

Are you kidding me?

Rosanna Lauriola *

*Dedicated to all women who
have suffered and suffer “the
greatest sorrow possible”*

Abstract: The presence of a picture such as the one that appears in the site (http://farm4.static.flickr.com/3252/2843406747_3c135d63d9.jpg?v=0) brings to mind both the enormous efforts made throughout many years to raise awareness about the dangers of rape, and the horrors of rape for women all over the world. To joke with such a subject is offensive both for people—men and women—who have been struggling for so long, and for the victims of this crime. People who use the subject of rape for fun cause immense pain and immense damage.

Key words: rape, internet, struggles, silence, voice.

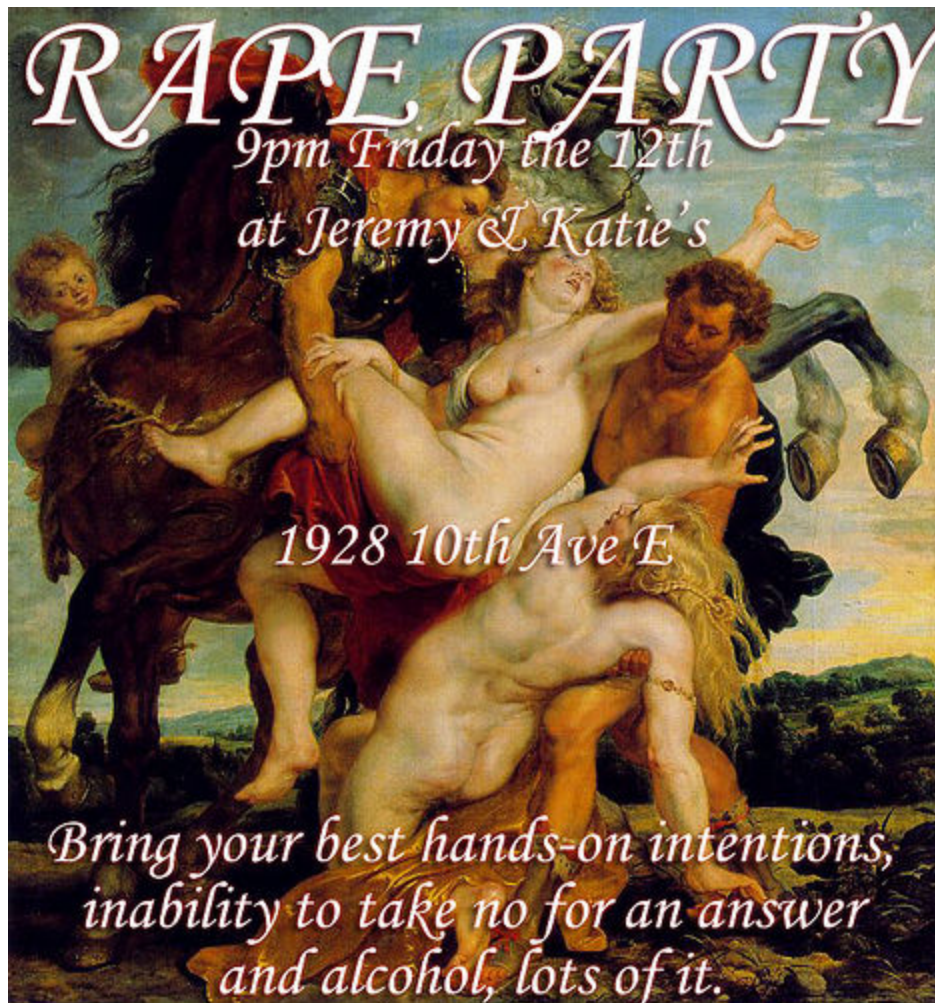
It was an ordinary Wednesday afternoon. Back from my last class to the office, I started working on my Power-point, a Power-point for a speech to present to a conference in Albuquerque (NM), at the section “Classical Representations in Popular Culture”, in the Annual Meeting of the Southwest Texas Popular Culture and American Culture Association (February 2010).

The title of the speech would seem unlikely to be related to that conference’s section: “Re-proposing ‘heroic’ abduction in art: On the side of the victims”. The subtitle would be of more help, by linking a classical myth in one of its Renaissance artistic renditions to a modern representation in contemporary popular art: “*The abduction of the daughters of Leucippus*

by Peter Paul Rubens (1616) and *Classic Tragedy* by Michael Merck (2004)”. The aim has been to combine the study of a crucial theme that has become one of the main scholarly issues in the field of Classics, and its reception up to our days, considering the relevance of such an uncomfortable--if not taboo-theme as ‘rape’.

Needing to find a nice reproduction of Rubens’ painting to be shown during the speech, I let myself follow the easiest way, i.e., enter the name of the painting on Google Images, and find it with just one ‘magical’ click.

I was impressed by the numerous results, and not sure about the difference among the several images displayed, I started clicking on each figure, until I found this ...



(http://farm4.static.flickr.com/3252/2843406747_3c135d63d9.jpg?v=0)

I had to re-read it at least twice, not believing to my own eyes.

I think I stared at the picture for some seconds, almost paralyzed in front of that *opprobrium*, before exclaiming aloud an instinctive, yet powerless, “Are you kidding me?”, still fixedly – and incredulously – looking at the image on the screen as if waiting for an answer, an answer that sadly I had to give by myself: “No, they are not”.

Still gawking at the picture, engulfed in a mixture of feelings that are impossible to describe, I saw, as in a snapshot, all struggles, all efforts that have been made to raise social awareness and civic

responsibility against sexual violence, vanished, wiped away.

How can people even think to “advertise” rape? Above all, what kind of people are they to think it is cool to invite to rape? And it does not matter whether it is for real or a joke. Indeed, to make such a joke is as outrageous and deplorable as to organize that kind of party for real. For fun or for real the message is sadly clear: to rape is OK, and to rape at a party is a right men are allowed to take: “bring your best hands-on intention, inability to take no for an answer...”.

Is this not an insulting challenge to the *de facto* situation? Is not the party, in

particular, the *classical* situation in which most of the teenagers and college students experience what cannot but be “la douleur sur toutes autre” (“the greatest sorrow possible”) as rightly Christin de Pizan wrote in *Livre de la Cite des Dames* (1405)? Is this not the *classical* situation in which women are ‘doomed’ to undergo the well-known contention that “no means yes”? Is this not a cruel, a very cruelly disrespectful remark on the victims who suffer a double injustice, the act itself and the stigma to their reputation due to the typical way in which then victims are seen, as the ones in some way implicated in the crime, as the ones that in some way wanted to be raped, as the ones whose “no meant yes”? Is this not a deplorable joke on the key issue in case of rape: that of consent? Is it not an unspeakable offence to all women, as if to say: they must but be raped, given that an “inability to take no as an answer” is required?

And is that script not the celebration of the male power that cannot accept a ‘no’, cannot accept to fail in obtaining what it wants, that needs to justify a ‘no’ taking it for ‘yes’ and thus asserting male pride?

The intentionally male-oriented abuse, more than just use, of Rubens’ painting by those ‘sort’ of people that dared to post that picture on Google, deposes in favor of a despicable wish to remind all of us “who is the man”! and to state that a man’s conduct is not to be questioned. Whether or not the people who used the picture know what ancient myths of abduction and their reception in Renaissance art stand for is certainly irrelevant in view of the intolerable message they communicate. And, I would doubt there is some kind of intellectualism in these people, or else it

would be even worse if ‘intellectual’, educated people are behind it.

Despite all courageous fights and initiatives women have been so far engaging in to just assert their equal rights, and their right to be respected as human beings at the same level as men, despite the undoubtedly great achievements we have been reaching, it is unfortunately undeniable that not all men are OK with these efforts, not all men really think women have the same rights as they do, and would prefer to have women still in the position to which they historically have been confined: as obedient, submissive, nursing children and taking care of the loom, at home, and ‘silent’. And if women dare to speak out and say ‘no’, they cannot take it as an answer.

Is that picture, with that invitation, anything but an insulting way to ridicule all efforts and contentions women have been taken to destabilize the unspoken social acceptability of such an inhuman action as rape?

What is alarming, what is a reason of high concern, is – additionally - the free availability of such an image with such a message. What kind of impact can such a picture with that message have on the youngest who might not have yet the tools to discriminate what is right and what is not? Do we want our children, our youth, to see such a thing and read such words? Are we sure that they would not be affected to the point of believing that to rape is not a big deal, it is actually a kind of fun?

Having received a rigorous philological training in the field of Classics, yet willing to enlarge my knowledge and view by touching on social issues, too, of the Classical Antiquity, I have to confess that at first I almost skeptically approached the theme of rape within the

Gender Women's Studies with reference to ancient times. While thinking it would be useful and of students' interest to investigate and reconstruct the roots, the cultural roots, of such a phenomenon, I was persuaded there would be, however, no need to address it as a concern for which to 'use' Classical Studies, too, to contribute to raise awareness and civic responsibility. Everyone – I thought - is likely to agree that rape is certainly to be condemned; everyone knows that it is not to be perpetrated, and that there is by no means any excuse when it is. Why, in the end, should we talk of rape in our classes, too, not as just a 'mythic' episode that was able to explain, to the Ancients themselves, the origin of basic features of the surrounding world (rituals, seasons, plants etc.), but as an event that might disguise a serious issue?

Surely, the realization of the presence of quite a large number of stories of rape/abduction in ancient culture, the realization of the occurrence of features that are similar to those characterizing rape nowadays, the importance of relating the past to the present to teach the youth how to take example from the past and what to take as example from it, the importance to understand why certain things are the way they are, and how to react, all of these simple considerations have so far given me sufficient reasons to start occupying myself with the theme of rape, too. A recently attended workshop on "New ventures in Classics Pedagogy: The Challenge of Teaching about Rape", organized by Kathy L. Gaca and Lillian Doherty, at the annual meeting of the American Philological Association (Anaheim, Jan. 6-9, 2010), under the auspices of the Women's Classical Caucus – a workshop where we, the presenters, were very glad to see many

male professors raising questions on specific class- and reaction- situations – has then persuaded me of the poignant relevance and appropriateness of speaking of rape in our Classics classroom, too. The outrageous picture has finally convinced me that definitely it is never too much to speak of rape, and we, as being teachers and educators, must address this issue from different perspectives by using, each of us, our field of studies. We cannot take it for granted that all students are aware, we have to prevent them from accepting such misleading, yet well-rooted, cultural assumptions as those behind the picture under discussion. Last, but not least, we adults, we educators, we citizens of the world have to give the example and denounce what is wrong, such as inducing to think that rape is 'a kind of fun'. We cannot tolerate the presence of such an image (and who knows how many, of that sort, are so freely available on internet). We cannot pretend not to have seen it, we cannot wait for such a terrible thing to happen to somebody close to us to then take the initiative. Each of us has the duty to react, to speak out.

The persons who put up that insulting picture, for real or for fun, would like to reduce us to silence. Who would care about that (they might have thought)? Who would say something?

By saying, "I do care", I would think I likely can speak for all women, whose suffering and humiliation are so cruelly and disrespectfully disregarded in that picture, for all women who deserve respect and have the right to say no and to be heard, for all men, who are aware, responsible and dare to make a difference by detaching themselves from 'the standards' and are willing to fight beside and on the side of women, and finally for all children and future

generations for whose life conditions we are responsible.

They – and people like them - likely want to reduce us to silence? They likely want to ridicule the efforts that all of us, women and men, have made to destabilize the silent social acceptability of such a deed?

Well, they have to accept that we are determined to follow the example of the courageous ancient heroine Philomela who, raped by her brother in law, had

her tongue cut by the same rapist to impede her to denounce the crime. She did, indeed, denounce it, she did, indeed, cry it aloud by weaving a tapestry that described the crime, that spoke of it, silently yet in a way able to be heard.

That tapestry was what Sophocles called ‘the shuttle of the voice.’

Let our voice be ‘shuttle’ of our protest against this abomination.



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