

BOOK REVIEWS

Diane Wolfthal *Images of Rape: The "Heroic" Tradition and its Alternatives*.
Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999. Pp. xv + 286.

Issues concerning rape and its representations in the medieval period are a current preoccupation that was inaugurated by Kathryn Gravdal's 1991 study *Ravishing Maidens*. Many of the literary studies focus on the canonical figures of Chaucer and Malory, interrogating both the question of actual rape as it crops up in their biographies, and the influences of law and of societal expectations on the imagined rapes and near-rapes of the fictions. Such studies, useful and often revelatory as they are, risk parochialism, a charge that is more than avoided by Wolfthal whose wide-ranging and thoughtful monograph offers an investigation of rape imagery from France, the Netherlands and Germany from the twelfth to the seventeenth centuries.

Wolfthal sets out to demonstrate the ways in which the privileging of Italian Renaissance art has influenced our understanding of the construction of rape in Western culture, and to provide a more nuanced account of the variety of representations of rape and their meanings. In doing so, she also comments on the interpretations traditionally provided by art historians who, she suggests, have "failed to unmask the eroticized and sanitized images of rape that they included in the canon." The theme is explored through examination of an extremely wide range of genres including marital paintings on *cassoni* (wooden chests carried through the streets between the bride's father's house and her new marital home); *spalliera* paintings (shoulder-high wall decorations made for a domestic setting); Greek vases; illuminations in medieval Picture Bibles and law treatises; Justice Paintings displayed in court rooms; statues; and early modern propaganda prints. In addition, the reader is also guided towards an understanding of the codes employed in the images, so that we learn to read the signs: the grasped wrist that signals enforcement; the dishevelled hair and clothing, demanded of rape victims by the courts in some places, but occasionally assumed to provide verisimilitude for a false accusation of rape; and the placing of the man behind the woman indicating a surprise attack.

Images of Rape is organized in six chapters, framed by an introduction and a conclusion, each of which focuses on a different tradition identified by Wolfthal. There is some very productive overlap across her categories, however, most notably perhaps between the first chapter on the "heroic" tradition of the title and the third which deals with the depiction of rape by soldiers, or in situations of war. The first chapter examines the canonical works of the Italian Renaissance and Baroque periods, such as Poussin's *Rape of the Sabine Women*, and other paintings in which the rapist is a Greek or Roman god or hero. Wolfthal's topic here is the aestheticization and consequent sanitization of the subject matter, and the contemporary reception of images which were often expressly designed to be erotic. Finally, Wolfthal shows us how art historians have reinforced this

construction of rape in their writings about these canonical representations in scholarly publications and in student textbooks.

Wolfthal's next four chapters focus on images of rape that have been excluded from the canon. In Chapter 2 she observes that while the medieval period continued to produce images of "heroic" rape, it also developed other types of rape imagery in its illuminations of Old Testament narratives and legends of saints' lives not designed to be erotic. In an extended discussion of images illustrating the story of the rape of the Levite's wife, Wolfthal notes that the victim is the focus and that she is explicitly represented as having been forced against her will. Almost invariably, she is shown fully clothed, and the careful depiction of her facial expressions make clear her grief. Additionally, the punishment of the rapist is presented as an integral part of these narratives. Wolfthal suggests that these medieval images reflect the idealistic theoretical concerns about rape also evidenced by contemporary law codes, despite the rarity of actual convictions and the leniency of the punishments assigned.

Chapters 3, 4 and 5 demonstrate the complexity of medieval and early modern rape imagery, exploring it in three further contexts: law, war, and the manuscripts of Christine de Pizan. In each case, Wolfthal finds that the images are generally sympathetic to the victim of rape and critical of her assailants, and observes that these depictions have largely been ignored by art historians who sometimes fail even to identify the subject matter of the images they discuss. The chapter on rape in the context of war brings out the complexity of the notion of the hero through the examination of "heroic" rape imagery in conjunction with images which recognize and criticize the dark side of the soldier's virility. Wolfthal presents her examination against a background of a consideration of contemporary notions of a just war and just methods of war which may include the seizure of booty, including women. She finds an ambivalence which, by the fourteenth century, is reflected in the scarcity of images of rape in the context of war.

An even greater ambivalence is delineated in the next chapter whose focus is images of rape in a legal context. The topic is introduced by an extended discussion of the various law codes of the period, most notably the *Sachsenspiegel* whose illustrations strongly criticize rape, and Gratian's *Decretum* whose illuminations blur the distinctions between rape and seduction. The Justice Paintings which hang in the courtrooms of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries are seen to offer a chronological evaluation, but it is the reverse of that of the war imagery: mid-fifteenth century panels are revealed as showing sympathy for the victim, whereas later ones blame the woman's loose morals for her rape.

Wolfthal constructs a further alternative to the "heroic" rape tradition in her reading of the manuscript illustrations for the work of Christine de Pizan in the context of de Pizan's life as a widow and as a resisting reader of misogynist texts. Wolfthal notes that in the *Othea*, de Pizan chose to avoid the explicit depiction of sexual violence perhaps because she objected to Jean de Meun's approval of

force in the *Roman de la Rose*, and feared that readers might concur with this idea. Wolfthal offers close readings of the images depicting Daphne, who is shown nude but without breasts, and of de Pizan's rewriting of the story of the Galatian Queen, which is shown to have influenced later illustrations of Boccaccio's redaction of the story, and she demonstrates the many ways in which de Pizan's representations reverse the usual power dynamics of gender relations.

The final chapter of *Images of Rape* focuses on two conceptions of the sexual aggressor: first, Wolfthal examines magical treatises, court transcripts, manuscript illuminations, and figurines to consider the person who tries to compel another to accede to his or her sexual desires through the use of magical images rather than physical force. Wolfthal notes that the person employing such stratagems may be male or female, and that this brings the fact of women's sexual desire to the surface of cultural consciousness. This observation leads to the second section of this chapter, that concerned with the rapacious married woman. Here the discussion is focused on the popularity of images of the Old Testament story of Potiphar's wife, a story which, for medieval and early modern society, exemplified two common misogynist stereotypes: the uncontrollable lust of married women and their deceptive natures. In the biblical narrative we find that the sexual aggressor is a woman, and that she falsely cries rape: Wolfthal concludes that the story's immense popularity can tell us something about why the rape of real women was marginalized.

It is impossible in a review to do anything like justice to the immense breadth of Wolfthal's scholarship which crosses geographical and linguistic boundaries as well as those of genre and subgenre. Equally impressive is the way in which she weaves the legal and cultural research into careful and perceptive readings of the images, and into a fascinating series of arguments about their meanings both for their original consumers and for modern audiences. The book is generously illustrated throughout; one longs for color reproductions, though presumably these would have rendered the cost prohibitive.

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