

Afterlives of Rape in Medieval English Literature, by Suzanne M. Edwards. The New Middle Ages. New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016. Pp. xvii+193. ISBN: 9781137364814 (hardcover).

At the center of Suzanne M. Edwards's compelling book is the question of how rape transformed the lives and the narratives of the survivors and their surroundings. The four chapters, each of which is an in-depth case study, cover theological, pedagogical, legal, and metaphorical aspects of "discourses of survival" in medieval English literature. The central terms "rape" and "consent" are problematized throughout as unstable and open to narrative appropriation, more often than not to the disadvantage of the rape survivor. However, Edwards suggests that our own careful attention to terminology in line with feminist theory, our use of "rape survivor" instead of "victim," effects a shift in perspective from disempowerment to dealing strategies. The great value of this book lies in tracing very carefully how such a shift of perspective may be achieved by paying close attention to the narratives surrounding many facets of sexual violence.

The Introduction starts from a thoughtful reading of Augustine's *City of God* to explore, in conversation with previous scholarship, the central questions of guilt, blame, and consent. Paying close attention to Augustine's transformations of the Lucretia story into a defense of survival against the classical tradition that celebrated her suicide, it also tackles the existential question of whether suicide was seen as a viable alternative to an afterlife for a victim of rape.

Chapter 1, on Aquinas's *Summa Theologiae*, the *Life of Christina of Markyate*, and two versions of the *Virgin of Antioch*, investigates the issue of suicide further and adds the questions of choice and consent. Because of the generic impossibility of rape in virgin saints' lives, the women in these texts ultimately escape rape. First, they are nevertheless presented with impossible choices between rape and death or between an unwanted marriage and sexual violence. This chapter hence frames the many oxymoronic "choices" at stake: is the suicide of a Christian virgin permissible in order to preserve her virginity? Can spiritual chastity survive the loss of the physical one? And, how can the endurance of rape be conceptualized as martyrdom if it also potentially betrays the female flesh's susceptibility to lust? Edwards analyzes how her authors navigate these difficult questions to come to complex conclusions such as the one by the Christina biographer who claims that even forced marriage can be understood as obedience to God's will.

In chapter 2 Edwards pursues the "pedagogies of sexual violence" prevalent

in the *Ancrene Wisse's* presentation of the Dinah story and in the horrors of wifehood described in *Hali Meibhad*. The afterlives discussed here are those that follow the imaginary encounter with sexual violence during reading. Edwards convincingly argues that the explicit descriptions of violent marital sex in *Hali Meibhad*, while aimed at preserving the chastity of young women, also destroyed it. The virgins' endurance of such reading was, however, framed as providing them with a deeper understanding of their chastity. Likewise, the *Ancrene Wisse's* explorations of Dinah's culpability in her own rape work as a foil to understand the preserving qualities of enclosure. Edwards shows how different authors use the ambiguities of the relevant terminology in order to shift perspectives of blame and guilt. She also briefly explores the spatial and material aspects of the literary imagination of rape with such interesting insights in this chapter that I would have liked to see more of this work on some of the other texts also.

Chapter 3 reads the *Wife of Bath's Tale* and the 1382 Statute of Rapes against one another. The chapter begins on the well-explored ambiguous meaning of *raptus* that not only led to difficulties in distinguishing abduction from "real rape" but also had repercussions for the question of the woman's consent. In her discussion of the different legal texts' ambiguous and even contradictory definitions, Edwards outlines how the option of retrospectively-granted consent had the potential to keep a woman in legal limbo until the moment of her death. The abduction of Eleanor West that Edwards discusses in detail effected a change in the legislation which, although called Statute of Rape, regulated abduction instead of rape and aimed at securing the daughter's inviolate body as the family's property. Edwards shows how the narrative of the first appeal of the West family, in which the daughter's abduction retreats behind the detailed description of the physical violence against her mother, resonates with the *Wife of Bath's Tale*, in which the rape victim likewise disappears from the narrative to be replaced by an older woman. With the new law in place, however, the second appeal of the Wests shifted the narrative focus to the daughter's consent in her own abduction and to the damage done to the family.

Chapter 4 turns to the ways in which romance and legendary history tie the female body to the body politic. Edwards is particularly interested in the trope of revolution as connected to rape. From this perspective, the chapter reevaluates the topics of death and survival and of forced consent tackled in the introduction and in chapter 1. It also returns to the Lucretia story "which requires a woman's death to provoke civic change" (119). Against it, Edward pits *Sir Orfeo's* revision of the classical Orpheus myth to a story of survival. Here, the afterlife of abduction (and probably rape, as both legal and literary traditions suggest)

is recast as a refusal of death and revolution in favor of survival and political reform. Closing this chapter and her book with a discussion of the light thrown on *Sir Orfeo* by the respective manuscript contexts of *The Four Foes of Mankind* and *Vanity*, Edwards argues for a countertradition that insists on the virtues of survival and that comes into view only with careful attention to “the ways that discourses of survival work against any singular, absolute, or linear account of rape as an event” (135).

With the outlook on recent campus rape survivors’ discourses in the afterword, Edwards gestures towards the ways in which the medieval afterlives discussed in her book speak to our own modern strategies of survival. Hence, this book is an invaluable contribution both to the discussion of rape in medieval literature and to the discussion of how our own narratives of the past may adequately address the traumata caused by sexual violence.

Nicole Nyffenegger
University of Bern