

Rape

ERIN SPAMPINATO  AND DOREEN THIERAUF 

Colby College, Maine, United States; North Carolina Wesleyan University, United States

THERE are many well-understood reasons why discussion of rape invites euphemism and circumlocution, but there is also the simple fact that rape hurts to talk about. Rape constitutes “a cultural sore spot . . . something that needs our attention but that we are afraid to touch.”¹ The Victorians preferred to describe rape through terms that either highlighted violence but downplayed sexuality (like “outrage”) or those recasting violence as romance or psychology (“seduction”).² Despite our increased contemporary comfort with sexual explicitness, like the Victorians, we continue to put linguistic distance between “rape” and its referent, between the word we use to describe violence that is sexual and such violent sexuality. We don’t like to say, don’t like to hear, don’t like to read the word “rape.” It feels too unspecific, too phonetically explosive, too emotional. It lacks legalese’s detachment and requires remodeling before entering the realm of interpretation—be it an actual court of law or the literary critic’s assessment—where it becomes either a category term (“sexual assault”) or a granular accounting of specific physical acts (“digital penetration”).

And yet rape is a necessary word and concept and, we contend, a keyword for a growing subfield of literary and cultural scholarship, humanistic rape studies. As scholars working to establish this approach, we embrace the openness of “rape” as an umbrella term. Without rape as a stable signifier of specific acts, we find ourselves transported back to the nineteenth century, speechlessly fumbling like Tess Durbeyfield

Erin Spampinato’s current book project, *Azoful Nearness: A Literary and Cultural History of Rape, 1740–1900*, explores the way representations of rape figure in the rise of the novel. Her essays have appeared in *PMLA*, *differences*, *Studies in the Novel*, and elsewhere. Like so many, Spampinato is a contingent scholar; most recently she has served as a visiting assistant professor at Colby College, where she taught courses on nineteenth-century literature and gender and sexuality studies. With Doreen Thierauf and Michael Dango, she is currently co-editing a collection entitled *New Rape Studies: Humanistic Interventions*, under contract with SUNY University Press.

Doreen Thierauf is assistant professor of English at North Carolina Wesleyan University, where she teaches British literature from the nineteenth century to the present. Her work on sexuality, reproduction, gender-based violence, and romance has appeared in *Victorian Studies*, *Victorian Literature and Culture*, *Women’s Writing*, and *Nineteenth-Century Gender Studies*, among other venues. With Erin Spampinato and Michael Dango, she is currently co-editing a collection entitled *New Rape Studies: Humanistic Interventions*, under contract with SUNY University Press.

Victorian Literature and Culture, Vol. 51, No. 3, pp. 491–494.

© The Author(s), 2023. Published by Cambridge University Press. This is an Open Access article, distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives licence (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0>), which permits non-commercial re-use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided that no alterations are made and the original article is properly cited. The written permission of Cambridge University Press must be obtained prior to any commercial use and/or adaptation of the article.

doi:10.1017/S1060150323000426

for language that adequately describes what happened. And yet it is the very particularity of rape for a character like Tess that leads us to clarity: rape remains an indispensable domain of nineteenth-century literary studies precisely because rape is a thoroughly historically contingent phenomenon. Joanna Burke, in her magisterial *Rape: A History from 1860 to the Present* (2007) insists that rape “varies between countries; it changes over time. There is nothing timeless or random about it. . . . On the contrary, rape and sexual violence are deeply rooted in specific political, economic and cultural environments.”³ It is part of the power of rape, of its current structural pervasiveness, that it is capable of shaping people’s expectations to such an extent that it suggests itself as a timeless, eternally recurring fact of life, when it actually amounts to an intensely situated set of behaviors, many of which crystallized into their current forms in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, propelled by changing labor conditions, European imperialism, and shifting family and romantic configurations. Literary scholarship, especially in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century studies, has traditionally attempted to tether representations of gender-based violence to “objective,” transhistorical frameworks such as “the law” and psychology.

To counter such ahistorical critical gestures, one of us recently coined the term “adjudicative reading” to make visible some scholars’ tendency to approach fictional depictions of sexual violence legalistically, including assessing characters’ motivations and identifying criminal behavior.⁴ Such readings replicate rape law’s historical prejudices by privileging the experiences of the accused over and often against those of the victim. Instead, Victorian rape studies should cultivate a “capacious conception” of rape that allows for a range of sexually violent acts to become intelligible as such.⁵

As noted, the Victorian period was notorious for its oblique representations of sexual violence. However, as far as we can ascertain from extant scholarship, Victorian representations of rape as a social problem resonate with contemporary framings in that it was disproportionately carried out by men, chiefly targeted women, and severely restricted the emotional, physical, and spatial autonomy of those it affected. The mental paradigm for rape was often that of “stranger rape,” a trope exploited in sensation pennies, especially during the advance of the railroad in the 1860s and ’70s.⁶ Conversely, the public paid relatively scant attention to domestic sexual assault, perhaps because it was built into the legal structure of marriage through the “marital rape exemption,” a legal standard formulated by Matthew Hale in 1736 that granted

married men immunity from prosecution after forcing sexual intercourse with a spouse.⁷ As the nineteenth century progressed, authors became increasingly vocal in their disagreement with this standard, contributing to the rise of the feminist movement.⁸

Victorians conceptualized the effects of rape mostly as property and status damage, with less focus on psychological or physical repercussions, though recent scholarship has recognized the subtle ways in which some authors traced the psychological aftermath of rape.⁹ Rape was often economically devastating, particularly for unmarried women if it rendered them unable to marry and thus join the domestic reproductive “workforce.”¹⁰ As a structure of violence, it permanently socially subordinated those it harmed, not just women, but also children, men, and nonbinary people. Unsurprisingly, the literary representation of rape of male and nonbinary people in the period is extremely limited.¹¹ Rape’s harms were compounded for those who were multiply marginalized, such as enslaved, poor, disabled, young, or queer people.¹² Finally, while rape in Victorian literature almost always serves as a metaphor for subjugation, violation, and social death, in the late Victorian period, it becomes newly invested with imperial guilt and is deployed in revenge fantasies against the socially ascendant New Woman, especially in nonrealist fiction.¹³

As can be inferred from our sketch, most research on Victorian literary representations of rape has addressed cisgender men’s violations of cisgender women’s bodies and minds. Typically, perpetrators and those they harm are white, middle class, able-bodied, heterosexual, and married, indicating both whose suffering the Victorians deemed important or safe enough to depict and in whose violations scholars have been interested. There is very little research on rape outside the white middle-class family, and we urge scholars to attend to nonheterosexual, queer, disabled, impoverished, and colonial contexts. For us to arrive at a fuller picture of Victorian rape and to understand both continuities and breaks with our contemporary moment, we continue to require bold forays into the past.

NOTES

1. Mithu Sanyal, *Rape from Lucretia to #MeToo* (London: Verso, 2019), 2 (emphasis original).
2. Frances Ferguson, “Rape and the Rise of the Novel,” *Representations* 20 (1987): 88–112.

3. Joanna Bourke, *Rape: A History from 1860 to the Present* (London: Virago, 2007), 6–7.
4. Erin A. Spampinato, “Rereading Rape in the Critical Canon: Adjudicative Criticism and the Capacious Conception of Rape,” *differences* 32, no. 2 (2021): 122–60.
5. Spampinato, “Rereading Rape,” 124.
6. Robin J. Barrow, “Rape on the Railway: Women, Safety, and Moral Panic in Victorian Newspapers,” *Journal of Victorian Culture* 20, no. 3 (2015): 341–56.
7. Heather Nelson, “‘Nothing That She Could Allege against Him in Judicious or Judicial Ears’: ‘Consensual’ Marital Abuse in Victorian Literature.” *George Eliot–George Henry Lewes Studies* 69, no. 1 (2017): 89–119; Doreen Thierauf, “*Daniel Deronda*, Marital Rape, and the End of Reproduction,” *Victorian Review* 43, no. 2 (2017): 247–69.
8. Anthony Trollope’s *Barchester Towers* (1857) and *The Way We Live Now* (1875), Thomas Hardy’s *Far from the Madding Crowd* (1874), and George Eliot’s *Middlemarch* (1871) and *Daniel Deronda* (1876) represent sexualized domestic violence.
9. Brooke McLaughlin Mitchell, “Secrets, Silence, and the Fractured Self: Hardy’s *Tess of the d’Urbervilles*,” in *Victorian Secrecy: Economies of Knowledge and Concealment*, edited by Denise Tischler Millstein, 193–204 (Farnham: Ashgate, 2010).
10. Such economic doom is depicted in Elizabeth Gaskell’s *Ruth* (1853), Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s *Aurora Leigh* (1856), George Eliot’s *Adam Bede* (1859), and Hardy’s *Tess of the d’Urbervilles* (1891).
11. Emily Brontë’s *Wuthering Heights* (1847), Anne Brontë’s *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* (1848), and Charlotte Mary Yonge’s *The Daisy Chain* (1856) represent violence against children, animals, and men as part of the same structure of violence that gives rise to the sexual assault of women. Male rape is suggested in Charles Dickens’s *Our Mutual Friend* (1865).
12. See, in addition to the above, Mary Prince’s *The History of Mary Prince* (1831), Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s “The Runaway Slave at Pilgrim’s Point” (1850), and Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre* (1848).
13. See Bram Stoker’s *Dracula* (1897) and Richard Marsh’s *The Beetle* (1897) and *The Goddess* (1900).

