that, ironically, both emphasizes

the origins of the violence and suggests the possibility of making it visible again. In addition, these texts reveal, however unconsciously, the ambivalence of the male author caught up in representations of masculinity and subjectivity that he may question, but that he ultimately leaves in place—except for the subversive presence of the O, the gap, that for the critics, if not for the authors, provides a space to speak of women's violation and subjectivity. The term *elision* in the title of this section, deriving from the Latin *laedere*, to hurt or damage, and relating to *lesion*, suggests once again the secret ways in which representation is linked to the physical, and damaged stories can represent damaged bodies.

What, then, becomes of the woman's story? The essays in part 3, Writing the Victim—to borrow a phrase from Marta Peixoto's essay—focus more explicitly on the ways in which literary or critical strategies contribute to the social and narrative acts of victimization they wish to expose. In Coppélia Kahn's essay on Shakespeare's *Lucrece*, the complicity belongs to the author, whose embodiment of one of Western culture's urtexts of rape firmly reinstates its tormented victim within the patriarchal tale. In Eileen Julien's essay, the critic's own response to sexual violence in two postcolonial West African novels, Yambo Ouologuem's *Le Devoir de violence* and Soni Labou Tansi's *La Vie et demie*, allows her to differentiate between radically different representations of rape as it is connected to the power of the state. In Peixoto's essay on Clarice Lispector, we are presented with an author, a woman, who writes the issue of complicity into her text, allowing no distance between author, narrator, and reader: all are implicated in different ways. Nevertheless, Peixoto also notes that Lispector "refuses to naturalize the oppression of one class or gender or race by another or, for that matter, to see human life in heroic terms," leading us to ask whether this refusal is an example of a "feminine difference" and whether it suggests a high level of racial and class self-consciousness in Brazilian society.

Part 4, Framing Institutions, shifts the emphasis from writing the victim to the institutional discourses in which rape occurs. Medieval legal codes and juridical practice (Kathryn Gravdal); Renaissance political structures and the heroic ethos of courtly love (Carla Freccero); slavery and its legacy—racism—including their enactment in lynching (Nellie McKay): each of these discourses provides a context for reading literary representations of rape, and each one is shown to "frame" the rape victim by rationalizing violence against women and other oppressed groups as necessary to the patriarchal status quo. The shared concerns of these essays clarify the intersecting

political and aesthetic meanings of "representation." Not surprisingly, what is at issue once again is who has the power to represent whom, in institutions as in texts, and the problematic position of those groups that are excluded from representation. One of the controlling institutions confronted in these essays is "history," particularly as it appears in literary interpretation: all three challenge not only accepted understandings of rape in past centuries, but the limited definitions used by historians for what constitutes rape and where its representations can be found. Equally notable, all three essays suggest how literature resembles other discourses in its figuring and disfiguring strategies of rape, illustrating how literature itself is one of the "framing" institutions.

In the concluding section of the volume, part 5, Unthinking the Metaphor, the discourses held up to scrutiny are aesthetic categories themselves. If in the previous section gender oppression was inseparable from other forms of oppression and was inherently political, in this section, as Froma Zeitlin notes, it is "poetics and the politics of gender [that] cannot be dissociated." For Nancy Jones and Zeitlin, the conventions at issue are no less than the Western lyric tradition and the quest for beauty, truth, and knowledge associated with the "Grecian spirit" in Western philosophy and art. For Lynn Higgins, the seductively multiple narratives and interpretive strategies of postmodernism become yet another formal way of mystifying rape by transforming it into another story. "Unthinking the metaphor" that naturalizes and elides rape—the act that Winkler, in the opening essay, argues might provide the premise of a different story—becomes here the unraveling of the dynamics, the mechanisms, by which aesthetic conventions and critical traditions continue to inscribe and displace rape as a founding event of art.

The juxtaposition, in the last two sections, of social and literary institutions suggests the dual movement at work in almost all the essays in the volume: outward to an analysis of contexts—historical, theoretical—and back to a close reading that brings social and textual/critical practices together. Anything less would leave in place the boundaries between art and politics, theory and practice, representation and power that this project intends to unsettle. Recognizing as well that feminist modes of demystification must include the critical act itself, the scholars here write into their texts the problem of who speaks, the positioning of their own subjectivity between academic privilege and the violent, embodied reality of rape. This often means writing against the fear and pain that surround the topic; it also means acknowledging the anger. By actively confront-

ing rape at the level of literary texts these essays become a force for resistance and change.

BIBLIOGRAPHIC NOTE

The references in this note correspond to the topics addressed in the Introduction. We have included those works we found particularly helpful in conceptualizing our own project, rather than attempting to list all the sociological and literary studies that have appeared since the speak-outs on rape in the late 1960s and Susan Brownmiller's influential manifesto, *Against Our Will: Men, Women and Rape* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1975).

Beckett's question appears in *Texts for Nothing*, trans. Beckett (London: Calder & Boyers, 1974), p. 16. It "supplies a direction" for Michel Foucault's "What is an Author?" in Josué V. Harari, ed., *Textual Strategies: Perspectives in Post-Structuralist Criticism*, pp. 141–160 (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1979), and it echoes in Roland Barthes' desire to keep the question "Who is speaking?" from ever being answered: *S/Z* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1974), p. 140. Andreas Huyssen evokes the question in his critique of the poststructuralist call for "the death of the subject," positing instead the development of "alternative and different notions of subjectivity" that would challenge "the *ideology of the subject* (as male, white, and middle-class)": "Mapping the Postmodern," *After the Great Divide: Modernism, Mass Culture, Postmodernism* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1986), pp. 212–213. Nancy K. Miller directly addresses the problematic nature of "the death of the (speaking/writing) subject" for women/women writers in "Arachnologies: The Woman, the Text, and the Critic" and "Changing the Subject: Authorship, Writing, and the Reader" in *Subject to Change: Reading Feminist Writing* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988); and Alice Jardine's "concern with women as speaking and writing subjects" became the basis for her theory of gynesis, "the putting into discourse of 'woman' ": *Gynesis: Configurations of Woman and Modernity* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1985). Beckett's question is also implicit in the wide-ranging discussion of the status of the colonial and postcolonial subject signified by the phrase "can the subaltern speak?"; see Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's essay with that title in Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg, eds., *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, pp. 271–313 (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1988).

Our need to raise this question yet again signifies its only too material ramifications for women who attempt to voice their experience of rape, whether in the police station, the courtroom, the novel, or the critical essay. Who is speaking has a great deal to do with whether or not the victim, most commonly but not always a woman, is believed and whether a case will be made against the assailant. The nature of the "who" evoked here includes more than gender: race, class, the sexual history of the victim, the relation-

ship of the victim to the perpetrator (e.g., whether he was a stranger or an acquaintance), all play a role in whether a "rape" is perceived to have occurred.

On the legal definitions of rape ("what rape *is*") and their implications for the victim, see Susan Estrich, *Real Rape* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1987); Catharine A. MacKinnon, "Feminism, Marxism and the State: Toward Feminist Jurisprudence," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* (1983), 8:635–658; Carol Smart, *Feminism and the Power of Law* (London and New York: Routledge, 1989); Monique Plaza, "Our Damages and Their Compensation. Rape: The Will Not to Know of Michel Foucault," *Feminist Issues* (1981), 1(3):23–35. Frances Ferguson links contradictory legal definitions of rape to questions of truth, fiction, and literary forms in "Rape and the Rise of the Novel," *Representations* (1987), 20: 88–112. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, using *Gone with the Wind* as her example, explores how "rape" means or signifies different things when brought into contact with the racial discourse of the South: *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985), pp. 9–10.

Two works that address the intersections of representation with other forms of violence are Teresa de Lauretis, "The Violence of Rhetoric: Considerations on Representation and Gender," *Technologies and Gender: Essays on Theory, Film, and Fiction* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1987), pp. 31–50; and Susanne Kappeler, *The Pornography of Representation* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986).

De Lauretis' essay has subsequently been reprinted in a work that came to our attention after our own was completed: *The Violence of Representation: Literature and the History of Violence*, Nancy Armstrong and Leonard Tennenhouse, eds. (New York: Routledge, 1989). Sharing our assumption that politics and poetics are inseparable, it focuses on "the development of sophisticated technologies of the individual and its Others" that, along with imperialism, "have turned the violence of representation into [a] ubiquitious form of power" (p. 9) in the West.

For a theoretical discussion of the rape culture in the United States, see Dianne Herman, "The Rape Culture," in Jo Freeman, ed., *Women: A Feminist Perspective* (Palo Alto, Calif.: Mayfield, 1984). Timothy Beneke explores contemporary American men's attitudes toward rape and the cultural factors, including language, that shape them: *Men on Rape: What They Have to Say about Sexual Violence* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1982). Anthropologist Peggy Reeves Sanday analyzes the idea of a "rape-prone" culture in two cross-cultural studies: "The Socio-Cultural Context of Rape," *Journal of Social Issues* (1981), 37:5–27; and "Rape and the Silencing of the Feminine," in Sylvana Tomaselli and Roy Porter, eds., *Rape*, pp. 84–101 (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1986). Hazel Carby emphasizes the importance of understanding rape in its specific historical context when she writes: "Rape itself should not be regarded as a transhistorical mechanism of women's oppression but