



**RAPE IN TWENTY-FIRST-CENTURY BRITISH
THEATRE**

Florentina GÜMÜŞ

**PhD Dissertation
English Language and Literature
Assoc. Prof. Yeliz BİBER VANGÖLÜ
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RAPE IN TWENTY-FIRST-CENTURY BRITISH THEATRE

PhD DISSERTATION

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TEZ BEYAN FORMU

SOSYAL BİLİMLER ENSTİTÜSÜ MÜDÜRLÜĞÜNE

BİLDİRİM

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CHAPTER ONE

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ABSTRACT

PhD DISSERTATION

RAPE IN TWENTY-FIRST-CENTURY BRITISH THEATRE

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Having established itself as a forum not only for entertainment but also for bringing issues considered taboo, unpleasant, and urgent to the audiences' attention, theatre has long been engaged with critical social problems. Rape is one of these problems and it appears that in the past decades, there has been a growing interest in the subject. This study aims to discover the ways in which rape is represented in twenty-first-century British theatre through an interdisciplinary approach, including critical theories and concepts from adaptation studies, feminist scholarship, legal studies, and sociology. The plays selected for this purpose are *Dea* by Edward Bond, *The Village* by April de Angelis, *It's True, It's True, It's True* by the Breach Theatre, *Immaculate* by Oliver Lansley, *Freak* by Anna Jordan, *Consent* by Nina Raine, *Boudica* by Tristan Bernays, and *Credible Witness* by Timberlake Wertenbaker. Their complexity and exploration of various rape-related themes, including pornography, consent, marital rape, and war, render these works intriguing subjects for study. This study reveals that twenty-first-century British theatre exhibits a significant inclination toward dramatising narratives which encompass diverse aspects of rape while explicitly avoiding the reinforcement of rape myths and the portrayal of women solely as victims.

Keywords: Feminism, Rape, Rape Myths, Twenty-First-Century British Theatre, Victimisation

ÖZET

DOKTORA TEZİ

YİRMİ BİRİNCİ YÜZYIL BRİTANYA TİYATROSUNDA TECAVÜZ

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Sadece eğlence için değil aynı zamanda nahoş, tabu olarak görülen ve ivedilikle seyircinin dikkatine sunulması gereken konuları gündeme getiren bir platform olarak tiyatro, uzun zamandır önemli toplumsal sorunlarla ilgilenmektedir. Tecavüz de tiyatrodaki işlenen bu sorunlardan olagelmıştır ve son yıllarda konuya yönelik ilginin giderek arttığı görülmektedir. Bu araştırma da hukuk, feminizm, uyarılma çalışmaları, psikoloji ve sosyoloji kavramlarıyla bu alanlardaki eleştirel kuramları içeren disiplinler arası bir yaklaşımla yirmi birinci yüzyıl Britanya tiyatrosunda tecavüzün temsil edilme biçimlerini ortaya çıkarmayı amaçlamaktadır. Bunun için Edward Bond'un *Dea*, April de Angelis'in *The Village*, Breach Theatre'nin *It's True, It's True, It's True*, Oliver Lansley'in *Immaculate*, Anna Jordan'ın *Freak*, Nina Raine'in *Consent*, Tristan Bernays'in *Boudica* ve Timberlake Wertenbaker'ın *Credible Witness* adlı oyunları seçilmiştir. Bu oyunları ilgi çekici kılan; çok katmanlı yapılarının yanı sıra pornografi, evlilik içi tecavüz, rızaya dayalı cinsel ilişki ve savaşı da içeren tecavüzle ilişkili temaları işlemeleridir. Çalışma ortaya koymaktadır ki yirmi birinci yüzyıl Britanya tiyatrosu, tecavüz mitlerinin pekiştirilmesinden ve kadınların kurban olarak resmedilmesinden bilinçli bir şekilde kaçınırken tecavüzün çeşitli görünümünü içeren hikâyeleri sahneye taşımaya güçlü bir ilgi göstermektedir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Feminizm, Tecavüz, Tecavüz Mitleri, Yirmi Birinci Yüzyıl Britanya Tiyatrosu, Kurbanlaştırma

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INTRODUCTION

I. PART ONE: BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

A very succinct summary of the history of modern feminism is, according to Margaret Atwood, the following: “First wave, the vote. Second wave, the image. Now it’s about violence and rape and death: we’ve got down to the nitty-gritty” (as quoted in Higgins, 2016). Although the second wave did, in fact, manifest a keen interest in rape and violence, it is definitely true that today, as it was in 2016 when Atwood made this statement, an intense campaign against violence, rape, and death lies at the heart of feminism’s struggle for a better world. From this, not only women but men, non-binary individuals, and children would benefit as well since they are also direct or indirect victims of sexual violence. Despite significant improvements on different planes, gender equality has not been achieved. Women are still perceived as the ‘weaker sex’, which implies both that they need male protection and that they are vulnerable to harm in all its forms, from work harassment and domestic violence to rape and murder.

Rape started to receive the consideration it deserves, both public and academic, during the 1970s with the efforts of the feminist movement and its consciousness-raising actions, such as the public event called ‘Speak-Out Against Rape’ organised in 1971 by the New York Radical Feminists with the slogan “Rape is a Political Crime Against Women” (Brownmiller, 1999, p. 209). Shulamith Firestone and Anne Koedt founded this radical feminist group and the speak-out they organised together with the conference that followed is considered the starting point of the anti-rape movement (Serisier, 2007, p. 86). Perhaps the most significant contribution of this period is the reconceptualisation of rape from a sexual act to an act of violence, which was proposed in one of the earliest and most influential works on rape¹, Susan Brownmiller’s seminal treatise *Against Our Will: Men, Women and Rape* (1975). Brownmiller was also a dedicated member of the New York Radical Feminists; thus, her efforts to increase awareness on rape expanded from

¹ In her book *In Our Time. Memoirs of a Revolution* (1999), Brownmiller gives credit to other pioneer figures and works, such as Ruth Hersherberger’s *Adam’s Rib* (1948) and the collective book *Our Bodies, Ourselves* (1973). These works, however, are not dedicated entirely to the subject of rape, which receives only a chapter in each. Brownmiller’s recollection of the four years she had spent in the New York Public Library writing the book *Against Our Will: Men, Women and Rape* (1975) is indicative of the limited resources on the subject: “the card catalogue had more entries for rapeseed than for rape” (p. 214).

academic scholarship to actual activist involvement. For her, it is a “basic truth that rape is not a crime of irrational, impulsive, uncontrollable lust, but is a deliberate, hostile, violent act of degradation and possession on the part of a would-be conqueror, designed to intimidate and inspire fear” (p. 391). Despite “lack of empirical support for the psychopathological model” (Scully & Marolla, 2003, p. 110), until modern times, a prevailing assumption was that rapists are mentally ill individuals or “degenerate, imbecilic men” (Brownmiller, 1975, p. 11). Furthermore, “Freudian psychology viewed rapists as having surplus, uncontrollable sex drive” (Bevacqua, 2004, p. 183), which not only obscured the violence of rape but also acted as a way of removing the blame from the rapist: if a man cannot control his actions, then he cannot be held responsible for them. The sexual nature of rape, the focus on the rapist and not on the experience of the victim, the justification for the rapist’s motives, and the general silence around rape are key battles fought, and partially won, by the anti-rape movement.

Even though a systematic study of rape was not published until the second half of the twentieth century, stories about rape have existed since the beginning of times, as can be observed in ancient Babylonian and Mosaic laws or Hebrew tradition, for instance. In those early times, the rape of a woman was considered an injury done to the father if she was not married or to the husband in case she was. In ancient Babylonian and Mosaic laws, “criminal rape, as a patriarchal father saw it (...) was, in a phrase, the theft of virginity, an embezzlement of his daughter’s fair price on the market” (Brownmiller, 1975, p. 18). In the Hebrew Bible or the Old Testament, three rape narratives stand out, namely that of Dinah, a nameless concubine, and Tamar, the daughter of David (Ripsman Eylon, 2004, p. 23). Amnon, the brother of Tamar, describes himself as ill with desire for her. However, he cannot satisfy his desire (in the end, he does) for two reasons only: firstly, she is a virgin, and secondly, he is anxious about their other brother’s reaction (Trible, 1984). At no point does she, as an individual, and what she desires represent an obstacle for him, nor does, as a matter of fact, the incestuous nature of the act. Even if she is given a voice in the story, it is the other brother, Absalom, who takes revenge on her behalf (and on behalf of their family’s honour).

Similarly, Dinah’s brothers are the ones who punish her rapist, Schechem, the prince of the land who in the aftermath of the act wants to marry her. Her brothers pretend to agree with their union on the condition that all male citizens of Schechem are

circumcised. After they comply with this request, Dinah's brothers attack and kill them all (Ripsman Eylon, 2004, pp. 23-24). Though the stories of Tamar and Dinah are quite disturbing, the most violent account of rape in the Old Testament is the gang rape and torture of a Levite's² concubine. When a group of men comes to the house where she and the Levite spend the night, demanding to sexually abuse the latter, the host offers his virgin daughter and the concubine instead. Perhaps since they consider the concubine a woman already 'spoiled', they choose her and rape her until morning. When the Levite wakes up, he finds her corpse at the doorstep. Upon arriving home, he cuts the corpse into twelve pieces, which he sends to the other tribes of Israel, and this act results in a devastating war against the Benjamites (Judges, 19-21). These ancient stories illustrate how women existed only in relation to their male relatives and no place was safe for them at the time. They were in danger of being raped both in their own house and when being away, even if they were virgins or not, even if they knew the rapist or not, reality not far from today's world.

Western³ culture is firmly grounded in acts of rape against women and perhaps this is one of the reasons why the situation has not improved even in the twenty-first century. This view is shared by Susan Griffin (1983), who observes that "as the symbolic expression of the white male hierarchy, rape is the quintessential act of our civilization" (p. 140). If, in today's understanding, such acts can be, without a doubt, called rape, the terms primarily used in ancient narratives when referring to rape are 'seduction' or 'abduction', terms much easily to be romanticised. In Ancient Greece, Zeus, the almighty god, abducts Europa to Crete, where he "took her as his mistress" (Hard, 2004, p. 337). It would seem that without her, Minos, Minotaur, and all the legends surrounding them would not exist. Zeus, again, 'seduces' Io, who gives birth to Epaphos, the legendary founder of Egypt (Hard, pp. 228-231). The ruler of the Underworld, Hades, is associated with almost no significant myths except the abduction of Persephone, his niece, with the help of his brother (and her uncle) Zeus. Her mother, Demeter, grieves for the lost daughter and as a result, the earth becomes infertile. To placate her – and not because

² A Levite was "a member of a group of clans of religious functionaries in ancient Israel who apparently were given a special religious status" (Levite, n.d.).

³ This does not mean that rape characterises only Western culture; however, the background and the focus of this study are limited to a Western understanding and representation of rape.

Persephone was abducted against her will – the gods convince Hades to return the girl to her mother, even if only for a specific time of the year (Hard, pp. 127-128). In like manner, one of the foundation myths of Ancient Rome tells of Romulus, the offspring of Mars' rape of Rhea, who orders his men to abduct the Sabine women in order to compensate for the lack of marriageable women (Dutton, 2005, p. 6) and hence to ensure the continuation of the city. Sextus Tarquinius rapes Lucrece and when his family is banished, the Republic arises (Arieti, 2002, p. 213); presumably, without this violent act, neither the Republic nor Shakespeare's poem *The Rape of Lucrece* (1594) would have existed.

Furthermore, these tales inspired new literary and artistic creations. They have been immortalised, aestheticised, and eroticised by artists such as Titian, Rubens, Poussin, and Tintoretto, with semi-nude women in the embrace of imposing male figures, very often in armour. Art follows the understanding that rape is not a matter of sex, with more contemporary pieces showing its violent and terrifying nature by moving from "subtle signs of the victim's unwillingness to overt representations of penetration and physical assault" (Donahue-Wallace, 2004, p. 15). Despite these efforts, the vast number of pornographic videos, which portray the classical scenario of a woman being forced into having sex and ending up enjoying it, perpetuate the traditional perception of rape as being a matter of sexual desire, uncontrollable for men, and deep down desired by women. In this regard, Scully and Marolla (2003) point out that "the message—women desire and enjoy rape—has more potential for damage than the image of the violence per se" (p. 112). For various reasons, writers and artists throughout the centuries found these stories inspiring, worth telling, and perhaps titillating for readers and audiences. For better or for worse, they do represent a significant part of our culture and rape acts and narratives have been employed as a forceful way of creating, changing, or explaining history, and of creating artistic and cultural artefacts.

The *Oxford Dictionary of English Etymology* (1966) defines rape as taking by force, ravishing, or violating a woman. The second meaning of the word refers to seizing and robbery (Onions, p. 739); in this context, the woman is implicitly the property of her father/husband, and raping her means to rob him of something he owns, just like any other commodity. Since literary productions are an outcome of culture, it is not surprising that this double meaning can be noticed in the mock-heroic narrative poem *The Rape of the Lock* (1712/2005) by Alexandre Pope, in which the Baron steals a lock of Belinda's hair.

The poem was written to bring together two families estranged by a similar event through the power of laughter. At the beginning of the poem, the spirit Ariel warns the girl: “Beware of all, but most beware of Man!” (Canto I, line 114). Ariel proves correct since the Baron is determined to obtain the lock and only needs to decide which direction to pursue, “by Force to ravish, or by Fraud betray” (Canto II, line 32). Not only does the word ‘rape’ mean both robbery, from the Latin *rapere*, and taking a woman by force, but also the word ‘lock’ carries two meanings: a lock of hair or the lock of a door. Thus, the title of the poem becomes a euphemism for the violent defloration of a virgin; the lock, i.e., the vagina, is ‘opened’ by the key, i.e., the penis. When transposed into fiction, the prospect of possessing a part of a woman’s body without her permission can be a source of laughter. Nevertheless, this is not the case in real life, where the incident led to a quarrel between the victim’s family, who took it quite seriously, and the perpetrator. So, what exactly is one robbed of when raped?

First of all, it has to be stressed that rape is experienced differently by every woman. However, some repercussions are familiar to most victims: a woman can feel robbed of agency, freedom, inner peace, or trust in others (Gibbs, 2004). Rape can also be understood as a crime in which sex is robbed from a woman, where the rapist’s “intent is to ‘have’ the female body in the acquisitory meaning of the term” (Brownmiller, 1975, p. 185). Jacqueline Rose expresses another implication in her book *On Violence and on Violence Against Women* (2021). She argues that the profound power a perpetrator of harassment or sexual abuse has over his victim “brings mental life to a standstill” (p. 29) as if he whispers in her ears: “You will think about me” (p. 29). Sexual assault⁴ can be understood in two ways: as an assault on the body which is felt even long after the actual rape, as Professor Andrea Benton Rushing (2003) puts it when describing her own experience: “my body’s no longer mine. The rapist controls it” (p. 14), but also on thought and this represents the absolute control, the ultimate conquest. After the event, the victim is not able to think about anything else, and furthermore, the perpetrator thinks he knows, before and during the event, what his victim wants, what she desires, i.e., to be raped by him.

⁴ Although the distinction between ‘sexual assault’ and ‘rape’ is not a clear one, it is believed that ‘sexual assault’ is a gender-neutral term. However, this study agrees with the view that rape is, in fact, a gendered crime and employs the term ‘rape’ instead. In this instance, ‘sexual assault’ was preferred since it is the one Rose uses in her book.

The belief that women secretly desire to be raped is one of the most prevailing rape myths. Unfortunately, this view was defended by Helene Deutsch, a woman herself and a student of Sigmund Freud. She is remembered “for her influential thesis that female psychology is characterized by masochism and passivity” (Murphy, 2004, p. 56) and for her conviction that the female fantasy abounds, consciously and unconsciously, in images of rape (Brownmiller, 1975, p. 320). Psychoanalysis did quite a lot of damage to rape victims; on the one hand, it portrayed rapists as mentally ill individuals who cannot control their sexual urges and on the other hand, it complemented this image with women desiring to be raped. When such statements are taken together with other controversial ideas, such as ‘penis-envy’, it is not surprising then that some feminists, like Brownmiller, have not been the most ardent supporters of Freud and his followers.

Evolutionary psychology is another field of research whose scholars stress again and again the feminists’ prejudice against their work. One example from McKibbin et al. (2008) can illustrate why such an impression exists. In their efforts to answer why rape is traumatic for women, they inform that (apart from the more obvious reasons, such as causing severe physical injury or death) it can lead to the disruption of “a woman’s parental care, causing a woman’s partner to abandon her” (p. 92) and the *coupe de grâce*: “Aside from death, perhaps the greatest cost to women who are raped is the circumvention of their mate choice” (p. 92). At the beginning of a more recent study by the same team, there is a sensible mention stating that its aim is not to show the world as it ought to be but as it is, that “researching rape from an evolutionary perspective does not justify or promote this heinous act” (McKibbin & Shackelford, 2011, p. 438). Regardless of this observation and Baker’s (2000) point that “what biologists call nature, feminists tend to call patriarchy” (p. 806), by presenting women only in relation to motherhood or romantic relationships, the use of language, and the solutions they propose (such as the idea of social barriers between men and women), studies of this kind reinforce the already deeply rooted sex role stereotyping. In a study examining the relationship between rape myths acceptance, sex role stereotyping, adversarial sexual beliefs, sexual conservatism, and acceptance of interpersonal violence, Burt (1980) found that “sex role stereotyping is the precondition for targeting women as potential sexual victims” (p. 229). Moreover, even if studies within the framework of evolutionary psychology are based on data collected from actual rape victims, it ought to be emphasised that their answers do not exist in a

vacuum removed from the culture they live in: “the culture reinforces the behavior, the behavior reinforces the culture and becomes the reality” (Burt, 2003, p. 137). Women have been programmed for centuries to believe that their actions or appearance is what leads to rape and implicitly that they are the ones who need to be punished and to suffer for it.

An alternative to the limited understanding of culture and society inherited in theories such as evolutionary psychology, within social sciences, miscommunication theory and sexual script theory are two popular theories for the understanding of rape. Furthermore, they present “a radical departure from mainstream biologically orientated sexology” (Frith, 2009, p. 100). Script theory “asserts that culturally prescribed ‘scripts’ for sexual interactions ascribe the role of sexual initiator and pursuer to men and sexual gatekeeper to women” (Frith, p. 99); thus, women are the ones who should make it clear that ‘no means no’. In these interactions, each partner plays a particular role in a predetermined order, with the peak point being the sexual intercourse. Miscommunication theory, just like script theory, is mainly related to ‘acquaintance rape’ since it implies a degree of communication which theoretically does not exist in the case of rape by a stranger. This approach does not put the responsibility for saying ‘no’ in an effective manner solely on the woman. On the contrary, it asserts that “women fail to say no clearly and effectively while men fail to understand or act upon women’s refusals” (Frith, pp. 99-100). This state of affairs is not that surprising considering that women are expected to have mild behaviour and not express themselves in a very firm or aggressive way, particularly when addressing a man. Moreover, it is generally not deemed proper for women to show too much willingness to engage in sexual acts and men are aware of this. For this reason, they can easily misinterpret a woman’s refusal simply as a pretence. As Frith and Kitzinger (1997) note, another “complicating factor is that (contrary to the feminist slogan that no always means no), women do sometimes give deliberately misleading verbal signals about their willingness to engage in sex” (p. 519). It remains to be debated whether these misleading signals are given in a deliberate way or not and to what extent what signals a woman gives is of any importance for a man who wants to ‘have’ her. Nevertheless, the only way to avoid such confusion must surely be to take ‘no’ for an answer under all circumstances.

Entering the sexual script means, in many cases, that there is no way back neither for the woman nor for the man and it is in that precise moment of withdrawal from the script that rape happens. An initial interest can also make women feel that they have a share of the blame for misleading the man who raped them; that they allowed the verbal or physical interaction to go up to a certain point and only afterwards said no (something they are entitled to do). By the same token, men feel it is acceptable to go through with the act (something they are not entitled to do) if early willingness is expressed.

Such false beliefs about rape are not associated only with acquaintance rape but with any form of rape. In a crucial essay for the research into the phenomenon of rape, Burt (2003) defines rape myths as “PREJUDICIAL, STEREOTYPED, or false beliefs about rape, rape victims, or rapists” (p. 129, emphasis in original). Rape myths are employed to explain how rapists justify rape, how it is processed by courts of law, and why the vast majority of women do not press charges or speak about being raped. Such myths can be grouped into several categories, namely “nothing happened; no harm was done; she wanted or liked it; and she asked for it or deserved it” (Burt, p. 131). In the first category are myths related to women lying about being raped in order to cover up for a sexual encounter which, for example, ended up in an unwanted pregnancy, as well as women who aim at taking revenge from a lover or a man who rejected them. To the category of ‘no harm was done’ belong myths that remove the physical and emotional damage coercive sex has on a woman. Even if the fact that sexual intercourse actually happened is accepted by those who harbour this idea about rape, some believe that it does not actually count as rape since the woman does not have enough ‘value’ to be damaged by the act. This is particularly the case if the woman was not a virgin, she was having an affair, or she belongs to a marginalised social group. In this way, rape myths are further fuelled by “racist, classist, and sexist stereotypes about victims, perpetrators, and violence” (Schmidt, 2004, p. 191). The third category includes perhaps the most pervasive rape myths, i.e., that the woman actually wanted it, provoked the perpetrator, or enjoyed it. Closely related is the fourth category of myths which imply that the woman must have acted in a way that led to rape either through her behaviour towards the perpetrator, by breaching the norms of ‘proper’ conduct, or by putting herself in dangerous situations, such as being late at night in a bar or hitchhiking (Burt, 2003, pp. 134-135). A woman may ‘ask for it’ also through the clothes she wears. If her clothes are ‘too provocative’,

this may cause the man in front of her to ‘lose his self-control’ and rape her (Gorman, 2004, p. 45). Therefore, the fact that she was raped may be believed, but she is still blamed for it.

According to Serisier (2007), the efforts of the anti-rape movement to dispel rape myths “can be read as myth-making to the same extent that they are seen as destroying or combating the misogynist myths that surround rape” (p. 89). For instance, according to Brownmiller’s critics, one of the myths her writings created is that “*all men keep all women in a state of fear*” (Brownmiller, 1975, p. 15, emphasis in original). This way of perceiving the world could be seen as problematic for it appears to reverse the blame from all women to all men. However, the main point of critique of her work is that it is constructed on “the myth of the universality of white feminist experience” (Serisier, p. 91), which erases the particularities of what rape means for women of colour. As an example, we can take the “U.S. stereotypes of Asian American women as being hypersexualized, docile, and obedient, and tied to the community and thus unable or unwilling to speak about rape” (Borel, 2004, p. 17). It is evident that both class and race play a crucial role in how the victim and the rapist are perceived by society and prosecuted by law. It is, however, also the case that the fear of rape is something that women across race and class feel at certain moments in their lives or on a regular basis, a fear that men, in general, do not experience.

Even if rape myths are intermingled with other factors, such as class or race, it is quite difficult for a definition of rape, particularly a legal one, to manage to incorporate all these issues since the focus is on the common and not the particular. Burt (2003) defines rape as “penetration, however slight, of any bodily orifice, obtained against the victim’s will by using force, or threat of force, of any part of the assailant’s body or any object use by the assailant in the course of the assault” (p. 129). Although this definition is quite precise, what it does overlook is that rape can happen with or without any degree of force or threat of force. Particularly in situations where an imbalance of power exists, force is not a crucial element. For a young woman who is raped by a family member whom she loves and trusts, force is not even necessary; fear and shock act as paralysing factors on their own. This façade comes in stark contrast with the so-called ‘real rape’ scenario most people believe: that of a woman whom an armed stranger rapes in a dark alley.

The most (in)famous definition of rape quoted in nearly every manuscript on the subject is the one proposed in the seventeenth century by the English judge and legal scholar Sir Matthew Hale. He warned that rape “is an accusation easily to be made and hard to be proven, and harder to be defended by the party accused, tho never so innocent” (as quoted in Cardyn, 2004, p. 94). This attitude has not changed even in modern times although, as Baker (1997) brilliantly points out, “Lord Hale had it precisely backwards: rape allegations are not easily made, and they are very easy to defend against” (p. 584). The legal system of England has come a long way since the seventeenth century and the latest definition proposed in the ‘Sexual Offences Act’ from 2003 states that in order for a person to have committed the offence of rape, he intentionally penetrates the vagina, anus, or mouth of another person with his penis and the other person does not consent to the penetration. Perhaps the trickiest aspect, this person does not reasonably believe that the other person consents. Even if the requirement of force or threat of force does not appear in this definition, it is not difficult to observe how the words ‘consent’, ‘reasonably’, and ‘believe’ are subjective terms, therefore the decision on what they mean rests on the judges which are first of all human beings, therefore subjected to cultural beliefs about rape, and secondly, they are primarily men, who are “more likely than women to adhere to rape myths” (Hayes et al., 2013, p. 211). Only 22 out of 106 High Court judges in England and Wales are women (Patrick, 2017). The appointment in 2023 of Sue Carr, Baroness Carr of Walton-on-the-Hill as Lady Chief Justice, the first woman to hold this title since its beginning in the thirteenth century, is one encouraging development. However, with such low representation in general, the chances that victims of rape will be believed are not much higher than they were in Sir Matthew Hale’s seventeenth century.

II. PART TWO: METHODOLOGY

That victimhood, especially when it comes to rape, is mainly associated with women “likely due to the patriarchal views that label women as weaker than men” (Hayes et al., 2013, p. 206) cannot be denied. What could be perceived as unexpected, however, is some critics’ reasoning that the patriarchy is not the only power behind the portrayal of women as victims, but as Serisier (2007) points out, there is a growing debate among scholars around the idea that the “anti-rape feminism is guilty of subsuming femininity

into victimhood” (p. 91). When Brownmiller (1975) starts her chapter on victims with the statement that “women are trained to be rape victims” (p. 309), she does not seem to imply that anti-rape feminists, such as herself, train women to be victims, but that “rape has something to do with our sex” (p. 309). Gavey (1999) indicates that the encouragement for women to view themselves as victims and the “language of victimization” characterising the beginning of the anti-rape movement, through the work of scholars such as Martha Burt and Rhoda Estep, “was proposed as a way of making sense of and opposing the moral injustice of women’s oppression in the forms of violence and harassment” (p. 59). In other words, at the time, such an approach was necessary to bring to light the pervasiveness of violence towards women by men. However, Gavey warns against imposing the notion of ‘victim’ on women who do not perceive themselves as such and who do not feel that they were traumatised by rape, sexual assault, or harassment (p. 80). Gavey also underlines the lack of emphasis in rape discourse on women who fight back. This can be understood as a precautionary approach since a strong focus on women who manage to avoid an attack can be used against women who do not successfully fight back and reinforce stereotypes that blame women (p. 73). However, giving more space to such stories can also be used to suggest that all women can actually fight back, and in so doing empowering them. There can even be more than two versions of stories about rape: women who fight back and women who do not. Focusing on any of these two versions only reinforces older stereotypes or creates new ones. In this regard, Lamb (1999) draws attention to the replacement of the formerly pervasive tendency to blame the victim with the current view that all victims are “pure, innocent, blameless, and free of problems (before the abuse)” (p. 108), which is far from empowering for women. Even if therapists, the media, and the public require “long-term suffering from victims for their victimization to be compelling” (p. 115), Lamb suggests that women should feel safe in sharing their own experience of rape, not limit it to learned and expected clichés from a rape victim. In light of these views, it can be concluded that strategies that made sense half a century ago and were crucial in shedding light on what was in the dark and hidden do not necessarily apply to a contemporary understanding of how the subject of rape and rape victims should be tackled.

What society expects from a rape victim did not change in a significant manner since the beginning of the anti-rape movement and time and again, it appears that for a

woman to be believed that she was raped, her only option is to play the role of the “convincing victim” (Lamb, 1999, p. 116). Konradi (1996) conducted research on rape victims and court trials and found that the women she interviewed ‘performed’ the role of the victim, which was the role the jury and the judges wanted to see, in order to obtain a guilty verdict for the men who raped them. The way they approached this was through “appearance work, rehearsal, emotional work, team building, role research, and case enhancement” (p. 411). What this means is that the women gave particular importance to clothing and makeup in order to appear “conservative, businesslike, and nonsexual” (p. 411). They made sure that the testimony they gave in court coincided with the initial statement given to the police and that they were in control of their emotions while doing so. For this purpose, they asked the help of close ones and also conducted research into rape laws and trials. When necessary, they also brought certain documents that may help enhance their case (pp. 411-423). It ought to be emphasised that Konradi’s findings do not imply that the women lied about being raped; they simply knew that the only chance to get a fair verdict was through displaying a specific image.

In view of Judith Butler’s (1999) theory of performativity, which argues mainly that gender is culturally constructed through repetitive actions, behaviour, gestures, and clothing, it can be maintained that what constitutes a rape victim is also reinforced in the same way and women who fail to display the expected image also fail to convince that they were raped. The idea that gender is culturally constructed has previously been discussed by Simone de Beauvoir in her *The Second Sex* (1949/1956). She asserts that “a man never begins by presenting himself as an individual of a certain sex; it goes without saying that he is a man” (p. 15); ironically, when one refers to a rape victim, it goes without saying that the victim is a woman, and in the case of male victims, the gender is specified as in male rape. If performativity is the repetition of an act and women are repeatedly portrayed as victims, does this make ‘woman’ and ‘victim’ tautological terms? Moreover, are sexual violence or the threat of assault and harassment at the heart of being a woman? De Beauvoir argues that one is not born a woman but becomes a woman. Can that very first moment a girl experiences the fear of rape be understood as a kind of rite of passage into womanhood? Moreover, although it is not the focus of this study, it can also be asked if being a man equates with the capacity to rape. In Nick Dear’s adaptation of Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* (2011) for the National Theatre, after the Creature rapes

and snaps Elizabeth's neck, he asks "Now I am a man?" (1:45:00). This sentence suggests that the moment he behaves like a man, through rape and murder, is the moment he feels a part of society. For this to happen, an innocent woman who actually does not reject his existence, has to be sacrificed.

Is it possible that the portrayal of women as victims of violence, through millennia, not centuries, perpetuated violence against women up to this very day? If literature's power, as a cultural product, to change the world is to be accepted, is it not possible that it also contributed to this result? In a documentary for BBC Radio 4 entitled *Theatre of the Abused* and broadcasted on December 4, 2014, the English dramatist April de Angelis begins the discussion by questioning the necessity for the portrayal of violence against women, including sexual violence, on stage (Tresilian, 2014). She warns against the dangers of representing women as victims, instead of empowering them. However, de Angelis concludes that bringing forth such issues, offering a platform for the stories of women who have been abused to be told, and raising the awareness of the audiences is indeed possible through theatre. She adds that the portrayal of violence on stage is less dangerous than silence, a view shared by the anti-rape movement since its beginnings. In a similar enterprise, Fitzpatrick (2018) looks into the ways theatre practitioners in Britain and Ireland represent rape on stage and do so with an effort to avoid eroticising the female body and the act of rape. There are, in fact, ways of transferring the horror of rape without even bringing it to the stage. For instance, Harold Pinter's play *One for the Road* (1984) presents a family tortured by a totalitarian regime through an officer named Nicolas. It is implied that Victor's wife, Gila, has been raped multiple times by a group of soldiers in a room above the one in which her husband is tortured in front of the audience. This hint, this ever-present dread, can have a powerful influence on the audience and even on someone reading the play; without the actual rape being brought to the centre of the stage, it makes the act more present and more potent.

Rape is one of the many crude realities of today's world, but more and more women find the courage to speak about their experiences of sexual abuse. One of the consequences is that numerous plays related to rape are performed on stage. Taking the recent growth of interest in rape as its point of departure, this study seeks to uncover the ways in which rape is represented in twenty-first-century British theatre by answering the following research questions: Are rape myths perpetuated or challenged in the selected

plays? What is the attitude of the characters, both female and male towards rape and rape victims? Are the victims believed when they say they have been raped and are they always telling the truth? How is the issue of rape weighed against other political and social issues? How do language and formal elements relate to the issue of rape? Which ethical questions and conclusions are generated by theatre in this context? One such ethical question is whether rape victims are abused not only by the actual rapists, but also by the theatre institution and by extension by scholars as well. In an effort to prevent reinforcing the portrayal of women as victims, the plays have been approached through a nuanced perspective, avoiding stereotypical assumptions about rape, rape victims, and perpetrators.

The significance of this study lies in the fact that rape is not a topic to be taken lightly; it has a strong social resonance since sexual assault and harassment are part of women's lives regardless of their social background and news about women being brutally raped, and in some cases, murdered makes the front-page more often than one likes to see. Since its beginnings, theatre has been a forum for bringing issues considered taboo, disturbing, pressing, and urgent to the audiences' attention. In one of the few books dedicated entirely to this subject, *Rape on the Contemporary Stage* (2018), Fitzpatrick argues that although there are several studies dealing with particular plays, "they do not advance a theory of violence in performance; nor are any of these works focused on the representation of sexual violence on the contemporary stage" (p. 31). Her conclusion that progress is "underway, and flourishing" (p. 253) could not have been more accurate since the plays of the past two decades selected for this study display a wide range of complexities surrounding the sensitive subject of rape while they offer no clear answers and leave the audiences with more questions.

In the age of the #MeToo movement⁵, when news about rape and sexual harassment appear on every platform on a daily basis all over the world, the question of why would someone want to research such a topic seems self-explanatory. Although I recognise that it is not a subject to be taken lightly and my response to some of the plays has been profound, being more aware, understanding that it is a complex subject, and perhaps shed some light on it seems worthwhile. Additionally, the fear of rape has been a constant in

⁵ The first chapter of this study will discuss the #MeToo movement in more detail.

my life since an early age and there have been occasions when I have been sexually assaulted and harassed myself, both by men I knew and strangers. The question that always troubled me in those instances was what did I do to provoke that particular man? Was it my attitude, my dressing style, or something I said? Brownmiller (1975) was asked if her being raped was the motivation for writing her seminal work *Against Our Will: Men, Women and Rape* (p. 7). I was not asked such a question but I was questioned about my reasons for wanting to work on such a disturbing topic. The answer is that rape is not only a literary trope; it is reality, and it is part and parcel of women's everyday life, including mine.

The nature of the study calls for an interdisciplinary approach for the reason that rape is a complex phenomenon and the selected plays' perspectives to rape differ significantly. Building from a critical discussion of feminist scholarship, cultural sociology, legal scholarship, and adaptation studies, this study examines the following plays: *Credible Witness* (2001) by Timberlake Wertenbaker, *Immaculate* (2006) by Oliver Lansley, *Freak* (2014) by Anna Jordan, *Dea* (2016) by Edward Bond, *Boudica* (2017) by Tristan Bernays, *Consent* (2017a) by Nina Raine, *It's True, It's True, It's True* (2018) by the Breach Theatre, and *The Village* (2018) by April de Angelis⁶. However, although the study has a strong interdisciplinary theoretical foundation, the understanding that guides the discussion is a feminist perspective, particularly a radical feminist one, which is governed by Brownmiller's understanding of rape as something that all women risk experiencing at some point in their life. This risk may be heightened by aspects such as race or class, but gender is at the core of rape.

An overview of contemporary British theatre shows that a large number of plays about or including references to rape have been written and performed. Some relevant examples are *Shoot/Get Treasure/Repeat* (2007) by Mark Ravenhill, *The Wonderful World of Dissocia* (2007) by Anthony Neilson, *The Westbridge* (2011), *Black Jesus* (2013), *Di and Viv and Rose* (2013) by Amelia Bullmore, *The Girl's Guide to Saving the World* (2014) by Elinor Cook, *The One* (2014) by Vicky Jones, *Lela & Co.* (2015) by Cordelia Lynn, *Ulster American* (2018) by David Ireland, and *Boots* (2019) by Jessica Butcher. Although the list of plays about rape is vast, this study had to be restricted in

⁶ The plays are presented in chronological order, not in the order they are discussed in the study.

several ways to ensure a better focus and a more in-depth analysis: firstly, only plays written by British playwrights and produced after 2001 are included here. Secondly, only plays in which women are victims of rape have been included for the reason that although male rape and child sexual abuse certainly exist and such stories do appear in contemporary British theatre, they do not prevail. Whether this disproportionate representation reflects society or shows that these subjects are avoided by playwrights either for personal reasons or as a response to the lack of public demand, is a discussion beyond the purpose of this study. Moreover, since I personally understand what it is to be a woman and nearly always under threat (be it actual or imaginative) of being sexually abused or harassed, I believe that my contribution can be more significant from this standpoint. Thirdly, I tried to maintain a balance between more famous plays and plays that have not received much attention from academia. One of the reasons why some plays have not been the focus of academic inquiry may be the fact that these plays were not produced by mainstream theatre companies or that they have been produced relatively recently. *Credible Witness* for instance was first performed in 2001 at the Royal Court and there are numerous studies about it, although none that gives prominence to the rape aspect of the play. *It's True, It's True, It's True* on the other hand premiered in 2018 and was produced by the Breach Theatre and although it is the adaptation of a very famous rape trial, that of Artemisia Gentileschi, a renown Renaissance painter, there are virtually no studies pertaining to it. Lastly, the study is limited to my understanding and readings, and certain restrictions, one of them being the lack of access to the performances of the plays, with two exceptions, *Consent*, which is available to access online via the *National Theatre at Home* platform and *It's True, It's True, It's True*, which was a part of the International Online Theatre Festival 2023 and could be accessed for a limited period of time. Thus, the study mainly focuses on textual analysis aided by reviews of the given plays. Finally, my personal preferences for plays that I found engaging and thought-provoking influenced the selection of these plays.

This research consists of three chapters organised around a broad introduction and a conclusion. The introductory section includes two equally significant elements. The initial segment seeks to establish the study's context by presenting the topic of rape from historical, social, and literary standpoints. Having created a foundation for the evaluation of the representation of rape in twenty-first-century British theatre, in the second part of

the introduction, the importance of the study is emphasised and the methodology and structure of the upcoming chapters are outlined.

The initial chapter explores why contemporary British theatre is invested in retelling older rape narratives for contemporary audiences. The discussion is launched through Edward Bond's version of Medea's story in his play *Dea*. Bond's adaptation represents an intriguing approach to the myth; while in the ancient versions, there is no reference to rape, Bond reimagines his heroine as the victim of multiple rapes. The second adaptation, *It's True, It's True, It's True* by the Breach Theatre, brings to the stage the historical rape trial of Agostino Tassi, who was accused of raping the Renaissance painter Artemisia Gentileschi. The third play under discussion is *The Village* by April de Angelis, an adaptation of a seventeen-century Spanish play, Lope de Vega's *Fuenteovejuna*. In this piece, the narrative takes place in present-day India, highlighting how rape continues to affect women across different eras and regions.

Having foregrounded the continuity between past and present narratives, the second chapter comes to pinpoint the central issue in rape which is consent. Legal and public discussions highlight the difficulty in defining the elusive concept of 'consent', a challenge skilfully portrayed through Oliver Lansley's *Immaculate*, Anna Jordan's *Freak*, and Nina Raine's *Consent*. In the first play, the Immaculate Conception of Jesus Christ is humorously challenged, emphasising that, traditionally, the Virgin Mary's consent was not regarded as a precondition for her impregnation. The contemporary character, Mia, takes a different stance on her unexpected pregnancy, diverging from traditional notions of female passivity. Consent is also central to Georgie's story, the protagonist of *Freak*. In the play, she is asked if she wants to engage in group sex with several unknown men; however, her consent is granted while heavily intoxicated and under the influence of drugs. The chapter concludes with the play *Consent* and highlights two instances of rape, showcasing the detrimental impact of the British legal system on women seeking justice for being raped.

The last chapter deals with a specific context where rape occurs, i.e., war. There are numerous examples of British theatre pertaining to wartime rape, which reflects the disturbing reality that rape has accompanied wars since the beginning of history and continues to be a prevalent aspect in modern conflicts as well. In this context, two plays

have been selected: *Boudica* by Tristan Bernays and *Credible Witness* by Timberlake Wertenbaker. *Boudica* provides a powerful example of rape in a conflict setting where women play a central role. Unlike the previous two chapters, where the plays are chronologically examined, the sequence is inverted here. The reason for this choice is that the second play, *Credible Witness*, effectively builds on the theme of dislocation found in *Boudica*. As a tragic and enduring consequence of war and conflict, migration has historically defined nations that are currently in a position to offer asylum, such as England. Aameena, a rape victim in *Credible Witness*, seeks asylum in England, which broadens the perspective on the discussion of dislocation and rape found in the play *Boudica*.

Two final points must be clarified before proceeding with the analysis of the plays. The first relates to the titles chosen for the three chapters: *Why are Past Narratives About Rape so Compelling Today?*, *What Counts as Consent?*, and *Where There is War and Conflict, There is Also Rape*, respectively. The final title is a clear statement contrasting the previous two which end with a question mark. This choice emphasises the undeniable impact of wars and conflicts which have led to widespread and brutal acts of rape. It also highlights the shift in this study from subtlety to overt violence in the portrayal of this subject matter. The second point is related to the inclusion of each play under a particular chapter. While each play could be discussed from different perspectives, this arrangement ensures that they are analysed within frameworks that lead to more insightful discussions and diverse viewpoints. While the story of *Dea*, for instance, is set in a war zone, the play is considered as an adaptation in this study because what stands out about it is Bond's decision to transform an ancient story that lacked any episode of rape into a play in which Medea, as Dea, is subjected to multiple rapes. *Immaculate* can be seen as an adaptation in the sense that it retells a biblical narrative, but the focus of the play is on the Virgin Mary's lack of consent in conceiving God's child. Likewise, the character of Boudica is rooted in British history, but there is no significant change to the 'original' narrative, which is, in fact, a blend of fragmented and somewhat unreliable accounts rather than a cohesive historical record. What is captivating about the play is the exploration of how the presence of strong female characters within a predominantly male context influences female victims of rape, and, therefore, the play is examined within the context of wartime rape rather than as an adaptation.

CHAPTER ONE

WHY ARE PAST NARRATIVES ABOUT RAPE SO COMPELLING TODAY?

We may “know now that a text is (...) a multi-dimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and clash” (p. 146), as Roland Barthes famously writes in his seminal essay *The Death of the Author* (1967/1977). If every text is a concoction of ‘unoriginal’ writings, then each and every text is, to some extent, an adaptation and simultaneously a two-lane road with multiple stops between the past and the present. MagShamhráin et al. (2020) observe that adaptations “cannot hope to do more than bring back a ghost, a story or a concept for a limited time to the ephemeral present” (p. 2). To develop this argument, they draw on the myth of Orpheus, who convinces the rulers of the Underworld, Hades and Persephone, to allow Eurydice to return to the world of the living. Yet, he disobeys their clear order: to trust that she follows him and not look back (p. 2). Orpheus, standing for the adapter, tries to bring back the ghost of his beloved, a story or a concept in the adapter’s case, and for this, he has to travel, in a way, back to a time when Eurydice was still alive in order to undo her death.

Such ghosts, stories, or concepts can be brought back to life only when they appeal to the ephemeral present. Historical figures are examples of such ghosts. Their connection with the present is not that different; they (generally men) and their great deeds are brought back to life whenever they offer a perspective, particularly within the realm of politics, pushing forward different agendas. Remarkable positive developments, for instance, in medicine and technology aside, our present is marked by wars, migration, racism, hunger, environmental disasters, and violence, among others. As previously discussed in this study, a widespread form of violence is rape and, more specifically, the rape of women by men. Thus, it is not unexpected that such stories about rape are often the subject of adaptation.

What contemporary theories of adaptation have in common is the fact that they depart from a concern of fidelity to the source text and are not “about making polarized value judgements, but about analysing process, ideology, and methodology” (Sanders, 2006, p. 20). The field of adaptation studies nowadays focuses on adaptations either as autonomous works or on the experience of “adaptation *as adaptations*” (Hutcheon, 2006,

p. xiv, emphasis in original). The experience of an adaptation as adaptation springs, in the views of both Hutcheon and Sanders, from the unexpected pleasure of identifying in the new text elements belonging to its source/s. The readers may realise by themselves that the text is, in fact, an adaptation, but more often than not, the authors are the ones who acknowledge the influence of the source text through signal words such as ‘based on X’ or ‘after X’. This open acknowledgement is, for Hutcheon, one of the defining aspects of adaptations (p. 8). Similarly, Sanders notes that “an adaptation signals a relationship with an informing sourcetext or original” (p. 26). Even if adaptations can be read and analysed on their own and a detailed comparison with the source text is not a compulsory step for analysis, it is significant for a discussion of rape to identify the ways in which older and contemporary authors tackle rape. It may be the case that “the idea of ‘fidelity’ (...) is often what drives any directly comparative method of study” (Hutcheon, p. xiii); yet, the present study is not guided by a directly comparative method nor is it interested in the selected adaptations’ degree of fidelity to the source texts. Nevertheless, glimpsing, just occasionally, at the source text carries the potential to detect differences and connections not only between individual authors’ approaches to rape but also between diverse cultures and historical periods.

Throughout its long history, British theatre found inspiration in ancient accounts of rape, whether they stem from other dramatic works, history, or mythology. A telling example is *Titus Andronicus* (n.d.), which is one of the most disturbing plays written by William Shakespeare. This play of blood and revenge draws on “famous books of the Roman literary tradition” (West, 1982, p. 65) to tell the story of Lavinia’s rape. An innocent victim used as a means of revenge, Lavinia is “ravish’d; her hands cut off, and her tongue cut out” (*Titus Andronicus*, p. 809) by her father’s enemies. With the help of her mouth, she manages to write down on the “sandy plot” (p. 815) the names of the men who raped and mutilated her but is later killed by her own father, Titus Andronicus. At a banquet, he asks the emperor if a father has the right to kill his daughter when she is “enforced, stain’d, and deflower’d” (p. 824). The emperor’s affirmative answer is based on the argument that “the girl should not survive her shame, / And by her presence still renew his [the father’s] sorrows” (p. 824). To reveal in a spectacular way that Lavinia was raped and he is one of those fathers, Titus kills her. In constructing his female character, Shakespeare adapted the story of Philomela, more precisely, her rape and

mutilation by Tereus, from Ovid's *Metamorphoses* (Ovid, 8 AD/1893). The Latin poet's work is even mentioned in *Titus Andronicus* (p. 814) and the characters repeatedly compare Lavinia to Philomela. Unlike the latter, whose tongue was cut but could use her hands to let her sister know that her husband is the one who raped her "by weaving her story on a piece of cloth" (Ovid, Book VI, Fable V), Lavinia is deprived of this creative means of expression. Her rapists even have the audacity to make a comment about Tereus' mistake in not cutting "those pretty fingers off" (p. 809). The degree of misogyny and loathing of the female body present in this play has very few counterparts in literature.

The same story is the subject of *The Love of the Nightingale* (1989/1996) by Timberlake Wertenbaker. In this contemporary adaptation, contemporary by virtue of its date of production, not the setting, which is still ancient, Philomela lives isolated for five years after being raped and mutilated by her brother-in-law, Tereus. Only Niobe, her chaperone, and a servant live with her and she is also visited from time to time by Tereus. At a feast in honour of Bacchus, a place where only women gather, she appears with three giant dolls she made herself, and with the help of Niobe and the servant, re-enacts her rape and mutilation. Her sister, who is among the spectators, recognises her and through this ingenious act, they are reunited. Hutcheon draws a parallel between evolutionary natural selection and the cultural selection of narratives: "Like living beings, stories that adapt better than others (through mutation) to an environment survive" (p. 167). The reason why stories like Philomela's adapt better than others to an environment and survive is because the fundamental aspects remain unchanged; with minimal adjustments to the ancient narrative, an adapter can place the theme of rape in any contemporary context.

As in many other traditional stories, it can evidently be seen that male authors have initially told the female characters' stories mentioned in these pages and the same applies to the heroines of the plays discussed in this study. The story of Medea, a woman capable of murder for the man she loves – a love instrumented by the gods and goddesses of Olympus – was made famous by a male playwright, Euripides. The story of Laurencia, a girl who urges her entire village to take revenge on a rapist, was made famous by a male playwright, Lope de Vega. In the twenty-first century, these stories have been retold by Edward Bond and April de Angelis in *Dea* (2016) and *The Village* (2018), respectively, with different degrees of intervention to the texts inspiring them. Unlike these two plays, which are adaptations of other dramatic works, the story of Artemisia Gentileschi, a

Renaissance painter who takes legal measures against her rapist, is based on historical accounts and was transposed in dramatic form in 2018 by the Breach Theatre, with the title *It's True, It's True, It's True*. Even if the gender of the notaries who recorded the court testimonies from Gentileschi's trial (one of the contemporary play's primary sources) is unknown, it is safe to presume that, just like Euripides and Lope de Vega, they were male as well. The storytelling power dynamics are shifting as female authors are now able to narrate the experiences of women who have been raped, potentially causing a significant transformation in the narratives.

This study brings together feminist scholarship on rape and Julie Sanders and Linda Hutcheon's theories of adaptation in order to discuss the way stories about rape are adapted for contemporary readers and audiences as well as the extent to which they reinforce or challenge the victimisation of women. Though the selected plays are rooted in past narratives, contemporary playwrights, both male and female, and those working as a group still find them relevant, particularly in the era of the #MeToo movement when the silence characterising the issue of rape has been finally broken. In the plays discussed in this chapter, Medea, Laurencia, and Artemisia emerge from different contexts, Classical Greek Tragedy, Spanish Golden Age, and Italian Renaissance, to open up new discussions on rape in a contemporary setting.

1.1. MEDEA'S SEQUEL: FROM EURIPIDES TO BOND

I write of the rape of a corpse with a beer bottle to bring back some dignity to
our theatre.

– Edward Bond, *Introduction to Dea*

The sort of violence as the raping of a corpse with a beer bottle is a recurrent feature of Edward Bond's writing. Though he authored many theatrical works and critical essays on drama, Bond is best known for his play *Saved* (1965), in which the depiction of a baby being stoned to death by a group of young men, one of them being the father, shocked the audiences and critics alike. The play has also reserved itself a place in the history of theatre for marking "the beginning of the end for theatre censorship" (Dorney & Gray, 2013, p. 64), a battle won on 26 September 1968. Bond laid the foundation for a new political form of theatre, urgent and unapologetic, which was to inspire playwrights

associated with the so-called ‘in-yer-face’ theatre, such as Sarah Kane, Naomi Wallace, and David Eldridge (Sierz, 2001). Sierz defines this kind of theatre as “any drama that takes the audience by the scruff of the neck and shakes it until it gets the message” and more importantly, “it tells us more about who we really are” (pp. 10-11). This definition is very close to what Bond’s plays do to those actively engaging with them. In a critical essay on drama, *The Human Plot*, Bond (2019a) states that “the nearest we can come to know ourselves is in drama and without drama we cannot be human” (p. 4). To achieve this objective, it has to shed light on whatever hidden corners of ourselves and our society we avoid looking at. The playwright is of the opinion that theatre has merely been reduced to entertainment as “a form of consumption” in service of capitalism (p. 19), and as the above quotation implies, theatre has lost its dignity in the process. To Bond, a return to the “subject and purpose of all drama”, which is “the trial of society” and often “written in blood” (p. 1) is highly crucial and the only chance for survival. This imperativeness is not meant to be taken literally; instead, it is a metaphor for our survival not as a species but as human beings. The opposite of humanness is not animals but machines without emotions, conscience, flesh, and blood.

The ‘personal’ blood is mirrored in the ‘social’ blood and vice versa. Furthermore, in Bond’s works, “the origins of violence and its oppressive impact are explored across and within the oppressor and the oppressed” (Billingham, 2014, p. 40). *Saved*, for example, explores “masculinity-as-violence”, but also “the wider meta-narratives of state-sanctioned violence” (p. 6). A similar technique can be noticed in Sarah Kane’s *Blasted* (1995), a play which though viciously attacked by critics just like *Saved* was when it premiered, Bond (1995) himself describes as coming “from the centre of our humanity and our ancient need for theatre” (para. 17). By portraying two different images of violence, one happening in a hotel room in Leeds, and the war atrocities going on in the outside world, Kane points out that they are, in fact, interconnected and that “the seeds of full-scale war can always be found in peacetime civilization” (as quoted in Sierz, 2001, p. 77). The oppressor can become the oppressed, as is the case with Ian, who takes advantage of Cate’s epileptic seizures to rape her and is later raped by a soldier. Such change of roles in a system of oppression is also noticeable in Bond’s adaptation of Shakespeare’s *King Lear* (n.d.). In *Lear* (1972), Cordelia – the daughter of Lear in Shakespeare’s version but not in Bond’s play – is raped by soldiers sent by Lear’s

daughters looking for him and her husband is murdered. After that, she becomes the leader of a revolutionary army. Having later transformed from a victim to a leader within the same sphere, that of the army, she perpetuates the same acts of violence and displays the same short-sightedness as Lear. The play may be a product of the 1970s, but the wall Lear and Cordelia built could bring to contemporary audiences' minds President Trump's wall at the border with Mexico, as it probably brought the Berlin Wall to the minds of its initial audiences.

The oft-ignored connection between domestic violence and political conflict also characterises Bond's latest staged play⁷. *Dea* premiered at the Secombe Theatre in the London suburb of Sutton on 26 May 2016 under the playwright's direction, causing some audience members to abandon the venue from the first act (Biber Vangölü, 2017). The playwright intended for the plays *The Children* (2000) and *There Will Be More* (2010) to form together with *Dea* a trilogy based on the myth of Medea (Billingham, 2014). However, he ended up reworking *There Will Be More* into the first act of *Dea* (Biber Vangölü, 2017). The first play of the trilogy, *The Children*, tells the story of Joe, a boy whose mother asks him to burn a house. After he reluctantly does so and a boy tragically dies in the fire, she denies having asked him to do such a thing: "What Mother would tell her child to do that. She'd be a monster!" (Scene Four). When he and his friends run away from home, they find themselves in a wasteland. At some point, an injured man appears and they must carry him around. Towards the end of the play, it is revealed that he is, in fact, the father of the dead boy in the house Joe burned down and was in the past the pander of Joe's mother. It is also uncovered that her motive for wanting her son to set his house on fire is due to the fact that he chose his wife over her. The man gradually kills all the children until Joe is the only one left. At the end of the play, the man either dies of exhaustion or is killed by the boy; the final lines of the play are left unclear. These tragic events are set in motion by the mother, who not only asks her child to do a horrible thing but refuses to acknowledge her share of guilt and, moreover, does not intend to stand by him when the police come and make him accountable for his deeds. The enormous

⁷ Based on Edward Bond's personal website (<https://edwardbond drama.org/new-entry>), it appears that he wrote another play titled *The Shoe Thief*, but no information about its publication or stage production can be accessed on the web.

destruction she causes to her son's life adds to the depiction of the mother as a monstrous figure.

The 'mother-as-a-monster' figure appears both in Euripides' *Medea* (431 BCE/2008) and in Bond's adaptation of the myth. In the ancient text, Medea murders her children in order to take revenge on her husband who is about to marry another woman. While this play ends with Medea's chariot flying away with the children's soulless bodies, the contemporary play starts with a scene where the mother smothers her two children and smashes their heads with her heels. From here on, for the most part, Bond relies on his artistic vision of how the story could go on. This act of filicide is placed in quite an ordinary setting: Dea and her husband, Colonel Johnson, get ready to attend a significant event for the future of his career. When he leaves the room briefly, Dea kills their sons. On being asked by Johnson why she killed them, she replies: "You wanted me to do it" (Bond, *Dea*, Part 1, Scene 1). Enraged by this answer, Johnson rapes her. Eighteen years later, she returns from the psychiatric hospital she was put in. Dea manages to escape only because the building is destroyed by yet another war. In the house, she meets Oliver, one of the twins resulting most probably from the rape. Enraged once more because Dea tells Oliver that she is his mother, Johnson rapes her again, but this time she kills him. Next to Johnson's corpse, she fellates her son and when he wakes up, at which point it is clear Oliver is a somnambulist, she blames him for killing his father in a modern twist of the Oedipus' story. After a heated quarrel, she ends up killing him as well.

Part Two shows Dea's other son, John, in a military camp. During his interrogation of a female prisoner, he is enraged by her lack of response – in a similar way his father was in his interaction with Dea – and orders the soldiers to gang rape her. They are, however, unable to do it, and when they push him to rape her instead, he shoots her. When Dea appears looking for her son, John forces her to rape the corpse of the prisoner with a beer bottle. This time the soldiers join in. Anxious that she is there to kill them, John then rapes Dea as the soldiers cheer along. During the rape, Dea realises John is her son. Outside, a bomb explodes. The next scene takes Dea and the severed head of her now-dead son to an abandoned caravan in the wilderness. She behaves as though what remains of her son is actually a human being until their peaceful life is interrupted by one of the soldiers who has survived the bombardment. He tries to make Dea see that the head is not her son, but their roles are reversed when he starts to take orders from the head he thinks

of as his superior and she is the one trying to bring some sense to him. The play ends with the soldier shooting Dea, who reappears in bloody clothes and refuses to die.

Chen's (2018) analysis of the play points out the fact that the ending leads us "into an indeterminate zone where the boundary between life and death is blurred" (p. 169). This ambivalence is also present in the name Bond selected for his story of Medea. Aside from the apparent similarity between the names, Dea also includes the first three letters of the word 'dead', which in Biber Vangölü's (2017) interpretation shows "on a linguistic level how close the world is to being both morally and physically dead" (p. 176). Moreover, the word also stands for 'goddess' in Latin. The metaphorical function of Dea's name symbolises the dual maternal power of birth and death, of creation and destruction (Jung, 2004). She gives birth to four children, but ends their lives as well, three of them by actual killing and one of them in a symbolic way, by smashing his skull. In a letter to an unknown recipient, Bond (2019b) explains that Dea was denied the "intimacy of motherhood. Incest is Dea's effort to be a mother" (p. 2) (her act is not merely incest, but also a form of rape and this aspect will be discussed in the following pages). Killing, too, can then be interpreted as Dea's effort to be a mother, a mother who protects her child from the atrocities of the world. Bond (2019c) also explains the name Dea as "Medea with the Me removed" (p. 8). He points out the following sentences as the reason why Dea kills her children: "You take everything from me! All of You! You murder me every day!" (Part 1, Scene 3). She utters these words right before stabbing Oliver who refuses to take the blame for her murdering Johnson. The 'me' in Dea's affirmations stands for the same 'me' removed from Medea to create his female character. In *The Human Plot*, Bond (2019a) argues that "when human autonomy is repressed there is violence" (p. 2). The human autonomy, the 'me', is removed from Dea who is simply "a victim in a net" of politics (Bond, 2019b, p. 5). Euripides' Medea is also a victim, the net in her case being created by divine beings. However, she does not actually leave the net after the tragic events, whereas Dea at the end of the play manages to escape and to become, as Bond concludes "radically human". Bond adds that the only ending for a person who achieves this goal "in our society" (p. 8) is death. What the playwright's words imply is that the current state of our society has dehumanised people to such an extent that, for the very few who manage to keep their humanness, or who rediscover it, as in the case of Dea, there is no way to live, no way to remain a part of this system.

As mentioned above, in Euripides' *Medea*, the female protagonist can be viewed as a victim in the divine game of the Olympians. She can also be viewed as the victim of her husband's betrayal; nevertheless, she is never a victim of physical domestic violence. Bond, however, takes the last part of Euripides' play where Medea murders her children, reproduces it in his play in an altered form, and breaks the bond between the adapted text and his own through Johnson raping Dea. This is a violent act of rupture both metaphoric (through adaptation) and physical (through rape). Chen (2018) remarks in his discussion of the live performance that Helen Bang, the actress in the titular role, "did not physically resist [during the rape] but froze herself like a mannequin" (p. 162). She remains motionless when Johnson tears at her clothes, falls on her, punches her face, her body, and rapes her. The second time he rapes her, she verbally resists and alarmingly begs him not to go back to 'that', back to a time when he took out his anger on her by means of rape. Not only does she verbally resist this time, but she stabs him before he has a "life-orgasm and death-convulsion" (Part 1, Scene 3). Brownmiller (1975) finds "some sort of metaphysical justice" in the fact that the penis used as a weapon against women is also a very vulnerable place (p. 404). This double function can be observed at the moment Dea kills her rapist, during 'sex', when, though she is obviously vulnerable, he is as well, and their roles are reversed: from the attacker, he transforms into the victim.

The third time Dea is raped is by her son, John. When the soldiers encourage him to rape her, they call him by his full name, and at that moment, she realises that the search for her son has come to an end, albeit in an extremely unusual way. If raping Oliver is Dea's twisted attempt to be a mother, then the fact that she embraces John while he rapes her and calls him a "wonderful precious boy" (Part 2, Scene 1), can be regarded as the manifestation of the same longing. For Dea, the horror of the rape seems to be engulfed by the happiness of being reunited with her lost son. An understandable resistance to accepting that Dea gets to be a mother by taking her son's (Oliver) penis into her mouth – especially since she kills him shortly after – has to be acknowledged. Nonetheless, when she embraces John during rape, it becomes plain that for her, the line of common sense setting apart these acts from a sense of union is considerably blurred. This is not that shocking when taking into consideration that the closest she probably felt to her children was during pregnancy when she had them inside her. After Johnson sends her to a hospital/prison, she cannot see them for eighteen years. Dea's character is constructed in

such an intriguing manner that she evolves from distressing numbness and frozen silence to actual expression of emotions, not negative emotions as it might have been expected for someone who suffered so greatly – though she does pass from this stage as well with the murders of her rapist/husband and victim/son – but the positive emotions of relief, joy, and tenderness. Moreover, though she starts out as a mad person, she ends up in saneness.

Dea's unorthodox response to rape places her above any stereotype. Similarly, none of the rapes happening to her fits into the 'real' rape scenario where the assailant is "a stranger who uses a weapon – an assault done at night, outside (in a dark alley), with a lot of violence, resistance by the victim, and hence severe wounds and signs of struggle" (Burt, 2003, p. 130). Dea is, in fact, raped by male members of her close family, what is broadly called 'acquaintance' rape⁸, and not by a stranger in a dark alley (though John is not aware at the time that she is his mother). As the painful details from the play illustrate, violence is definitely prevalent, but not to such a degree as to put her life in danger; nor does she resist to the utmost. In fact, this may be one of the factors that allowed her to survive and to do so without severe physical wounds. Although the myth of the 'real' or 'stranger' rape is openly challenged in the play, there are several other myths that are perpetuated, such as the rape myths that commonly account for the disbelief in the truth behind a woman's rape assertions. It would appear that Oliver believes that his father raped his mother. Nevertheless, when he confronts Johnson about it, his interest does not spring from a deep concern for Dea, which is, in a way, understandable since he has only known her for a few hours. "It would make a difference" (Part 1, Scene 3), Oliver says, to know if she was already pregnant or if he came into existence as the fruit of rape. Johnson does not define what he did to Dea that night as rape. He declares that "words don't apply" and "situations change meanings" when the victim of rape is a cold-blooded murderess, when "her hands are still writhing from the necks of her [children]" (Part 1, Scene 3). What is beyond hypocrisy is that his active participation in the war also makes him responsible for the death of children, whom he "ran over" in trenches, with his boots (Part 1, Scene 1). The cover of the Bloomsbury edition of the play, referred to in this study, depicts a red stiletto on a brownish-grey background of bricks, boots, military

⁸ 'Acquaintance rape' will be discussed in more detail in the second chapter of this study.

pants, and bare feet. The heels Dea uses to smash her (and his) babies' brains are the aestheticised version of the dirty heavy boots of Johnson used to crush the small bodies of other people's dead children. From his perspective, the difference between his crimes and Dea's lies in the fact that, in contrast to the otherness of the children he kills, she kills *his* offspring, even more significantly his *male* offspring.

After Johnson asks Oliver to leave them alone and unsuccessfully tries to convince her to have sex, he admits that eighteen years ago he was brutal. When she rejects him, he ends up raping her again. This time, he explains that it is a matter of life, of his life which she carries in her body. While rummaging in her (to find his life), he utters what is probably a rapist's most famous line: "You want it you whore" (Part 1, Scene 3). Johnson's words during and after he rapes Dea relate to myths that can be grouped under the categories of "no harm was done", since she is a murderess; therefore, in his view, she lacks emotions and should not be treated as a human being. This also implies that she "deserved it", and furthermore, "she wanted (...) it" and "asked for it" (Burt, 2003, p. 131). Johnson deduces that she "wants it" and "asks for it" simply from her coming to his house, an act he views as "flaunting [herself] like a common —", whore or prostitute most probably (Part 1, Scene 3). The fact of the matter is that Dea actually comes to her own house, which he takes over, just like her body and her children. From this angle, the second rape can be considered as Johnson reinforcing his status, institutionalising her by violently forcing her into the family. At this point, a question arises regarding an observation made previously in this discussion of the play: If Medea raping her son can be regarded as a way of being close to him, is it plausible that Johnson raping his wife is a deplorable attempt to be close to her as well? In both instances of rape, he may feel he is about to lose her; in the first case, it is clear that after the murder of the twins, she will be incarcerated, and in the second, she realises that it was not such a good idea to return and has already expressed the desire to leave the house. Seen from this perspective, it appears that with the first rape, Johnson achieves his goal; Dea falls pregnant again and gives birth to his sons, and for the sake of their sons, returns to him. The second rape, however, does not bring the results he expects, whatever these expectations may be. She kills him and, in doing so, manages to take back some of her power and agency.

Though this study focusses solely on victims of rape who are women, it is worth pausing for a moment on the fact that Dea raping her son, also challenges another

powerful myth, that women cannot or do not rape men. In Tennessee Williams' 1947 play *A Streetcar Named Desire* (1984), the female protagonist Blanche, has to resign from her teaching position because she 'seduces' a seventeen-year-old male student. Still, the audience is inclined to empathise with her due to her sensitive nature and a past full of suffering and sorrow, refusing to see her actions as rape. If a male character acts in the same way, however – an eloquent example being the male protagonist of Vladimir Nabokov's controversial 1955 novel *Lolita* – no amount of sensitivity and sorrow would be able to remove his crime for the audience or critics. It makes no difference if the young girl actually consents, as perhaps Blanche's student does because sex with a minor constitutes statutory rape. The logic behind statutory rape is that a minor is legally unable to give consent for such an act. Those engaging with *Dea* would probably have empathised with her as well, had Oliver not been her son and unconscious. However, he is her son and he is in a somnambulist state when his mother fellates him, making both incest and rape very clear. In including this disturbing scene, even if in an undesirable manner, the playwright seems to downplay the recurrent portrayal of women as victims, suggesting that women can be both the oppressor and the oppressed at the same time.

Dea raping Oliver may be interpreted as the playwright suggests, as an act of motherhood, but Bond shares no light on the inclusion of the scene where she is forced into raping the corpse of the female prisoner with a beer bottle. At the plot level, the moment John kills the prisoner is instantly followed by Dea's entrance. It would appear that John forcing Dea to rape the corpse is an attempt to diminish the frustration he – and the other soldiers – accumulated for not going through with the rape themselves. They are not satisfied, however, since Dea is also incapable of doing it. As a result of this, John rapes her. The prisoner dies without being raped. The rape which was planned for her, which she was repeatedly threatened with, passes on to Dea. This substitution suggests on the one hand that rape is a fundamental element of war⁹ and it has to happen, someone always has to be raped, and on the other hand that in a male-dominated sphere women are replaceable objects. It makes no difference which woman gets raped, particularly since they are both perceived as dangerous. Moreover, it should be noted that John raping Dea can also account for the fact that she manages to avoid being raped by Johnson for

⁹ The connection between rape and war will be discussed in more detail in the third chapter of this study.

the second time. For a woman, avoiding one rape does not mean avoiding rape in general; only the time, the place, and the rapist change.

Chen (2018) associates the second part of the play, set in a military tent, with the age of the global ‘War on Terror’. Among the play’s elements that support this association are the suicide jacket of the prisoner – later detonated by the interpreter – and the decapitation of John when the bomb explodes, a reference to the beheadings released by ISIS¹⁰ (p. 167). Throughout history, prisoners of war have been tortured in various ways, rape being one of them and the victims being generally women (when torture happens by rape). As forms of coercion, torture and rape are inflicted to intimidate and extract information. An example of how rape as a coercive device functions is the scene when John interrogates the female prisoner. After numerous attempts to make her speak, he asks the interpreter: “What’s their word for rape?” and later “What’s gang rape?” (Part 2, Scene 1). John employs a two-fold strategy to break the prisoner’s resistance. On the one hand, he tries to frighten her with the prospect not only of rape but of gang rape, and to this end, he enhances the message by uttering these nightmarish words in her native language. On the other hand, he appeals to the religious beliefs he assumes she holds, that “raped women never get in up there”, ‘up there’ presumably being Heaven, a place reserved only for pure women. None of these tactics works and therefore his threats have to become action. He orders the soldiers to rape her, but they somehow cannot. Billingham (2014) observes that the “dehumanising and alienating condition of the human being (...) programmed to obey orders, kill and hate for the monarch and the state is a recurrent theme in Bond’s work”, a feature which can be attributed to his own traumatising experience in the army (p. 3). The soldiers under John’s command, however, do not obey their superior’s orders because they perceive rape as “infringement a’ human rights” (Part 2, Scene 1). To convince them (and perhaps himself) that they are justified to act in a way that goes against their principles and human rights, John utters his father’s exact words: “Situations change meanings” (Part 2, Scene 1). Just like his father, he also employs rape in the service of learning the truth, and in this context, for John rape does not mean rape: it means knowledge, it means power.

¹⁰ The abbreviation refers to the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria.

Power is also reflected through the use of language and the rape scenes in *Dea* are written differently in comparison to the rest of the play. For instance, the language used to describe the first time Johnson rapes Dea includes numerous repetitions of concise words and phrases dominated by hard-sounding consonants such as ‘bitch’, ‘tell me’, and ‘the truth’. Through this linguistic device, the words and the sounds they produce appear to mimic and be in tandem with each painful and violent move he makes inside her body. With every movement in and out of her vagina, he seems to try to extract a piece of information, a fragment of the truth behind the murder of the babies:

Johnson: Bitch! Open your legs! (Falls on her.) Bitch! (The chair topples.) Bitch! Open your –! Tell me! (He punches her face. Her body. Rapes her.) Bitch! Bitch! I wanted? Liar! Liar! Liar! (The chair grates. The babies lie on the floor under the rape.) Tell me! Liar! Liar! What must I do to –? You are the worm in the brick. Tell me! The truth! The truth! I’ll beat it out of your –! (He rapes her and one hand throttles the grating chair.) The truth! The truth! (Pleasure.) Ah Ah! Ah! Ah! (Part 1, Scene 1)

Punctuation also differs in the rape scenes with the exclamation mark being the most frequently used. This punctuation mark enhances the intense emotions of the attacker, be they anger or frustration, and it has the effect of overwhelming and confusing the already physically assaulted victim with loud and harsh sounds. Johnson ordering his wife to do as he says and to tell him what he wants to know is very similar to how John interacts with both the female prisoner and his mother in the second part of the play.

Numerous threads unite the female prisoner and Dea. First of all, they are foreigners, just like Medea. It is clear that Dea is a foreigner from the explanation her husband gives to Oliver regarding her absence after his birth, that “she was sent back to her own country” (Part 1, Scene 3). Most importantly though, what unites the two women is rape and the words associated with it. The word ‘bitch’, shouted at Dea again and again by the men raping her (Johnson and later John), bears a certain visual resemblance to the word ‘brtoch’ meaning rape in the native language of the prisoner. Furthermore, when the soldiers cheer John to rape Dea, they repeat the words ‘bitch’ and ‘botch’, the second being slang for ‘balls up’, but it is also visually similar to the word ‘brtoch’. The blurring of these words and the fact that the verbal rape threats towards the prisoner are transferred to Dea in an actual rape show that in the intensity of the events happening in the military

tent, the two women are one, and as previously discussed, interchangeable from the perspective of the men into whose hands they fall.

Even though after the scene where Dea murders the twins, Bond relies mainly on his creativity in the retelling of the story of Medea, certain elements related to other stories enhance the pleasure of experiencing *Dea* as an adaptation. This pleasure is described by Sanders (2006) as an “inherent sense of play, produced in part by the activation of our informed sense of similarity and difference between the texts being invoked, and the connected interplay of expectation and surprise” (p. 25). In his newspaper article on Sarah Kane’s *Blasted*, Bond (1995) states that the images Kane uses are ancient and can be observed in great works of art. If Kane changes some of them, it is because “all artists do that to bring the ancient imagery, changed and unchanged, into the focus of their age” (Para. 17). Similarly, Bond also brings ancient imagery to the present, changed in his case, and draws not only on the myth of Medea in constructing Dea’s character and story. The image of the mad mother holding the severed head of her son is also present in Euripides’ *The Bacchae* (405 BCE/1954) and corresponds to Dea living in the wilderness with the skull of John. Unlike Dea, who does not kill her son (though she smashes his skull towards the end of the play), Euripides’ Agave plays an active role in her son’s death while in a state of madness inflicted by Dionysus (Hard, 2004). Furthermore, a story even more relevant to this study is that of Callisto and Arkas. Callisto is a virgin follower of Artemis, who is raped by Zeus and transformed into a bear by his jealous wife, Hera. When Callisto retreats into the wilderness, she is nearly killed by her human son, Arkas. The male figure responsible for her tragedy saves her by transforming her into the Great Bear constellation (Wall, 1988). In *Dea*, the son, who is born, just like Arkas, out of rape, also comes close to killing the woman who is his mother. Just like Callisto, Dea finds temporary refuge in the wild, far from other human beings, and just like Agave, Dea is portrayed as a mad woman who does terrible things. In Sanders’s (2006) view, mythology “depends upon, incites even, perpetual acts of reinterpretation in new contexts” (p. 63). In a bold act of reinterpretation, Bond takes ancient female victims of the patriarchy who sometimes do horrible acts themselves and thus crafts his Dea, a heroine transforming from being a victim of numerous rapes into a rapist herself as well as a murderess, and a mad woman.

Dea may not be an adaptation in the narrowest sense of the term, however, the playwright acknowledges that his play is based on *Medea* by Euripides. Bond's (2019c) conviction that "the crucial play for our century is *Medea*" (p. 3) may be the reason why he decided to adapt it for the contemporary stage. A few elements bring the two stories together, such as the murder of the twins, Johnson being, like Jason, a military man driven by ambition, and most importantly the portrayal of *Medea* and *Dea* as foreigners, mad, and dangerous. Where the stories of *Medea* and the story of *Dea* drastically depart is Bond's transformation of the myth of *Medea* into a story about rape. The reason why the story of *Medea* refuses to be forgotten and materialises itself again and again in different disguises throughout the centuries and in different cultures has to do with the essential quality of the story. This story gives a portrayal of a woman representing the incarnation of the monstrous mother who does the unthinkable, i.e., kills her children. Bond takes this essential quality of the story of *Medea* and adds new elements, such as numerous rapes, incest, and war. Together with the fact that the resulting story resonates in a more meaningful way with contemporary audiences, there can be at least two explanations for Bond's radical departure from the ancient story. The first is that in Greek mythology, the goddesses Hera and Aphrodite, helped by Eros, make *Medea* fall in love with Jason and do all the horrible things she does to her family and others (Hard, 2004). A pawn in the hands of the gods and goddesses of Olympus, she never gives her consent and is actually tricked into loving Jason. Implicitly, she is tricked into having sex with him and this lack of conscious consent may have been interpreted by Bond as rape. More strikingly, I would argue that the message Bond wants to transmit by giving so much space to rape is that having sex with a woman to produce children to be sent to war and death is a form of rape. This act is no less and no more disturbing than men being sent to war and death, and civilians being killed in the war. 'Situations *do not* change meaning': rape is violence in the same way murder is violence.

1.2. WOMEN'S SOLIDARITY ACROSS CONTINENTS: FROM DE VEGA TO DE ANGELIS

The beginning of the #MeToo movement meant, first of all, that more and more women started speaking publicly about their experiences of rape, sexual assault, and harassment. What it also meant was that more women expressed their support for other

women in a way that is perhaps unique in history. The Me Too movement¹¹ was created by the black feminist and civil rights activist Tarana Burke in 2006, however, it went viral in 2017 when the American actress Alyssa Milano posted on Twitter (now X): “If you’ve been sexually harassed or assaulted write ‘me too’ as a reply to this tweet”. Milano has been criticised for failing to acknowledge the creator of the movement but corrected her error when she was called to do so (Phipps, 2020, p. 37). Phipps (2020) argues that men are not the only ones who perpetrate violence against women, but white privileged women and white feminists also exploit and marginalise women of colour or fail to stand with less privileged women such as female farmworkers. Various feminist scholars have also made a point in their works about the lack of solidarity between women. In *The Second Sex*, Simone de Beauvoir (1949/1956) postulates that, unlike other marginalised groups, women never had the means to unite – in the same way as the proletariat did for instance – and fight against their subjugation by men. She adds that “women do not say ‘We’, except at some congress of feminists or similar formal demonstration; men say ‘women’, and women use the same term in referring to themselves” (p. 18). In a similar vein, bell hooks (1986) underlines that the Women’s Liberation Movement, most active during the late 1960s and 1970s, dealt with oppression only as experienced by one group of women, namely bourgeois and white. Thus, the movement failed to address the adversities faced by women with different racial and class backgrounds, a point also made by Phipps in her book *Me, not you. The problem with mainstream feminism* (2020). Even de Beauvoir started as a defender of socialism and initially refused the title ‘feminist’ because she “believed that the problems of women would resolve themselves automatically in the context of socialist development” (as quoted in Moi, 1985, p. 91). Nevertheless, she changed her position and “realised that we must fight for the situation of women, here and now, before our dreams of socialism come true” (p. 92). For hooks, it is precisely this

¹¹ Although Tarana Burke is indeed the founder of a movement with the name Me Too, a movement that aims to end sexual violence especially in relation to marginalised groups, #MeToo is a global movement that Alyssa Milano initiated. Naming Burke as the founder of the viral #MeToo movement is as problematic as Milano not acknowledging that another activist has already employed the name in a similar context. It is tempting to argue that the reason why Burke’s initiative did not reach an audience as broad as Milano’s is rooted in racial matters, however, it is more plausible to consider the different impact these two movements made as the result of being initiated by people with very different profiles. While Burke is an activist, Milano is mainly known as a Hollywood star; arguably, criticism should be directed at why an activist has less impact on the general public than a cinema star, but this is the subject of another discussion, one which is not related to gender nor race.

separation between women's fight for liberation and other social aspects such as class, racism, and sexism within the feminist movement that is the reason why women did not succeed in creating a united front against oppression. De Beauvoir's concern about the use of the pronoun 'we' does not apply to hooks who employs it very often, as can be observed in the following paragraph from her chapter entitled *Sisterhood: Political Solidarity Between Women* (1986):

Male supremacist ideology encourages women to believe we are valueless and obtain value only by relating to or bonding with men. We are taught that our relationships with one another diminish rather than enrich our experience. We are taught that women are 'natural' enemies, that solidarity will never exist between us because we cannot, should not, and do not bond with one another. We have learned these lessons well. We must unlearn them if we are to build a sustained feminist movement. We must learn to live and work in solidarity. We must learn the true meaning and value of Sisterhood. (p. 127)

One of the crucial arguments of feminism, no matter if it is liberal feminism, radical feminism, or any other type, is that gender is socially constructed, and not biologically determined. As such, the idea that women are 'natural' enemies is also constructed by the patriarchy and its demolition is the base on which solidarity can thrive. Without a thorough evaluation of how the lessons hooks refers to have been assimilated by women – and by feminists as a matter of fact – the result is simply women imposing on other women the same system of oppression learned from the patriarchy.

Although the rejection of biological determinism lies at the core of feminism, essentialist viewpoints are present even in the works of some of the most significant scholars in the field. A case in point is Brownmiller (1975) who traces the lack of solidarity between women back to primitive societies when “disappointed and disillusioned by the inherent female incapacity to protect [other females], she [a female] became estranged in a very real sense from other females” and this is “a problem that haunts the social organization of women to this very day” (p. 17). The use of the adjective 'inherent' to describe women's incapacity to protect implies that there is a biological factor that makes women weak. Moreover, it reinforces the idea that solidarity between women is not possible and that they need men's presence to feel safe. However, in recent years, it has become clear that when it comes to 'protection' men are not a better alternative either. In fact, they should not be responsible for it in the first place; the whole idea of protecting women (either by men or other women) would vanish if certain men

would simply stop assaulting women. Women from all over the world had to say ‘enough’ to rape and other forms of sexual violence perpetrated by men for the #MeToo movement to bring them together regardless of race, religion, class, sexual orientation, and gender identity. It may be the case that there is a less democratic side to the movement as Phipps contents, however, the fact that women from all over the world, white or non-white, rich or poor, cis women, or trans women used the hashtag MeToo cannot be contested. The lack of means de Beauvoir writes about in the 1950s, appeared in the twenty-first century in the form of online platforms and social media websites.

In literature, women’s solidarity takes many forms. One classical example of fictional women who unite against men is *Lysistrata* (411 BCE/1990) written by the Ancient Greek dramatist Aristophanes. In this play, under the leadership of Lysistrata, women from different Greek city-states force their husbands to end the Peloponnesian war by withholding sex. The women are successful, the war ends, and the two groups celebrate their reunion. From a feminist perspective, the play presents two problematic aspects. The first is that it is a comedy, therefore the possibility of women coming together as a force capable of standing against men is treated as a subject suitable for laughter. This does not mean that humour cannot be employed as a subversive tool, but in this case, there is no indication that the playwright tries to criticise the status of women in society or that he attempts to empower women in any way. The second, and more critical point in the context of rape, is that it reinforces the idea that women manipulate men through sex¹², which is, in fact, offensive not only for women but for men as well. Ideas such as this perpetuate beliefs that lead to rape because they imply that a woman has, in fact, the power to withhold sex if she ‘really’ wants to. Moreover, it implies that men are driven by their sexual urges, and not intellect, conscience, or personal principles, to such a degree that they would do anything a woman asks just to have sex with her. A convenient consequence of such ‘weakness’ on their part is that men are absolved of any guilt even in the eventuality of rape. This eventuality has nothing to do with chance and has everything to do with a decision on the part of the attacker. It is a paradox that weakness is accepted in men who traditionally are supposed to be the embodiment of strength and

¹² A quite recent study on the biological bases of sexual coercion by Thornhill and Palmer from 2000 claims the same, i.e., that women use sex as a manipulative tactic (p. 160). This example shows how ancient beliefs have been perpetuated up to the present day, with reinforcement from scientific studies.

self-control, whereas if women – who are supposed to be the ‘weaker sex’ – are not physically or emotionally strong enough to resist rape they are blamed for it.

In other cases, solidarity among women may take unexpected forms. In the novel *The Color Purple* (1982/2017) by Alice Walker, it manifests itself in the profound friendship (and love affair) between Celie, the abused wife of Albert and his mistress, Shug Avery, the woman he loves. A singer with an independent life and a charismatic personality, Shug encourages Celie to leave her husband and make her own way in life, which she successfully does. The novel accomplishes what hooks argues as that which the Women’s Liberation Movement failed to do: it tackles the oppression of African-American women not only as women but also from a racial point of view. Another example of women joining forces is portrayed in Pieter Bruegel the Elder’s painting *Dulle Griet* (1563). The painting depicts a group of women led by Dull Gret (in its anglicised form), a character from Flemish folklore, into pledging Hell. The central figure in the painting has been typically characterised as the personification of madness, gluttony, lust, avarice, and ambition (Sullivan, 1977, p. 63). In theatre, Dull Gret is also popularly known as one of the five female characters invited by Marlene, the protagonist of Caryl Churchill’s *Top Girls* (1982/1991), to celebrate her job promotion. Here, Dull Gret is presented in quite a different light. She is indeed a simple peasant woman whose contribution to the group discussion consists of single words and is mainly limited to food, but Churchill also offers her a long monologue (together with a voice) explaining her reasons for going to Hell. She says that after “we’d had the Spanish” (Act 1) – a reference to the Spanish invasion of the Netherlands – the creatures from Hell are not that scary. Having witnessed the murder of her children, she cannot take it anymore and madden with hate decides to go to Hell: “I come out my front door that morning and shout till my neighbours come out and I said, ‘Come on, we’re going where the evil come from and pay the bastards out’” (Act 1). Churchill’s interpretation of what drives a woman mad is quite different from the interpretations offered by researchers discussing Bruegel’s painting: she is maddened by the violence and injustice happening around her, not by gluttony or avarice.

Literary representations of women fighting together against patriarchy share specific characteristics, one of them being the prominence given to one female character who encourages and guides the others into resistance. That the leading character is a

woman instead of a man is indeed empowering for all women. However, it is essential to acknowledge that this runs the risk of reproducing the same hierarchical structures inherent to a patriarchal system and the authors who intend to challenge the status quo have to tread carefully with this strategy. April de Angelis' adaptation of Lope de Vega's *Fuenteovejuna* (1619/2010), for instance, has a woman central stage named Jyoti performing this role. In this case, the motivation for Jyoti's call for justice is rape.

Premiered at the Theatre Royal, Stratford East¹³, on September 2018, under the direction of Nadia Fall, this adaptation titled *The Village* is set in contemporary India and tells the story of a young peasant girl who urges her entire town, particularly the women, to take revenge on a rapist. A corrupt policeman, Inspector Gangwar behaves as though everything and everyone, especially the women, belong to him. He has raped many young girls and women, the last victim being Jyoti, the Mayor's daughter. Gangwar and his men abduct her from her wedding ceremony and imprison the groom. When she returns, her transfigured appearance reflects severe maltreatment. Jyoti accuses the male townspeople of cowardice and incites the women who have suffered just like herself, to make the Inspector pay for his deeds. When the authorities come to learn who is responsible for the death of Gangwar, each and every person answers 'Sahaspur', the name of their town, which means courage. Since there can be no punishment for an abstract entity as the town – and also because Gangwar's deeds are not entirely unknown to the authorities – the peasants get away with murder.

The position of women in society, past and present, informs de Angelis' oeuvre, and the stories she crafts are usually based on historical events and figures. Placed in broader social and political contexts, these stories range from the medieval period and the story of a group of free-thinking women (*Crux*), the Apartheid in South Africa (*Soft Vengeance*), the escape of Natasha Kampusch from her Austrian kidnapper (2006), the Iraqi War (*Amongst Friends*), to the climate emergency of our times (*Extinct*) (D'Monté, 2011). The women de Angelis writes about have agency over their lives and are not portrayed as simple spectators. In some cases, they use this agency to fight against patriarchy, as is the case with Jyoti from *The Village*, and in other cases, they reproduce

¹³ In 1955, Joan Littlewood and Theatre Workshop performed de Vega's play under the title 'The Sheep-Well' at the same theatre. In a symbolic gesture, the newly appointed artistic director, Nadia Fall, makes her debut with the same play (Stratford East, 2018).

the same system of oppression to which they have been subjected. One such example is the protagonist from the play *Ironmistress* (1989/1999). In the introduction to the play, de Angelis mentions that she intended “to write a woman character who was not sympathetic, who was perhaps as blameworthy as a patriarchal figure” (*Introduction*). The widow of an ironmaster, she takes over her husband’s business and tries to find a place in a male-dominated profession, despite the pressure from other ironmasters to give up. Martha, the ironmistress, does share a certain resemblance with Margaret Thatcher through the way they view the world, which can best be described as a market, “where everything in the whole world is bought and sold. A perfect machine. A free thing” (Scene 1). What makes Martha an unsympathetic figure, however, is not her business-like manner but her attitude towards her daughter. She does not allow her to be a part of the business, instead encourages her to go on with domestic activities such as sewing. When the newly wedded daughter narrates her first night with her husband in terms of violence, blood, pain, and abuse, the mother pretends to hear nothing. Though she describes her own married life as being in a box, she pressures her daughter to follow the same path.

The apparently irreconcilable relationship between motherhood and work appears in other works of de Angelis as well, such as *After Electra* (2015). The play is set during the birthday party of Virgie, an 84-year-old woman, in de Angelis’ words “a transgressive character, an artist and a mother, who is a powerful older woman and wants control over her life and her body” (as quoted in Gardner, 2015, para. 8). The story is loosely based on the Ancient Greek myth of Electra who takes revenge on her mother for killing her father. De Angelis stresses that she did not “want to copy the Electra story, but the echoes are there”. In the same paragraph, the playwright briefly describes what adaptation means for her:

The ‘after’ in the title is important to me, because it’s as if I’m trying to chase her and pin her down. It’s about looking at an old story and maybe reassessing it, and trying to find another way of looking at it, and a potential for change. To see if there are other ways of reframing the story so we see it differently, with new eyes. (as quoted in Gardner, 2015, para. 14)

The word ‘after’ is significant for understanding *The Village*, de Angelis’ play discussed here. The playwright uses the same word in this adaptation as well, the cover of the play reading ‘April de Angelis *after* Fuenteovejuna by Lope de Vega’. It is common for adapters to include words such as ‘after’ or ‘following’ in the description of their

books as a way of recognising the influence of the source text. However, in this instance, by being written in italics, the word seems to support the meaning de Angelis gives it in the context of the play *After Electra*. The oblique position of the letters gives the impression that the playwright is on an actual run to chase and pin down a moving target, Fuenteovejuna, the village which through solidarity escapes both from the men who terrorise its inhabitants and from the punishment that might have come from the authorities.

Unlike *After Electra*, *The Village* closely follows the adapted text. The Spanish play is based on an actual event involving the revolt of the people from the village Fuenteovejuna in 1476 against the Comendador Fernán Gómez de Guzmán. Bored with women who would easily give in to his advances, the Comendador is inflamed by Laurencia's refusal to be his mistress. When he attempts to rape her in the forest, Frondoso, the man she is soon to marry, threatens the Comendador with his own crossbow and so they manage to escape. During their wedding celebrations, the enraged Comendador arrests them both. Laurencia returns and verbally humiliates the male villagers for their failure to defend women. She urges all villagers, both men and women, to go and defend their honour by killing the Comendador. The play ends with the Monarchs Isabella and Ferdinand deciding to forgive the villagers after torturing them to learn who the murderer is and obtaining only the answer 'Fuenteovejuna'.

The adapted text and the contemporary play may follow the same plot, yet, the crucial difference between the two is marked with a scene where the female protagonist Laurencia/Jyoti returns after being arrested by the Comendador/Inspector. In the Spanish play, there is no clear indication that Laurencia has been raped and the focus is on how hard she fought back:

Laurencia: How many daggers at my heart
 And gallant speeches I endured!
 How many threats and foul misdeeds
 From one who'd be my paramour
 And yearned to see my chastity
 Surrendered to his appetites!
 Look at my hair for evidence
 Of how I fought him through the night
 And see the blood spilt by his blows. (Act 3, lines 1744-1752)

The same passage in de Angelis' reinterpretation portrays a very vivid and painful image leaving no doubt that what happens to Jyoti in the hands of the Inspector and his men is brutal rape:

Jyoti: [...] I was marched away
 In their vicious grip to be raped and raped.
 Doesn't my hair tell its own story?
 Or my bloody clothes, my wedding dress of rags
 Or my beaten face which was used as a
 Space to smash their fists
 While they drove into me with their sex
 Till my mouth was dry of any cry
 Because who would hear it? (Act 3, Scene 1)

In the first excerpt, Laurencia's words suggest that she was assaulted by a single man, the Comendador, whereas in the second, Jyoti describes how she was gang-raped by the Inspector and his men. The police officers, Ved and Gopi, are from the same town as Jyoti. They are not some foreigners brought to Sahasapur to implement the order. On the contrary, they are people born and raised there, in a community that includes Jyoti as well as the other rape victims. This proximity makes her question "who would hear it?" even more meaningful. The male townspeople, impersonated by her rapists as well as those who stood by and cowardly watched them take her away, are deaf to Jyoti's desperate cries for help, each in their own way, playing a role in the rape. In the Spanish play, the Comendador as the only rapist is an outsider, and if de Angelis had written this scene only with the Inspector as the rapist, the myth of 'stranger rape' would have been partially reproduced. By including men from Jyoti's own town among the rapists, de Angelis seems to emphasise one of the most recent and crucial arguments of anti-rape activists and feminists: that stranger rape is, in fact, the exception and rape by someone known to the victim is the rule. A feminist and an activist herself, the playwright problematises the construct of such resilient myths. By underlining this point and by retelling the story of Laurencia from a contemporary understanding, de Angelis offers a different perspective which, judging by recent studies and testimonies, is closer to the reality of rape.

Those who try to raise awareness of rape dynamics between the victim and the rapist often look at the role played by the victim's resistance. Both Laurencia's and Jyoti's accounts of sexual assault make it clear that they did not consent to what was happening to them; instead, they resisted through different means. Laurencia uses her physical

strength to fight the attacker while Jyoti uses her voice to call others to her rescue. If in Laurencia's case, physical resistance to a single attacker may explain how she might have escaped without being raped, Jyoti's struggle is not enough to prevent it, which is understandable since she was attacked by more than one man. The young women's physical appearance supports their declaration of sexual assault and those who listen to their story have no difficulty in believing that they are telling the truth. Evidence of resistance is one of the crucial factors in rape trials to support the victim's rape allegations. The so-called 'force-resistance requirement' has been disputed by law reformers who argue that the imbalance of power between the victim and the rapist may make it impossible for the victim to defend herself in such a manner (Odell, 2004, p. 210). Besides, in some cases, resistance can actually put the victim's life in great danger. Shock and fear of rape may also have a paralysing effect on the victim and therefore the rapist may not even need to resort to physical violence. Rape legislation has indeed changed a great deal and the criterion of force – in theory – does not play such a significant role anymore (Donat & D'Emilio, 1992, p. 19). Nevertheless – in practice and everyday life – if a woman wants to be believed that she was raped, it is important to be able to bring concrete proof that she tried to resist the attack.

Even if her family and the townspeople believe that she was raped, the Co-mayor, a woman, expresses her disapproval at the sight of the ravished Jyoti: "Better she had died than come back alive / To face the shame" (Act 3, Scene 1). The Co-mayor speaks from a place of 'privilege'; thanks to recently becoming a widow, she is not one of the Inspector's victims. In fact, Jyoti's attitude towards other women is also characterised by this lack of solidarity. Before the Inspector's initial rape attempt, he lets her know that: "I could name other women in the village who have / Given in to me with very little persuasion" (Act 1, Scene 4), to which she answers: "Maybe they weren't fussy" (Act 1, Scene 4). The Spanish play gives more space to this episode with the Comendador enumerating such experiences. Laurencia's answer is also longer and in it, the contempt for these women is palpable. She states that they required little persuasion because they were more sexually experienced on account of all the men they had slept with (de Vega, lines 805-810). As in the Spanish play, the inexperienced young woman is not aware at the moment that her refusal and her virginity are precisely the factors that make him even more determined to 'have' her. Stuck in his own egocentric cosmos, the Inspector can

only interpret Jyoti's resistance as an attempt to "save face" or as playing "hard to get" (Act 1, Scene 4). The idea that she really does not want to give herself to him is simply incomprehensible. He knows that he will stop only upon getting what he wants: "Then I'll be able to get you out of my head and you'll be free" (Act 1, Scene 4). The freedom of his victim rests in his hands. The rapist's desire to destroy something pure, to take something perceived as worthy, is more proof that rape is not so much about sexual desire, it is about power and violence.

The other factor that inflames the Inspector's obsession with Jyoti is her relationship with Farooq. When the Inspector tries to rape her for the first time, he thinks she is alone in the forest. In fact, she is there with Farooq whom she asks to hide to avoid a worse confrontation. Realising that she is in danger, Farooq takes the Inspector's gun from the ground and threatens him. The Inspector is one of the leading figures of the Indian People's Party and he declares that the "biggest test" of the party is "cleansing Hindustan of the Muslim pest" (Act 1, Scene 1). Considering himself an important member of society, he cannot accept the fact that Jyoti prefers Farooq over him. What he sees in this act on the part of a Muslim man, is "a way of humiliating" all Hindu men (Act 2, Scene 6). Towards the end of the play, when Jyoti is kidnapped from her wedding with Farooq, the Inspector has his revenge and Farooq is thrown into jail with the accusation of having threatened him with a gun and being a terrorist, act punished with hanging. Another male friend of Jyoti, Mango, receives an even harsher punishment for hindering the Inspector's plans. He is tied to a tree, whipped, and tortured with an enema because he tries to prevent the two police officers from bringing Jacinta to the Inspector. His actions are a display of power seeking to intimidate. By punishing the two young men, the Inspector makes an example of them and sends a clear message to everyone that opposition will not be tolerated.

'Having sex' with Jacinta, as with any other woman in Sahasapur, is also a way of displaying his unquestioned authority. Called 'the untouchable girl' (for unknown reasons), Jacinta crosses paths with Jyoti when her friends hurry to take her out of town, to a safer place. When the Inspector and his men find them, she begs him to spare her because she belongs to the lowest of classes: "I'm a Dallit [sic] not fit to clean your shoes, nor drink from the same well or cross your shadow's path. You don't want me – I'll pollute you" (Act 2, Scene 2). His answer to her imploration is: "I'll give you to my men.

They can use you” (Act 2, Scene 2). This suggests that he perceives himself as superior not only to the Dalit girl but to his men as well since they come from the same background as her. What it also suggests is that he views the rape of a woman as a privilege, as a gift offered to her, a gift of which not every woman is worthy. A false sense of superiority over the women abused by the Inspector can also be observed in Jyoti’s attitude toward them. Even though Laurencia’s “appropriation of a masculine discourse” (Allatson, 1996, p. 268) is definitely downplayed in de Angelis’ version, the way Jyoti reacts to Jacinta’s cry for help is no different from the way she feels about the women who gave themselves (or who were forced to give themselves) to him. Before the apparition of the Inspector and his men, Jacinta begs the group to take her with them. Instead of offering help or at least some sympathy, Jyoti replies: “Best we go our separate ways – it’s safer” (Act 2, Scene 2). It is indeed safer for her because, unlike Jacinta, she has her friends’ protection. Though her biggest wish is for the Inspector to leave their town for good, Jyoti distances herself from his victims. Perhaps this happens because she is the Mayor’s daughter and believes he would not dare harm her. Nevertheless, her attitude dramatically shifts when she is gang-raped and asks for the support of the other women, particularly Jacinta, to take revenge.

Jyoti’s initial distancing from other women is also signalled by the cover of the Faber and Faber edition used in this study. The cover depicts a young woman – not a group – with a brave and defiant countenance. The picture is taken from a lower angle, which shows a woman, presumably Jyoti, looking at the world from above. Her words following the gang rape: “Doesn’t my hair tell its own story? (...) Or my beaten face” (Act 3, Scene 1), gain more meaning when associated with this image of the young woman. Contrary to the moment after the rape, here, her face is not bruised and her hair is not exposed, which implies that the attackers have not gained access to her body yet. She has control over her facial expression, over her hair carefully collected under the scarf, and is busy with everyday chores. On her head, she carries a disproportionately considerable weight for her thin body, which can symbolise the weight she takes upon herself to lead the town into punishing the Inspector. This voluminous bundle of straws connects her to the domestic sphere, the straws most probably being used for cooking, but together with her defiant look, it also suggests empowerment. However, this empowerment does not seem to result from solidarity, there being no sign of other

women. This appears to be the image readers form about Jyoti by looking at the cover of the book and by reading the play up to the final scenes. As previously mentioned, the return of the abused Jyoti sets up a totally different course for the relationship between the women in the play, one in which they realise how much they need to rely on one another.

In this adaptation, the women of Sahasapur are not the only women who have a say in the punishment of Inspector Gangwar. Instead of the Monarchs Isabella and Ferdinand who pardon the villagers in de Vega's play, in *The Village*, towards the end, the authority is transferred to Ishani, who manages to defeat the ruling party supported by the Inspector. Being on the other side of the political scene, she is a progressive Hindu candidate who advocates for religious equality. Writing for *The Guardian*, Michael Billington (2018) criticises the way in which de Angelis changes this particular aspect of the Spanish play. He argues that "some of the original's complexity is lost: where De Vega's play combines collective action with a belief in monarchical authority, this version implausibly suggests a progressive Hindu politician would have the power to offer pardon" (para. 3). Though this might be the case, what she has the power to do or not should be understood in a specific political and social context where a man like the Inspector – in a position lower in the hierarchy than hers – can abuse his power by raping village girls, torturing and executing prisoners, and extorting from the impoverished their last provisions in return for 'protection'. To add to his irksome character, in a meeting with Ishani, he also uses the fact that she is not only a politician but a woman and a mother as well, to intimidate her. When he learns that she is planning to go on a campaign rally, first, he threatens her that her safety cannot be guaranteed. When she makes it clear that she will not change her mind, he goes even further:

Gangwar: How is your daughter?

Ishani: My daughter?

Gangwar: Is she enjoying boarding school in Puna? Stay away from Rampur
And I'll make sure nobody touches her.

Ishani: I'll call the law on you.

Gangwar: I am the law. (Act 2, Scene 3)

Considering how he torments young girls and women in Sahasapur and elsewhere, there can be little doubt that what he means by making sure that 'nobody touches her' also implies that Ishani's daughter may be raped or harassed if he wishes that to happen.

Afterwards, when she learns about his death, she replies that she “would have liked a front seat” and admits that “they’ve done [her] a favour” (Act 3, Scene 3). Ishani’s ‘politically incorrect’ reaction does not spring only from a sense of solidarity with his female victims but from her own unpleasant experience with him. She manages to appear unnerved, but it is not difficult to understand the range of emotions a woman (and a mother) experiences when faced with the possibility of violence of a sexual or other nature. Yet, once more, this solidarity has its limits, at least initially. Her advisor urges her to appear indignant in public and to condemn the actions of the people of Sahaspur, a piece of advice she, albeit reluctantly, takes.

Just like the Inspector, Ishani underestimates the power of these people and believes that nothing of proportion will follow their crime. At the beginning of the play, the Inspector describes the town and its people in the following way:

Gangwar: In the quiet little town of Sahaspur, a forgotten pocket,
We will plan our campaign undisturbed.
The people there are simple, they hold no views
Leaving us free to do what we have to do. (Act 1, Scene 1)

He is mistaken since the people actually hold different views on significant issues such as politics, history, and economy. More significantly, they (especially the women) have something to say about his unethical and abusive behaviour, and though later on in the play, they act on it and cause his death. Similarly, when Ishani’s advisor worries that the Inspector’s death may lead to civil war in a country already in turmoil, she answers: “It won’t come to that. / Sahaspur is a sleepy little town – a pimple on a pimple (Act 3, Scene 3). This little town’s views and punishment of a corrupt policeman leads, however, to a much wider phenomenon with the women of India expressing their support in “an outpouring of suppressed rage – hashtag MeToo” (Act 3, Scene 6). Neither the Inspector nor Ishani expects such an outcome. They fail to realise that it takes a single person or an insignificant small group of people for change to happen. This attitude is, in a way, paradoxical since the Inspector implements his rule of terror on the town with very few supporters and Ishani manages to win the elections even if at the beginning of the campaign she had almost no one by her side.

Unlike the Inspector and those supporting him, Ishani advocates both for moral and legal justice but gives more prominence to the law. Her argument that “vigilante justice

is not something I can trust. / It's never a legitimate way to proceed" (Act 3, Scene 7), in theory, may indeed be valid. However, she hears the Inspector say that he represents the law and therefore can bend it to his own will, and should have no doubt that he means it. Since he is the law, and his way of acting is implicitly the 'legitimate way to proceed', the question that arises is: what is the alternative for people who not only lack the law's protection but are also abused precisely by those who are supposed to protect them? In this light, Jyoti's counter-argument to Ishani's, that "we women avenged ourselves" (Act 3, Scene 7) because nobody else does, renders their actions understandable. On the other hand, it can be argued that the women of Sahaspur go too far in their revenge, particularly since it appears that they not only murder him but mutilate his body as well, "tearing at his flesh with their bare hands, like modern day Bacchante" (Act 3, Scene 3). Furthermore, there is no indication in the play that they actually report or denounce him, in other words, they do not make any effort to follow a legal path (no matter how corrupt) to get justice.

As the person responsible for ensuring that injustices come to an end after she wins the elections, Ishani seems to display contradictory views regarding the Inspector's death. In front of her political antagonist, she utters words that her overall attitude toward him makes it clear she does not believe, such as "he was a great man" (Act 3, Scene 6), but after his departure, she says that the people of Sahaspur actually "killed a rapist", to which her advisor replies: "An *alleged* rapist" (Act 3, Scene 6, emphasis in original). In the scene following this dialogue, when Ishani decides to go to Sahaspur to listen to the people's version of the events, she makes a point of the fact that "Gangwar was never charged in a court of law, / And so he was innocent". Nevertheless, for Jyoti and the other townspeople "he was guilty" (Act 3, Scene 7). Once again, the advisor intervenes and specifies that technically he was not. The rape discourse when the play was initially written and performed presumably did not present similar nuanced legal terms which are a product of more recent years. Ishani's contradictory utterances about the Inspector being a rapist or not and about the people of Sahaspur taking the law into their own hands being the right thing to do or not, also reflect the complex nature of rape and the legal system. This kind of language choices, like emphasising the words 'alleged' and 'technically', together with more crude descriptions of violence such as "you let us women, helpless, be taken, fucked, shouldered like sheaves" (Act 3, Scene 1), seem to be adopted by the

playwright in an attempt to make the story more relatable to a contemporary understanding of rape and not only legal but also public debates around it. The play's language holds a mirror to how society speaks today about the increasingly visible pervasiveness of rape, the biggest platform of debate being the internet where movements like #MeToo allow women to share their stories and find support in one another.

April de Angelis's adaptation of Lope de Vega's play *Fuenteovejuna* portrays rape as the driving force for women to unite against patriarchy. The people of Sahaspur do not react to the Inspector's rule of terror until a young woman, who does not comprehend his power of intimidation on other women at first and considers that accepting his abuse is, in a way, a fault on their part, is raped. The playwright considers that "they're always characters who have to be shaken up or through the play they may have to reappraise their world" (as quoted in Stephenson & Langridge, 1997, n.p.). Being such a character, Jyoti's attitude evolves from thinking in terms of 'I', 'you', and 'they', to thinking in terms of 'we', but only after she experiences herself what the other women around her already experienced. Most probably, what hooks had in mind when writing about solidarity and sisterhood was not revenge and murder, but in the play, after numerous traumatic experiences and lack of solidarity, women realise that men's protection either comes at a cost or is insufficient. This motivates them to come together and protect each other in the only way they see possible.

The reality may not be as bleak as Brownmiller (1975) famously claims, that "*all men keep all women in a state of fear*" (p. 15, emphasis in original), but it can be argued that all women at some point in their lives fear being raped by a man. This view is clearly expressed in *Students* (2013), a play by Peter Rose, in which a young woman is verbally harassed by her boyfriend's elderly uncle. Her response to his blunt request: "I just want to fuck you. Just once" (n.p.) is a succinct and to the point image of the reality of sexual violence: "every woman I know, every female friend, family member, whatever, every single one has been sexually assaulted" (n.p.). Paradoxically, she "can't find a man who will admit to ever having done it" (n.p.). This does not necessarily mean that all men have done or will do something that belongs to the broad spectrum of sexual violence, but it does mean that all (or most) women if asked and feeling safe to answer, have had such experiences or will have at some point in time. As such, hooks' (1986) disbelief in the common oppression emphasised by the Women's Liberation Movement (p. 127) may be

apt when it comes to race and class, but when it comes to the fear of rape (also a form of oppression), it is a feature common to all women regardless of race or class, something that a quick look at the variety of women who retweeted #MeToo since 2017 makes quite clear. The women of Sahaspur in particular, but of India more extensively, come together not as hooks proposes, “on the basis of shared strengths and resources” but “on the basis of shared victimization” (p. 128), to end the terror of rape brought into their lives by the Inspector and his men. The fact that they employ murder as a tool to do so, an act both morally and legally wrong, but nevertheless the only way that seems possible in the socio-political context of the time and place of the play’s setting, leaves the readers and the audiences of *The Village* in an oscillatory position between empathising with these women and feeling that they have gone too far in their revenge. While the play debates the moral complexity of ‘vigilante justice’, it also shows that even (or perhaps precisely) in the darkest of times, there is hope for solidarity between women. The play eludes clear conclusions and judgement about the women’s actions, but it leaves no room for doubt that the Inspector’s actions are wrong, that rape is wrong, and that it has to stop or be stopped.

1.3. VERBATIM DRAMATISATION OF ARTEMISIA GENTILESCHI’S RAPE TRIAL

Understood through its etymological definition, with the Greek words *polites* (πολίτης) meaning citizen and *politikos* (Gr. πολιτικός) meaning civic at its roots, the adjective ‘political’ seems unnecessary in the description of the word ‘theatre’, the two being almost a tautology. Since the subject of theatre has always been people and society, all theatre could be considered implicitly political. However, Kirby (1975) disagrees with this idea and argues that “theatre is political [only] if it is *concerned with* the state or *takes sides* in politics” (p. 129, emphasis in original). He goes on to add that “because something may somehow and to some extent be interpreted as being political does not mean that it is political” (p. 130). The political message should be overtly stated and not a product of the interpreter’s mind, be they reader, audience member, or critic; political conclusions that may come out of a play or a particular aspect of the play not being sufficient to characterise it as political. Yet, adaptations of a given play in different contexts and historical periods and subversive ways of directing a performance can turn

a play that is not political (or not overtly political) into one that is. Moreover, a type of theatre that does not always concern itself with the state or politics and has been characterised as “a new form of political playwriting” (Rees, 2020, p. 73), i.e. verbatim theatre, in scholarly works on the subject appears more often than not in association with the term ‘political’.

Although the beginnings of the so-called ‘verbatim theatre’ cannot be pinned down with certainty, it is generally accepted that it appeared on the British stage in the 1960s and 1970s (Biber Vangölü, 2020, p. 45). Among the precursors of verbatim theatre are the works of Brecht and Piscator and Russian productions by workers under the ‘blue blouse’ name. Documentary theatre spread to the USA and Western Europe, including Britain, via ‘living newspapers’ performed by Unity Theatre, Theatre Union, and later by Theatre Workshop whose leader Joan Littlewood directed the play *Oh, What a Lovely War!* (1963), a play that marks one of the most significant moments in British theatre. A follower of Littlewood, Peter Cheeseman, together with Stephen Joseph, created the ‘theatre in the round’ in an attempt to break down the boundaries between the audience and the stage (Mureşan, 2017, pp. 46-47). Among the most significant examples of verbatim theatre are Richard Norton-Taylor’s *The Colour of Justice* (1999), David Hare’s *The Permanent Way* (2003) and *Stuff Happens* (2004), and more recently Lucy Prebble’s *Enron* (2009). These plays deal with a wide range of national and international issues that are still relevant today, such as racism, corruption, privatisation, bureaucracy, military invasions, and corporate crimes. To explore such various phenomena, verbatim plays convey the words of public figures, but also give voice to personal testimonies and stories overlooked by the media and less known by the public.

The first use of the term ‘verbatim theatre’ is accredited to Derek Paget (1987) who defines it as follows:

A form of theatre firmly predicated upon the taping and subsequent transcription of interviews with ‘ordinary’ people, done in the context of research into a particular region, subject area, issue, event, or combination of these things. This primary source is then transformed into a text which is acted, usually by the performers who collected the material in the first place. (p. 317)

Based on the words of real people, verbatim theatre asserts close proximity to the truth of the story it tells. Yet, as the word ‘transformed’ implies, the final product is the result of different degrees of intervention from the playwright, and even from the part of the team

producing the performance. The source material is usually transcribed and edited, and only afterwards, is it given a ‘final’ form through performance, a process in which the performers’ acting style plays an important role too.

A play that takes a different approach to verbatim theatre to ensure more direct access to the ‘real people’ and their words – and is perhaps one of the few verbatim plays that puts women central stage – is Alecky Blythe’s *The Girlfriend Experience*, first performed at the Royal Court Theatre Upstairs in 2008. Unlike most verbatim plays, Blythe’s is not based on material that has been recorded, transcribed, and then edited into the playtext. Instead, it is the direct product of edited recordings that have not been transcribed and which are passed on to the performers via earpieces. In this way, not only the words uttered during the interviews, but also “the exact cadences and rhythms of the person they are playing on stage” are retained (Dorney & Gray, 2013, p. 212). This approach is described by Mureşan (2017) as “a Brechtian way of distancing, determining the audience to understand that the actors rather transmit a message, than they identify with it” (p. 54). Resembling a journalistic style of delivering information and narrating other people’s stories, this distancing style has the effect of making the audience more inclined to intellectually search for the intended message and the people behind the story, rather than empathise with the characters played by the actors.

The Girlfriend Experience is based on interviews conducted by Blythe with a group of female sex workers and conversations with their clients. The play starts with the playwright’s voice offering some information about the technique behind the performance. She emphasises that what happens on stage is “kind of very true – obviously so so true to *life*” (Technique, 2008, emphasis in original). Her words are interrupted by Tessa, one of the four girls, who remarks that “you ‘ave [sic] to be careful what you say” (Technique, emphasis in original). These words are, in a way, antithetic to those of the playwright; they imply that what the interviewees say during the recording – and what therefore the performers transmit to the audience – may be a self-censored version of what is ‘true’. Even if this is the case, the play succeeds in portraying a different side to prostitution, one that differs from the image people usually have about sex workers, their families, and their clients and one that is presumably closer to the truth. The fact that this ‘truth’ may be partial due to the ‘self-censored’ information offered by the girls does not

reduce its merit since, in such a context, every person has the right to share as much as they feel comfortable with from their personal stories.

The issue of truthfulness is at the core of what distinguishes this kind of theatre from others. The backlash certain plays get from critics is the result of the fact that verbatim theatre “promises objectivity and truth”, while at the same time “this lofty ideal is undermined by the fact that it is still ostensibly political theatre, which is subject to the political biases and agendas of the individual playwright” (Rees, 2020, p. 82). Particularly in a play that shouts from its very beginning, from the title, ‘it’s true, it’s true, it’s true’, the desire to convince about the truthfulness of the words it conveys becomes very significant. Does this mean that, since the play in question, *It’s True, It’s True, It’s True* (2018), is the result of a collective effort, being authored by the Breach Theatre¹⁴ and not an individual playwright, the ‘biases and agendas’ are reduced to a minimum and the ‘objectivity and truth’ it promises are less likely to be partial or altered? Based on the court transcripts of a 1612 rape trial – a court of law being presumably one of the places where everything said is true, hence the famous ‘I swear to say the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth’ – the play can be described as a tribunal play. Mureşan (2017) sees tribunal plays as a form of documentary theatre distinct from verbatim. Similarly, Rees (2020) differentiates between verbatim, tribunal, and history plays. However, this study follows Biber Vangölü’s (2020) understanding that it is more beneficial to understand tribunal plays within the more encompassing term of verbatim theatre (p. 51). The rationale behind this is that both verbatim theatre and tribunal plays are based on real people’s words, the differentiating element being the limited scope of the latter; unlike verbatim theatre, which can deal with any aspect of life, tribunal plays are limited to court trials (p. 51). Moreover, treating *It’s True, It’s True, It’s True* as a verbatim piece of theatre is also based on the fact that the Breach Theatre itself defines it as such.

In the notes to the text, the company asks: “what does ‘verbatim’ theatre – which typically aspires to truth – actually mean when dealing with a four-hundred year [sic] old court transcript”, a text “transcribed and translated several times before even reaching our rehearsal room?” (p. ix). Together with the desire to explore the meaning of verbatim

¹⁴ Online sources, reviews, and even the book cover present the play as Breach Theatre’s work; however, in the production information preceding the playtext, Ellice Stevens and Billy Barrett, two of the company’s founders, are mentioned as writers.

theatre, another reason for wanting to tackle this rape trial is to stand by “the countless women who’ve come forward with accounts of rape” (p. ix). The notes may imply a specific limitation to the possibility of reproducing a rape story that dates back a few centuries, but the prologue to the play ends with the words: “Everything that follows is true” (p. xiii). This is how the readers/audiences step into the play, with the expectation to encounter a story based on truth. The life of Artemisia Gentileschi, a Renaissance painter, is marked by two extraordinary events. The first – in chronological order, not of importance – is the fact that when she accuses a painter for the Pope and a friend of her family, Agostino Tassi, of rape, he is actually found guilty, a rare occurrence even in today’s times. The second is marked by her being the first woman to be accepted by Florence’s Accademia di Arte del Disegno. The Breach Theatre brings these two aspects together by reproducing the courtroom and the words uttered during the trial and by including two scenes directly related to Artemisia’s paintings that reflect abuse and fear, as well as revenge and violence.

The selected paintings, namely *Susanna and the Elders* (1610) and *Judith Beheading Holofernes* (c. 1612) are invoked by Artemisia to provide further evidence for her rape allegations since, as can be expected in a trial, more than one version of the events is submitted to the judge. According to Artemisia’s account, everything begins when her father’s friend and colleague, Agostino Tassi, develops the habit of visiting their house. He approaches her under the pretext of warning her about gossip and rumours that ‘she gave herself’ to Francesco, the family’s servant and occasionally a model for their paintings. Because her mother died when Artemisia was only a child, her father proposes to Tuzia, their neighbour from across the street, to “take a house jointly and live together” (Scene One) and be a companion for her daughter. Therefore, she must have been aware of Tassi’s interest in the young girl, especially since Artemisia says that the two have become friends and that Tuzia is the one who advised her to listen to what Tassi has to say in the first place. Though Tuzia initially claims that he is a real gentleman who cares significantly about Artemisia, later, during the trial, she changes her testimony and reveals that, in fact, Tassi developed an obsession with her. After stalking her on numerous occasions, on the day when the rape happens, Tassi asks Tuzia to leave them alone and forcibly pushes the girl inside her bedroom. There, he rapes her for a painfully long time despite Artemisia’s cries for help and physical resistance which goes as far as

removing a piece of his penis with her nails. After the rape, she tries to stab him with a knife, but he averts the attack. Seeing how distressed she is (and probably because he is afraid for his life), Tassi promises to marry her, a prospect that seems to her better than having her reputation destroyed. With this promise, they continue to meet and have sexual intercourse, which she never enjoys and as a result bleeds every time. The fact that they are in the courtroom means that he does not keep his promise and for this reason, he is under trial for rape.

Together with the accusation of rape, he is also charged with stealing her painting *Judith Beheading Holofernes*. Early in the trial, when Artemisia asks the judge to consider one of her paintings in relation to the events discussed at that moment, he believes that she refers to the stolen painting, when, in fact, she wants to show *Susanna and the Elders*. The aim of bringing it in front of the court is to explain how she felt before the rape when Tassi was stalking her: “I painted it around this time because of how I was feeling in all this” (Scene One). The following scene reproduces the painting with Artemisia in the role of Susanna. The biblical story is told by two narrators who impersonate the elders as well. The wife of a rich man from Babylon, Susanna has the habit of bathing in the garden. Without intention, she attracts the attention of two elderly judges who plan how to “fuck her”, not rape her, because in their understanding “she’s absolutely gagging for it” (Scene Two). When they startle her naked, she tries to make them go away, but they blackmail her saying that they will start a gossip about finding her with another man. This is the moment captured by Artemisia in her painting: when a woman is torn between two horrible prospects. She either gives herself to the lecherous older men and, in doing so, acts against her principles and beliefs, or rejects them and risks being accused of cheating on her husband by two respectable members of society, with no one to support her version of the events. What Artemisia tries to stress through her version of a story that has been painted by others (male painters) in the past is that Susanna does absolutely nothing to invite or encourage the attention she receives. Furthermore, she asks the court to “look at the angle of the body. It’s pointing away from the elders, it isn’t inviting their gaze at all. (...) And it’s turned away from the viewer, the presumably male viewer” (Scene Two). Similarly, Artemisia does nothing to attract the attention of Tassi and Cosimo, another friend of his and her father who also stalks her and tries to have sex with her. This powerful rape myth, that before being raped a woman is ‘asking for it’, is supported by

Tuzia as well who tells the judge: “You know how these young girls are. The power they have – say they don’t like it, but it’s flattering, isn’t it?” (Scene One). The performance of the play *It’s True, It’s True, It’s True*, accessible during the International Online Theatre Festival 2023, makes this ‘not asking for it’ visually apparent. There is nothing sensuous about Susanna here: she scrubs herself, cleans her feet and fingernails, her hair is untidy, her bodily hair is visible on her legs, armpits, and genital area, and she wears big beige underwear. To make the point even more explicit, this scene is contrasted by one in which Susanna performs a very sexualised image of a woman teasing the two men followed by the story suddenly going back to Tassi and Cosimo chasing Artemisia who seems unable to escape them.

In opposition to the helpless image of Susanna – and implicitly Artemisia in the early phase of Tassi harassing her – after the rape, Artemisia starts painting her version of Judith slaying Holofernes with the help of her maid, Abra. In the *Book of Judith*, “she slays the Assyrian general to free her city, Bethulia” (Scene Seven); with this brief information, Artemisia introduces Judith. In the final scenes, however, Judith tells her own story. The story of Susanna is narrated by others, but Judith describes herself as a daughter in a long line of sons and fathers, showing in this way that after generations of women’s names being buried in the graveyard of history, her name and Artemisia’s “will never be [forgotten]” (Scene Nine). The painting of a woman decapitating a powerful man, “taking all that rage that she has been sitting in for months, and channeling it into action” (Scene Seven), reflects the state Artemisia has been in from the moment Tassi raped her and she unsuccessfully tried to stab him, up until the time of the trial. It appears that Tassi himself notices the intense feelings Artemisia transfers onto the canvas and steals this particular painting because of his resemblance with Holofernes. This view is also supported by Tuzia who says that she “told them [Tassi and Cosimo] that they should not take a painting of that sort away from a young woman – but they stole it because of its likeness to Agostino, which he was concerned would arouse suspicion” (Scene Six). The explanation for why the painting was stolen makes more sense in the context of the play than it does in the source of the Breach Theatre’s adaptation of the story, which is the English transcript of the trial included in Mary D. Garrard’s *Artemisia Gentileschi: The Image of the Female Hero in Italian Baroque Art* (1989). From the first page of the transcript, it appears that the painting belongs not to Artemisia, but to her father, Orazio

Gentileschi (p. 410); as such, it would make no sense for Tassi to see a dubious message hidden in it. However, it seems that the fact that the painting belongs to the father does not necessarily mean that he painted it as well. This lack of coherence appears to be the result of the translation from the original text which can be interpreted in both ways (p. 410). Furthermore, it is in fact the father, not Artemisia, who “launched a prosecution against Agostino and Tuzia for conspiring to deflower his daughter” (Cohen, 2000, p. 49). Her virginity, her honour, and even her work, belong to her father and only he has the right to transfer this ownership to another man. What Tassi does by raping his daughter is an injury done to the father, an injury that comes from a friend, a fellow painter, and a fellow man. The play, nonetheless, gives no voice to the father and makes it clear that Artemisia is the rightful owner of her work and body. The image that is conjured is not that of a woman at the hands of patriarchy, of a victim, but the image of a determined, resilient woman who speaks for herself and through her empowering portrayal of heroines such as Susanna, Judith, Cleopatra, and Lucretia, speaks for and through other women as well.

Artemisia Gentileschi’s work was discovered and given the place it deserves through the efforts of feminist art historians. In spite of this development, more recently, critics have been concerned with a recurrent tendency in the discourse surrounding her work that “sexualized the artist to the point of explaining her art if not through, at least systematically with reference to, the artist’s rape by her tutor Agostino Tassi” (Bal, 2005, p. x). This discourse is perpetuated mainly in the form of “popular culture” that “produced semibiographical novels, plays, and more recently, a film of the ‘biopic’ genre” (p. x). What characterises this kind of adaptations of her life and work is that they “heroize Gentileschi through a discourse of victimization” (p. xi). Cohen (200) argues that “not only did Artemisia Gentileschi suffer sexual violence in the past, but also, because of these judicial documents [presumably the rape transcript and other documents related to the trial], her reputation continues to be violated in the present by an overly sexualized interpretation” (p. 47). To Cohen, this is the outcome of a “poor sense of history” (p. 47) and that in order to understand her story better, it has to be considered not through a contemporary magnifying glass, but in the context of the seventeenth century (p. 48). It is indeed the case that, when it comes to art history, the discourse around her work should not be limited or conditioned by the rape, just like a literary work should not be interpreted

simply through biographical information about its author's life. However, in a feminist and literary study such as the present one that aims to discover how exactly Artemisia's rape by Tassi is adapted for the contemporary stage, focusing on the rape and her work in relation to the rape is inevitable. Even the cover of the Oberon edition employed in this study depicts a young woman's face, presumably Artemisia, splashed with paint of different colours, thus showing how immersed she is in her art. Furthermore, creating a piece of theatre about the rape of Artemisia and analysing this play does not signify that she is 'violated' again, since the stage adaptation discussed here, gives no indication that she is simply a "sexual creature" (p. 47), as Cohen postulates or a victim. Artemisia is in fact a heroine and a source of inspiration for women in search of empowerment in the fight against patriarchy. The strength of character she displays throughout the long-lasting rape trial could be enough to explain why her story is so enduring and compelling to contemporary audiences and her being a successful painter only enhances this appeal.

There is, however, one aspect that contemporary audiences may find problematic and the fact that the Breach Theatre retains it is proof of its decision to root the play in the context of the time when the rape and the ensuing trial happen. The aspect in question is Artemisia accusing Tassi of rape not only because he rapes her, but because he does not keep the promise to marry her. In a contemporary court of law, this would have probably nullified any hope a rape victim may have to get her rapist convicted because it would have made the accusation appear simply as an act of revenge. Artemisia explains to the court that Tassi's promise to marry her made her feel calmer, "because at least if he married me then I could have some sort of life, and have dignity" (Scene Three). She believes that the reason he does not keep his word is Cosimo's boasting that he had sexual intercourse with her, when, in fact, she repeatedly refuses this claim. While imprisoned, Tassi even tries to convince Tuzia to bring Artemisia to him and make her withdraw the rape accusation; in return, "he was ready to marry her as he had promised, before fifteen days went by" (Scene Six). There have been an impressive number of adaptations of Artemisia's life in all literary genres, particularly in the twenty-first century. One example is a novel in prose verse, initially a play, *Blood Water Paint* (2018) by Joy McCullough where the author deliberately omits the fact that Artemisia wants to marry Tassi because "it's so offensive to our modern sensibilities that someone would want to marry their rapist, but it was not uncommon back then" (as quoted in Cascone, 2018, n.p.). Artemisia

has to choose between two bad situations and chooses the one that would help her protect her honour, something that seems very important to her and is underlined both in the court transcript and in the play *It's True, It's True, It's True*. The Breach Theatre does not avoid bringing to the fore what can be named a victim's anachronous reaction to rape. The impetus behind it seems to be the desire to stay as accurate as possible to the story of the Renaissance painter. Furthermore, it also calls attention to the fact that there are still places in today's world where the victim is forced to marry the rapist. This coercion may take different forms, be they more indirect, such as the pressure the victim's family may exert on her to accept getting married for the sake of protecting her own honour and that of the family, or direct and corroborated by authorities. According to a United Nations report, "twenty countries still allow rapists to marry their victims to escape criminal prosecution" (Johnson, 2021, n.p.). When cornered, Tassi also attempts to escape criminal prosecution, by convincing Artemisia that if she withdraws her accusations he will marry her, but she does not waver. She does not waver even when the trial turns into an emotional and physical nightmare.

Another disturbing event that actually takes place during the trial and is recreated in most of the adaptations about Artemisia's life, including the play discussed here, is the torture she has to endure to enhance the credibility of her words. She is asked by the judge to talk about the details of the rape more than once and in what Cohen (2000) explains as being an act of sympathy from the judge's side (p. 59), she is asked: "Would you be willing to confirm and substantiate your testimony under torture?" (Scene Eight). This question comes after Tassi contradicts her allegations and therefore they both believe that the judge addresses the latter, when, in fact, he does not. The choice of torture is by thumbscrews, and the reason why Artemisia is tortured instead of Tassi is that the court "can't risk Signor Tassi's hands – he's a painter" (Scene Eight). In response, she iterates the commonsensical arguments that she is not the one on trial and that she is also a painter. The fact that Tassi's work is considered more valuable than hers, either because he is a man or he is a painter for the Pope, is underlined from the very beginning of the play. Moreover, his high connections will help him not serve the sentence (Cohen, 2000, p. 49), though he is found guilty of the rape of Artemisia. To add to what Artemisia has to endure, the judge even allows Tassi to interrogate and torture her, which seems to have been a common practice at the time of the trial, when "the magistrates sorted out

conflicting testimonies by face-to-face confrontations between the accused and witnesses or by judicial torture” (Cohen, 2000, p. 58). The choice of the title of this study ‘Artemisia’s Gentileschi’s rape trial’ is intentional. It is obvious that it should be ‘Agostino Tassi’s rape trial’ instead, but in fact, she is the one who is tortured, she is the one who is questioned more than Tassi, and her past is under scrutiny. Therefore, it appears that it is Artemisia who is on trial or that at least it is her trial as much as his, a point also made by Cohen (2000). The Breach Theatre uses a very ingenious and effective technique to emphasise this paradox. Having an all-female cast, the actors playing the roles of Artemisia, Tassi, and Tuzia also take turns acting the role of the judge. Through this device, Artemisia as the judge and Tassi as the judge interrogate each other, and the lines between who is on trial and who judges who are blurred even further.

Alongside being tortured with thumbscrews by the court and her rapist, Artemisia also undergoes a less obvious form of physical and emotional suffering in the form of the vaginal examination by two midwives. Signora Diambra and Donna Caterina are asked to testify if Artemisia is a virgin or not and they both answer that she is not. The way they can be sure about it is by placing their finger inside her vagina and finding that the hymen was broken (the relationship between hymen and virginity is now known to be a myth). Yet, this examination is nothing compared with the modern so-called ‘rape kit’ which is “a collection of evidence from a rape or sexual abuse victim after an assault” (Grutsch McKinney, 2004, p. 185). The process includes, among others, “swabbing of vagina, anus, and gums”, “combing of pubic hair”, and “pulling of hairs from pubic area and head” (p. 185). Even if these pieces of evidence may help arrest the rapist, it is evident that the ordeal women have to face has only gotten worse. It is not a coincidence that the whole process a rape victim goes through after the actual rape has been called ‘secondary rape’, “the term commonly given to describe the process of investigation that agencies, institutions, or individuals perform when questioning a rape victim” (Thompson, 2004, p. 217). The physical examination of the victim should also be understood as a part of this never-ending ‘secondary rape’. Pertinently, Mackay (2020) argues in her review of the filmed version¹⁵ of *It’s True, It’s True, It’s True* that it “does not so much dramatize

¹⁵ The premiere of the play which was planned to open at the Barbican Centre for Performing Arts in London had to be postponed due to the coronavirus. In its place, a filmed version was shot for BBC Four (Sierz, 2020, para. 1). All references to the performance, including Mackay’s review and the International Online Theatre Festival 2023, are to this particular production.

the trial as expose the systems that sustain it” (p. 511). The beauty of the play is that, despite all these forms of torture and abuse, despite people trying to convince her that she is in the wrong, Artemisia can repeat over and over again – in what takes the form of many pages of script with the letters getting bigger and bigger (Scene Eight) – sometimes louder, sometimes weaker, sometimes choked with tears, that what she says is true. The Breach Theatre’s play leaves no room for thinking otherwise.

The play’s dedication to the truth of Artemisia’s story would not necessarily be a point of interest in adaptation studies, since as it has been stressed in the introduction to this chapter, adaptation studies have largely distanced themselves from issues of fidelity to an ‘original’. But how can a verbatim play be understood in relation to adaptation? It can be argued that a helpful way of thinking about verbatim theatre is precisely in terms of adaptation since it also involves the source material and the creative process of transforming it into a resulting play. However, in adaptation studies, the issue of fidelity is not the norm anymore perhaps because it deals with fictional works, but verbatim theatre is presumed to reflect the truth, and therefore, is open to criticism about lack of fidelity to truth. It seems that this issue of understanding verbatim theatre as an adaptation has so far only been considered by Tricia Hopton (2011) in her discussion of David Hare’s play *Stuff Happens* (2004). Hopton’s main argument is that the play can break free from “being potentially suspect” (p. 49) – of being embedded with Hare’s personal agenda – if it is re-categorised as an adaptation instead of a piece of verbatim theatre. She goes even further in arguing that verbatim theatre, in general, can be read as a form of adaptation (p. 52). Taking Hutcheon’s (2006) view into account that adaptation can mean “a shift [...] from a historical account or biography to a fictionalized narrative or drama” (p. 8), it follows that *It’s True, It’s True, It’s True*, as a shift from a transcribed document to drama, can be characterised as an adaptation. Even the Breach Theatre, in the notes to the playtext, uses words such as ‘re-voice’, ‘re-order’, and ‘re-work’ to describe the creative process, words usually associated with the act of adapting the source material. Nonetheless, the resulting product, either understood as a verbatim play – as the Breach Theatre names it – or an adaptation – as this study does – is a fictionalised account of an actual event. However, regardless of how many fictionalised accounts have been or will continue to be written, the rape of Artemisia Gentileschi, the famous Renaissance painter, by Agostino Tassi is definitely not fiction.

The plays discussed in this chapter, namely *Dea*, *The Village*, and *It's True, It's True*, are generally categorised as adaptations. The reason for this categorisation is because they retell old stories that have been a source of inspiration for other authors before Bond, de Angelis, and the Breach Theatre; the stories told in *The Village* and *It's True, It's True*, *It's True* being drawn from events that actually took place at some time in history and *Dea* being inspired by myth. The starting point of this study was to not confine itself to strict categorisations such as adaptation vs. translation¹⁶, verbatim plays vs. tribunal plays, or verbatim theatre vs. adaptation. The focus was not on theoretical considerations about the difference between these closely-related terms, but on how older stories about rape and rape victims relate to the twenty-first century, the beginning of which is heavily marked by the #MeToo movement. The pleasure of experiencing an adaptation as adaptation, stressed by both Hutcheon and Sanders, depends on whether the person engaging with the play has any knowledge of the adapted text. In this particular case, my experience of *Dea* was as an adaptation, since I was already familiar with the story of Medea from different sources. I was, however, unfamiliar with *Fuenteovejuna* as well as the work and life of the painter Artemisia Gentileschi and not until I read the stories from which *The Village* and *It's True, It's True, It's True* have been devised, was I able to enjoy the similarities and differences between them, which only added to how inspiring I had already found these two plays as autonomous works and the stories of Jyoti and Artemisia.

What feminist studies in visual arts have defined as a problem, namely “the recurrent temptation to call a woman artist by her given name rather than by her surname or full author name” (Bal, 2005, pp. xi-xii), can be observed in this study as well and not only in relation to Artemisia. Although they are not artists, Dea and Jyoti are also referred to by their given name, since there is no other relevant information in the plays. Nonetheless, Artemisia Gentileschi's full name is known, yet, in this study, she is still referred to as Artemisia. In contrast, the male characters are usually mentioned as Colonel Johnson, Inspector Gangwar, and Agostino Tassi. This is a conscious choice that aims to put a distance between the rapists and the victims, but also between the rapists and the readers of this study. Dea, Jyoti, and Artemisia are the characters that should feel closer,

¹⁶ Jorge Braga Riera (2022), for instance, discusses the play *The Village* as a retranslation of Lope de Vega's *Fuente Ovejuna*.

especially for women. The issue of solidarity (and lack of it) between women has been discussed mainly in the play *The Village*, due to the nature of the story. Nevertheless, it appears that in all plays, the female characters are trapped in a men's world and all of them are also motherless. They appear to be in the hands of patriarchy and have to fight very hard to escape from its grip. In Dea's case, there is no other woman to reach out to in times of need, but she nevertheless manages to liberate herself in the end. The women of Sahaspur unite against male oppression only when Jyoti is raped and she urges them to put an end to the Inspector's rule of terror. Artemisia is initially betrayed by her companion, Tuzia, but her change of testimony – probably due to the fact that Tassi uses verbal and physical threats towards her during the trial to be careful about what she says – helps Artemisia prove that she was raped.

This study shows that through the adaptation of stories about women who fight back in various ways, without expecting the men in their lives – be they fathers, husbands, brothers, or lovers – to fight for them, theatre is capable of contributing to the empowerment of women. Seeing women who fight back against patriarchy is noteworthy, since we live in a culture that “does not support women's hostility toward men, however justified” (Burt, 2003, p. 136), though it takes little issues with men's hostility towards women or even towards other men. In the plays discussed here, this ‘hostility’ covers a spectrum of actions and reactions ranging from Artemisia shouting in Tassi's face that he raped her and calling him a liar, to Dea killing her husband in self-defence while he tries to rape her (again), and to the women of Sahaspur under the leadership of Jyoti who kill the Inspector and mutilate his corpse. Women's desire for a counter-narrative to stories about rape in which the female characters' lives are ruined or they kill themselves as a result of rape is justifiable and revenge, as a last resort, can be considered a form of empowerment. However, history insistently warns us that violence should not be the response to violence, and the vicious circle this way of thinking and acting creates can never be broken in the same way it was created.

CHAPTER TWO

WHAT COUNTS AS CONSENT?

Rape and consent are so inseparably entwined in legal and cultural contexts that the simplest definition of rape could be ‘sexual intercourse *without* consent’, consent meaning, in this case, ‘to agree’. However, as far as rape is concerned, it is more appropriate to speak about ‘meaningful consent’. To do so, “a context of not only choice but also mutuality and equality; (...) [and] the absence of fear or the most subtle coercion” (Fortune, 2004, p. 44) is required. One of the founders of feminist legal theory, Catharine A. MacKinnon, presents her radical views on consent and coercion in her seminal work *Toward a Feminist Theory of the State* (1989), in which she argues that “Rape law takes women’s usual response to coercion—acquiescence, the despairing response to hopelessness to unequal odds—and calls that consent. Men coerce women; women ‘consent’” (p. 168). To return to the ‘simplest’ definition of rape, it follows that ‘sex *with* consent’ can also be defined as rape when the woman is forced to agree to sex under constraints that denote an imbalance of power, which MacKinnon sees as inherent to the relation between genders (p. 182). What renders MacKinnon’s thought radical is not the emphasis on the imbalance of power between genders since this is a fact recognised by feminism in general; it is the suggestion that all sex takes place under coercion and that it can then be reframed as rape that designates it as radical.

In a succinct overview of the role played by feminism on the anti-rape front, Graham (2004) notes that some feminists – MacKinnon could also be included in this category – argue that: “If women live in a male-controlled society, then they are not able to give free consent. Therefore, if women are not able to consent, all heterosexual sex can be considered a violation” (p. 73). This broad definition fades next to Andrea Dworkin’s statement during a speech she gave at the ‘Take Back the Night’ march in 1979 that romance is “rape embellished with meaningful looks” (as cited in Levy, 2006, Forward, p. xxi). Dworkin’s words make sense when the claim that all sex between men and women can be considered a form of rape is taken into consideration. However, if so, then it would seem that women should avoid entering any romantic relationships with men, something that even Dworkin does not do. In fact, it appears that her husband, John Stoltenberg, was the most important man in her life (Levy, 2006, Forward, pp. xxi-xxii). Instead of being

taken literally, perhaps these radical statements should be understood as a good provocation of thought and as one of the many possible façades to the relationships between genders. Though coercion can hide behind consent and rape more often than it is publicly acknowledged, sex does happen without any coercion or pressure, and it can also be initiated by women, contrary to MacKinnon's claim that "Man proposes. Woman disposes" (p. 174). Nonetheless, an emphasis on the aspect of coercion is significant, particularly in law, because it challenges the traditional view that for rape to happen, overt physical violence is a determining factor.

The primary federal law enforcement agency of the United States of America, the Federal Bureau of Investigation (2013), removed only in 2013 the word 'forcibly' from the offense title 'forcibly rape', although feminist reformers and activists have been insisting at least since the 1960s on the fact that women are more often than not raped without force being involved. American law seems to have had similar issues with adjectives preceding legal concepts in the past as well. In the nineteenth century, the judges came up with the terms 'half consent' and 'ultimate consent' to understand how the victim reacted to the assault. In the first situation, "defendants argued that if the woman's resistance was equivocal, it amounted to a partial consent, which was as good as a whole consent", and in the second, "defendants used the ultimate consent rule to assert that even though their accusers initially resisted their efforts at seduction, they eventually gave in and ultimately consented to the intercourse" (Block, 2004, p. 182). It is evident that no matter the characterisation, in the defendants' eyes, the women consented either way and therefore the rape did not happen. The final decision on whether what transpired between the parties was rape or sex rested in the hands of the *male* judges. Going a few centuries back, the ordeals of women appeared even more desperate. The narrow approach to consent from the nineteenth century is no equal to the medieval belief perpetuated at least until the eighteenth century that for a woman to become pregnant, she must have an orgasm; consequently, "a rape could not result in pregnancy; conception entailed women's consent" (Shelton, 2004, p. 106). A retrospective look at the absurdity of these past beliefs brings about a sense of optimism that the legislature is, at least in theory, more sensitive to rape victims' experiences and more open to acknowledge subtler factors involved in the phenomenon of rape.

Currently, the law distinguishes between ‘express’ and ‘implied’ consent. In the first case, consent is “directly given, either verbally or in writing, and clearly demonstrates an accession of the will of the individual giving it” (Block, 2004, p. 51). Unlike this straightforward response to a request, the ‘implied’ consent is “indirectly given and is usually indicated by a sign, an action or inaction, or a silence that creates a reasonable presumption that an acquiescence of the will has been given” (Block, 2004, p. 51). Yet, as Germaine Greer points out in her book *On Rape* (2018), sexual interaction is not “a matter of signing on a dotted line” (p. 18), and as such, in the majority of the sexual interactions the consent is not given directly, through a clear ‘yes’, but is transmitted through body language and indirect expressions. On the other hand, the lack of consent is generally transmitted through the word ‘no’ or something to that effect. For this refusal to matter, the man to whom it is addressed has to take it seriously, i.e., not see it as an attempt to ‘play it hard to get’ and respect the woman’s will. The idea that rape happens due to a lack of communication implies, as McCaughey (2004) observes, that “men are in fact trying to get consent and would not rape if women only communicated more clearly” (p. 168), something that would only make sense in a society where men and women are viewed as equal. As a matter of fact, as Koss (2009) points out, “both men and women are already capable of understanding and communicating refusal in ways that are hearable” (p. xxv). There are, however, some instances in which a woman’s consent is not valid in the eyes of the law. This kind of consent should not be valid in the eyes of the man trying to engage in any kind of sexual activity with the woman in question either. Women who are mentally and physically incapacitated or who are under a specific statutory age cannot give informed consent (Block, 2004, pp. 51-52). Statutory rape is defined as “sexual intercourse with an unmarried person who is under the ‘age of consent’” (Cocca, 2004, p. 240). While the age of consent varies from country to country, in the UK, it is determined as 16 years old. A man having sexual intercourse with a girl under this age is automatically charged with rape, regardless of whether she agrees to the act or not. From the definition quoted above, it is inferred that if the person – a girl for the sake of this study – is married, then she is not under the age of consent, and therefore, having sex with her is legal. This begs the question as to how it is possible in the first place for a girl to be already married if she is not old enough to consent to sex. If she is under the age of consent, then the sexual intercourse her husband has with her, just like

any other man having sex with a ‘consenting’ unmarried girl, should also be considered rape.

This paradox has a long history behind it, a history which may elucidate why a married girl or woman ‘cannot’ be raped by her husband. To put it differently, “the right of a husband to rape his wife” (Purdy, 2004, p. 122) is a phenomenon that has been endorsed by the marital exemption, which can be traced to Sir Matthew Hale’s views, a jurist who influenced rape legislation until the late twelfth century. Hale infamously argued that “the husband cannot be guilty of a rape committed by himself upon his lawful wife, for by their mutual matrimonial consent and contract the wife hath given up herself in this kind unto her husband, which she cannot retract” (as quoted in Cardyn, 2004, p. 94). What Hale’s words state is that a married woman gives her consent to all future sexual activities happening during her marriage, and in saying ‘I do’ during the wedding ceremony, she willingly renounces the right to ever say ‘no’ to sex with her husband. In the nineteenth century, Victoria Woodhull wrote, “Of all the brutalities of the age, I know none so horrid as those sanctioned and defended by marriage. Night after night there are thousands of rapes committed” (as cited in Carey, 2004, p. 82). A century later, Margaret Sanger similarly remarks that “Woman was and is condemned to a system under which the lawful rapes exceed the unlawful ones a million to one” (as cited in Greer, 2018, p. 8). In England and Wales, marital rape was recognised as a crime only in 1991 (Kitzinger, 2009, p. 78), but it is still more difficult to obtain a conviction for such cases than for rape by a stranger, a kind of rape both the police and the judges ‘prefer’.

Marital rape falls into the broader category of acquaintance rape, in which the victim and the rapist know each other. It has also been called ‘real’ or ‘simple rape’ by Susan Estrich and ‘banal rape’ by Germaine Greer, both authors having been victims of rape themselves. Whereas Estrich approaches the issue from a legal perspective and insists that recognising as rape only cases when “the perpetrator was unknown to the victim and extrinsic violence or multiple assailants were involved” (Sielke, 2004c, p. 206) does not reflect the experience of most of the victims, Greer (2018) is more interested in the culture where non-consensual sex happens all the time. She defines ‘banal rape’ as “the kind that happens when a man has sex with a woman without concerning himself that she is not into it and doesn’t want it” (p. 43). Like many of Greer’s ideas, this can also be characterised as controversial. When asked in an interview for ABC News

Australia (2018) if her emphasis on this kind of abuse diminishes the impact a violent rape by a stranger has on a woman, Greer answers: “I think actually being used without consideration, without care, without conversation, without love, without tenderness for years on end is much more damaging than a sudden encounter with someone who has nothing to do with you” (3:00-3:15). In her book *On Rape* (2018), she clarifies that even if non-consensual sex is ordinary, this does not mean that it is not evil and damaging for women and men alike (p. 9). In the 1980s, Diana Russell appears to be the first to expose that “women were far more likely to be raped by husbands, lovers, boyfriends, and dates than by strangers” (Gavey, 1999, p. 60). In this broader category, ‘date rape’, a type of rape that involves “some level of romantic relationship” between the victim and the perpetrator has been singled out by Koss and Cook in the 1990s (Lovett & Horvath, 2009, p. 129). Relatively recent findings suggest that “in more than 90 percent of all rapes, perpetrator and victim are acquainted with each other prior to the assault” (Sielke, 2004c, p. 206). Taking these bits of information into consideration, it becomes apparent that everyday non-consensual sex is the area where more research and awareness is needed, and it is precisely in this wide spectrum where the concepts of ‘consent’ and ‘coercion’ are more meaningful.

Lately, theatre scholarship has become more conscious of the representation of consent and has addressed it mainly in relation to Shakespearean plays, the most read, staged, adapted, and taught British works of theatre. A telling example is Hailey Bachrach’s (2023) research project on the bard’s plays, early modern drama, and consent, which looks at both the ‘original’ texts and more contemporary productions through five key themes, namely acceptance, coercion, reclamation, rejection, and silence. Framing the necessity for such a project within the rising of the #MeToo movement, the platform Shakespeare and Consent (2023) brings together performance reviews, workshops, and interviews that question what has to change – and if it has to – in producing “these sometimes troubling plays” (n.p.). The historical play *Henry V*, for instance, drew the interest of Bachrach (2022) due to its final scene between King Henry V and Princess Katherine of France, which though “framed as a courtship (...) it is scaffolded with reminders that Katherine’s consent is a foregone conclusion, being debated outside the room at the political treaty table” (n.p.). Copland’s (2022) contribution to the project introduces her secondary-level teaching experience with *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, a

thought-provoking play with young characters and “a couple of scenarios in which characters’ agency is taken from them” (n.p.), mortals and fairies alike falling in and out of love through magic spells. Similarly, Bailey’s monograph entitled *Shakespeare on Consent* (2023) also centres around the fact that Shakespeare’s plays are taught to young people, from middle school up to college, and they can have an impact on the students’ understanding of consent. She notes that “the institutions that endorse and legitimate the teaching of Shakespeare are the same institutions that support structures and systems that perpetrate sexual and racial harm” (n.p.). The purpose of such initiatives is not to advocate for ‘cancelling’ Shakespeare but to use the plays he authored as a starting point for debate and for change in the sphere of sexual violence, at the core of which lies what counts as consent.

This study aims to engage in the ongoing debate around the multiple facets of consent through the plays *Immaculate* (2005) by Oliver Lansley, *Freak* (2014) by Anna Jordan, and *Consent* (2017a) by Nina Raine. The first play dramatises one of the founding pillars of Christianity from a radical standpoint, i.e., the Immaculate Conception of Jesus Christ. Set in a contemporary setting, *Immaculate* transcends the notion of consent altogether, and risking blasphemy spells out what the Holy Books do not: that Mary is not actually asked if she wants to carry God’s child. Unlike the Virgin Mary, who is a symbol of purity, in this contemporary retelling, the woman chosen to give birth to Jesus is a dominatrix who nevertheless does not engage in sexual intercourse with her clients. Similarly, the play *Freak* tells the story of a woman who works at a striptease club. In one event narrated in the play, she gives her ‘express’ consent to having sex with a group of men, but she does so while heavily intoxicated with alcohol and drugs. Her story is presented in parallel with that of her niece, a young girl who takes the first steps in discovering her sexuality. The final play, *Consent*, deals with acquaintance and marital rape, the area where consent is perhaps most meaningful. Moreover, it portrays how the legal system abuses victims of rape and manipulates language to dismiss cases of rape. Since consent is the central issue in rape, any given play that revolves around it can be discussed under this theoretical framework. Nevertheless, *Immaculate*, *Freak*, and *Consent* have been selected for their different perspectives as well as their less explored and subtler approaches to consent.

2.1. CHRIST'S SECOND COMING, LUCIFER'S SEED, OR MIA'S CHILD?

Have you actually ever thought about the underlying semantics of that? The *Virgin Mary*. You know how fucking poisonous the philosophy that lies at the heart of our entire culture is?

—*Yerma*, Simon Stone

There are many people who have thought about the toxic ground on which Western culture is built. Fewer, however, have gone so far as to argue against the sacred roots of Christianity. Departing from the rule, the female protagonist of Simon Stone's play *Yerma* (2017), whose words are quoted above, dares to state that "God was a fucker" (p. 72), but her rebellion lasts only briefly. She instantly regrets uttering these words and asks for forgiveness. Even Phyllis Tribble, in her prominent work *Texts of Terror: Literary-Feminist Readings of Biblical Narratives* (1984) where she extensively discusses rape, does not include the impregnation of the Virgin Mary amidst biblical 'texts of terror'. This is even more surprising since Tribble's work builds on the foundation laid by other thinkers such as Elizabeth Cady Stanton in *The Women's Bible* (1895;1898) and Margaret Brackenbury Crook in *Women and Religion* (1964), works critical of the position of the Virgin Mary in the Bible. Most distinctively, the book *Gyn/Ecology. The Metaethics of Radical Feminism* (1978) by Mary Daly, an American radical feminist philosopher and theologian, concerns itself with rape not only in Christianity but within "the universality of patriarchal religion itself" (p. xxiv). In her analysis of the 'Virgin Birth', she clarifies that "the holy ghost, the third person, who was consubstantial with him [God], impregnated Mary spiritually" (p. 83). The distinction between God and the Holy Ghost serves as an ingenious device to attribute to the latter acts that would not be in harmony with godly behaviour, such as impregnating virgins or older women who were not able to conceive, like John the Baptist's mother, Elizabeth. Positioning what happens to Mary within the wider mythical tradition of patriarchal rapes, of which most famous have to be those perpetrated by the Greek god Zeus, Daly concludes that Mary is the "Total Rape Victim—a pale derivative symbol disguising the conquered Goddess" (p. 84). Furthermore, she adds that "within the rapist christian myth of the Virgin Birth the role of Mary is utterly minimal; yet she is 'there'. She gives her unqualified 'consent'" (p. 85),

which is her acceptance of the news of the pregnancy when the Archangel Gabriel brings it to her.

Traditionally, literature approached the Immaculate Conception through a devotional perspective consistent with the religious dogmas of the time. According to Howe (1986), it appears that in Spain, particularly in the seventeenth century, a growing interest can be observed in devotional works related to the Virgin Mary. The doctrine was intensely debated, sometimes violently in the streets, by opposing religious groups, Franciscans and Jesuits defending Mary's virginity and Dominicans questioning it. Not surprisingly, art and theatre also reflected the prominence given by Christian debates around the Immaculate Conception, a noteworthy example being Lope de Vega and his numerous works on the subject. The playwright presents the main points of debate so as to appeal to popular taste in an entertaining manner. His intent is not "so much to convince his varied audiences of the truth of the Immaculate Conception as a dogma but, rather, to confirm them in their popular acceptance of it as an article of faith" (Howe, pp. 50-51). Mary herself does not really have a voice in all these debates and representations, which is in agreement with Daly's (1978) argument that "it should not be imagined that Mary had any real role in this conception and birth" (p. 83), her body being simply a receptacle waiting to be filled and emptied once it fulfils its role, i.e., procreation. During the English Reformation, a focus on Mary's body and the physical aspects of the birth of Jesus can be discerned, when "women and men (...) heard, read, and saw stories about the Nativity that were richer and more corporeal than the purely scriptural account, full of juicy details" (Fissell, 2004, p. 46). This tendency radically departs from the Catholic representation discussed by Daly as the rape of the mind/spirit (p. 85). In a way, bringing to the fore Mary's body and not seeing her simply as an abstract notion, also emphasises her humanity and the violation of her body and freewill.

Theatre performed in the past – as the examples from the Spanish Golden Age and English Reformation show – remains quite truthful to the biblical story of the Virgin Mary and her portrayal as a submissive young woman. Departing from the Bible and divinely impregnated virgins, more contemporary variations limit themselves to specific allusions to the story and assign to Mary-like figures different degrees of agency. For instance, the play *Threshold* (1992) by the group Derry Frontline, first performed prior to the arrival of the #MeToo movement, tells the story of Marie, who realises she has been raped after

having been knocked down unconscious by a man and falls pregnant as a result of it. The play signals its relation to the Immaculate Conception of Jesus through its third scene titled 'The Annunciation' (Fitzpatrick, 2013, p. 306), a reference to the Virgin Mary's submission to God's will when she learns that she will conceive his¹⁷ son. Unlike her, Marie does not accept bringing a child into the world she lives in, which is Northern Ireland during the sectarian conflict called the Troubles. When she tells her priest friend that she was raped and is now four months pregnant, he offers to give her money for an abortion – something the Catholic Church condemns – but “she rejects abortion because it will only hide her experience and obscure the wider problems of violence” (Fitzpatrick, p. 306). What she needs him to do instead of ‘discreetly’ giving her money for an abortion is to speak publicly to the parish about “the violence that makes abortion necessary” (Derry Frontline, 2021, 25:56). Refusing to end the pregnancy, Marie decides to go on a hunger strike or ‘freedom strike’. This action gives her some agency over what has happened to her, at the same time, enhancing the prospect of bringing awareness to the pervasiveness of violence. ‘Private’ violence, unlike the one out into the open that characterises Northern Ireland at the time when the story is set, usually remains hidden from view. Marie's story becomes known to the community through her anonymous letters that are broadcasted by the local radio. In the last scene she appears, her priest friend visits her and their roles are reversed: this time he asks for her blessing. At that moment, she realises that if she dies during the hunger strike, her community will transform her “into a martyr, a portrait of a holy woman, another Virgin Mary” (2:47:20). Marie's attitude suggests that this glorification of women's suffering and sacrifice is the last thing she wants and the last thing that people need. Particularly since every woman in Derry could have been in her place, she needs to remain anonymous in order to inspire people to continue the fight against not only the ‘public’ violence but also the ‘private’.

From an entirely different standpoint and, at first glimpse, with no apparent connection to the biblical story apart from the title, *An Immaculate Misconception* (2004) tells the story of a woman who takes absolute control over her body. Written by a male scientist, Dr. Carl Djerassi, widely known as ‘the father of the pill’ for his contribution to the development of oral contraception, the play can be described as a dialogue on

¹⁷ In this study, masculine pronouns are employed when referring to God for the reason that in the literary works and the critical texts discussed here, God is perceived as a male figure.

reproductive ethics. Dr. Melanie Laidlaw is a scientist who developed the first use of intracytoplasmic sperm injection (ICSI¹⁸), an actual technique used mainly in cases of male infertility where a single sperm is directly injected into a single egg¹⁹. Melanie has an affair with a married man who lives on a different continent. They occasionally meet when he visits the United States and after one night together, although he tells her that he is infertile, she hides the condom they had used and takes it to the laboratory. She intends to inject his sperm into her own egg and asks the help of Dr. Felix Frankenthaler, a friend and a renowned infertility expert, for the ICSI procedure and also to monitor the pregnancy to see if the fertilisation is a success. He raises many ethical questions about the fact that *she* is the first woman to test the technique and that the ‘donor’ of the sperm did not consent to it. During the procedure, however, when Melanie is absent, Felix injects without her knowing his sperm into one of the eggs collected from her.

The main issue in the play is related to the ethics of what she does in order to have a child, i.e., the act of stealing the sperm of her lover and the central moment is when she, a woman, injects sperm into her own egg with a phallic object. Her decision to cut any communication with the ‘uninformed donor of the sperm’ suggests that she has absolute control over her body, pregnancy, and the resulting child, until Felix, a man, decides to interfere in the process. He has no interest in having a child with Melanie but simply wishes to become the father of the first ICSI baby in history. Nevertheless, Melanie does not give him this satisfaction because she refuses to do a paternity test. What makes the female protagonist of *An Immaculate Misconception* similar to the Virgin Mary is that she does not have a say in being impregnated with this particular man’s sperm. Though there is no physical contact and he does not rape her in the strict definition of the term, his intervention in the fertilisation process can be perceived as rape. Yet, in that case, what she does to her lover would also be rape. The fact that at the end of the play, he is happy to raise the baby together on finding out about what she has done does not make up for her unethical behaviour. Calling both Melanie’s and Felix’s intrusive acts rape may seem like an overstretch. Perhaps the term ‘violation’ – which is in fact employed as a descriptive word for the term ‘rape’ – may be a more suitable alternative, but even if there

¹⁸ In reality, the technique was developed by Dr. Gianpiero Palermo at the Vrije University in Brussels.

¹⁹ ICSI is different from in vitro fertilisation (IVF) where a larger number of eggs is combined with sperm and allowed to be fertilised on their own in the laboratory.

is no sex involved, in both cases the sexual context exists: Melanie steals the sperm of her lover after having sexual intercourse, Felix injects his sperm in her egg in a symbolic representation of the sexual act. As such, the closest work available to describe these actions has to be rape.

In contrast to the realism of *Threshold* and *An Immaculate Misconception*, the contemporary play on which this study focuses presents a story closely related to the Bible and the supernatural. Authored and directed by Oliver Lansley, *Immaculate* premiered in 2005 at the Gilded Balloon during the Edinburgh Festival Fringe. It was performed by Les Enfants Terribles Theatre Company which was established by the playwright in 2002. The action is set in Mia's small bedsit with minimum furniture comprised of two chairs, a hatstand, and a Greek column with a phone on it. The Greek atmosphere is enhanced by a Classical Greek Chorus performed by the same actors who portray Michael, Gabriel, Lucifer, and Rebecca. The first of the two acts begins with the Chorus introducing Mia, a young woman whose life is "not one of solitude but vice / Indulgence presiding over sacrifice". Even so, she is chosen "to incubate / A child they say had greatness as his fate" (Lansley, 2006, Act One). Not having had sex for more than nine months, since she broke up with her boyfriend Michael, Mia is perplexed to find herself pregnant. When the Archangel Gabriel knocks at her door – something unexpected from an angel – she believes him to be a client. During their dialogue, it becomes apparent that Mia works as a dominatrix, but she wants him to know that she is not "a whore" (Act One) and does not have sex with her clients. He explains that he comes to inform her that the child she is carrying is God's, something she understandably has trouble accepting. Her ex-boyfriend appears and against any logic (since they broke up a long time ago), he panics that he might be the father. When he finally understands that it has nothing to do with him, Lucifer enters the room declaring that he is the father and that he is there for his baby. The child now becomes a prize claimed by both God and the Devil. Mia is sure she never saw him in her life and definitely did not have sex with him, but he tells her that one night he took the body of a mortal, Gary Goodman, and they spent the night together after meeting at a bar.

The second act starts with a retrospective scene portraying the moment Mia and Gary met at the bar. This technique of interrupting the story with scenes from the past is occasionally employed in the play to make the current events more straightforward. The

role of Gary, an unsympathetic man Mia used to go to school with, is performed by Lansley himself. When Mia accuses Lucifer, saying, “you must have drugged me or something, used some black magic, or your devil powers to seduce me”, he states that he took Gary’s body much later in the evening and by that time “there wasn’t a lot of seducing needed” (Act Two). During this confusion, Mia’s best friend Rebecca comes to confess that she is in a relationship with Michael. The role of Rebecca can be interpreted as a shy attempt to include another female character in the male-dominated world that Mia finds herself in, but in essence, it appears to have no contribution to the story apart from creating more chaos in an already bewildering situation. Her entrance is followed by Gary’s who sees Mia’s belly and declares his excitement at the prospect of having a baby together. The Archangel Gabriel explains to him what really happened and then leaves to spread the news of this miracle. Overwhelmed by what is going on inside and around her, Mia utters the central argument of the play, that God cannot impregnate her without her permission and if he did, this would be rape. She contemplates the possibility of having an abortion but the Chorus announces another way out, suicide, which seems to be what everyone expects. Nevertheless, she bluntly says that she will not end her life just because she was “knocked up” (Act Two). The play ends with Gary speaking with journalists about the Second Coming of Jesus, followed by a baby’s cry and a second one soon joining in.

In the context of religion, laughter is usually deemed inappropriate as religious issues mostly require seriousness and contemplation. This perception could spring from the fact that, as Buckley (2003) points out, “the Bible affords little comfort to those who love laughter” (n.p.); in the Bible²⁰, laughing is perceived as an indication that mourning and weeping will follow (Luke 6:25). Furthermore, according to Bergson (1996), “the comic does not exist outside the pale of what is strictly *human*” (p. 472, emphasis in original) and since the quintessence of religion is the figure of God who is not human, it follows that God and his actions cannot be the subject of laughter. To quote Bergson once more, in laughter “we always find an unavowed intention to humiliate, and consequently to correct (...)” (p. 477); yet, ‘correcting’ and ‘humiliating’ are neither compatible with a figure that is supposed to represent perfection nor advisable since it can lead to being

²⁰ ‘Religion’ is not restricted to Christianity and the Bible, but the play *Immaculate* appears to present the Immaculate Conception of Jesus from this standpoint.

punished by God. Laughter is also – or at least it should be – the least expected and the most inappropriate reaction when it comes to rape. In her discussion of the portrayal of rape in New Comedy, Pierce (2002) contrasts Greek and Roman writers – and presumably their audiences – to modern Western audiences. For ancient writers, rape “seems to be little more than an incidental occurrence or convenient plot device” and is not intended to inspire “feelings of revulsion”, whereas in today’s times, “the issue of rape is emotive and tends to evoke feelings of abhorrence and shock”. The author goes even further and argues that “to find it in a comedy is singularly unnerving” (p. 163). Nonetheless, *Immaculate*, a play both about religion and rape, challenges this understanding.

The readers of the play are encouraged to perceive it as “a comedy variation on the virgin birth” (Drama Online, n.p.). Additionally, certain directions in the text, such as “to use actual doors wherever possible (...) for maximum comic effect” (Lansley, 2006, Setting) or “a novelty ringtone may be used for added comic effect” (Act One) call for such an organisation of the production elements that they would bring out humour. However, these directions work only in relation to the performance and have less to no effect on the readers of the play text, even if Gurtler (2013) thinks that Lansley’s writing “hits the comic tone with a perfect punch that sends the audience into an unstoppable fit of laughter” (n.p.). There are certain aspects in the text that could be perceived as humorous, like the absurdity of the events, the exaggerated reactions on the part of the characters, and perhaps more obviously, the indecent and irreverent language. For instance, after the readers are informed by the Chorus that Mia is the woman who will carry God’s child, the first words of this ‘chosen woman’ are “fuck off” (Act One) or in another instance, in reaction to a phone that would not stop ringing, her words are followed by a toilet flushing. Mia describes the fact that she was impregnated with God’s child not in pious words, not as something to be in awe of, but through the slang expression of being ‘knocked up’. Another example of funny moments is when Mia demands that the Archangel Gabriel prove his angelic nature by showing his wings and he replies “... I don’t have them with me” (Act One). Nevertheless, he is equipped with a scroll – a phallic symbol – containing Mia’s details such as her name and date of birth to prove that she is indeed the woman he was sent to find. Another example of a comic moment is when Michael sees Mia’s belly and has an out-of-place reaction even if they had broken up over nine months ago:

Michael: I don't believe this, how did this happen? I told you to be careful, I asked you every time if it was OK, If you were on the pill, You promised me... Oh God, I see it, That's what this is... THIS IS ENTRAPMENT, You're trying to get me back, you thought a baby would...OH YEAH, OH WELL, I'M ON TO YOU, MISSY. (Act One, emphasis in original)

There is nothing funny about the misogyny of his words, but the fact that he does not pause between the sentences to think about the validity of his thoughts – the lack of full stops enhancing this impression – is to a certain degree, amusing. However, it is doubtful that such examples would send the readers into a fit of laughter.

The reviews of various performances of the play, on the other hand, abound in descriptions of its extremely comic nature, like Gurtler's admittance that "I actually laughed so much I cried a little" (n.p.). This particular review refers to the White Bear Theatre's production in Kennington which Gurtler describes as "intimate and hysterically funny" (n.p.). In a similar vein, Shmatenko (2017) states that "the outrageous comedy of *Immaculate* hardly ever gave us a moment to gasp for breath from all the unstoppable laughter" (n.p., emphasis in original); the review seemingly referring to the production by the ADC Theatre at the University of Cambridge. The fact that the text does not bring about such a reaction could be in part attributed to Shmatenko's warning that the play "is carved out for those who can truly appreciate witty one-liners, bitter sarcasm, over-the-top slapstick, relentless swearing and even somewhat childish humour" (n.p.), but it can mainly be explained by the lack of those elements that only a performance can incorporate, such as sounds, lights, face expressions, pauses, and body language. Comedy can and has often been used as a subversive device without this meaning that it does not aim to entertain as well. The play questions religious beliefs and the portrayal of women in religion, but based on the reviews cited here, the play is often referred to as a successful comedy too. Even though the text is not as comic as the performance – a fact underlined throughout these pages – the playwright, being both the director and the producer of the play, seems to suggest that he intended *Immaculate* to be more comic and less dramatic. Yet, how suitable is the topic of rape for comedy? Is it more acceptable when it does not have to do with physical violence? To what extent could a piece of theatre dealing with a violent gang rape, for instance, be the subject of laughter? Such questions render the premise of any play difficult and problematic since risibility appears to be in contradiction with the contemporary understanding of the seriousness of the subject of rape.

Nevertheless, in this particular instance, the elements related to adapting an ancient biblical story for contemporary audiences are those that render the play a comic piece of theatre, not the issue of rape per se.

According to Shmatenko's review, being a comedy does not obscure the fact that – unlike the biblical story that inspired it and its traditional interpretations – this is a play about a young woman who is impregnated without her consent:

The greatest achievement of this production of *Immaculate* is its ability to keep us focused on the serious issue at the heart of the play even when it seems buried underneath the thick layer of comedy – and that issue is the baby at the centre of it all and the mother who never consented to its conception but has no choice but to take care of it single-handedly once it emerges into the world. Mia's daring confidence, with which she faces unforeseen circumstances, is a quality to look up to – it is this which makes not only her character but also the play itself so memorable. (n.p., emphasis in original)

However, it can be argued that the text by itself makes it easier to perceive the play's engagement with a serious matter more than the performance does. Particularly towards the end of the play, the playwright crafts for Mia a long monologue that transcends beyond the comic moments that might have previously occurred. In a direct address to the audience, Mia makes several crucial remarks about a woman's right to choose what happens to her body—a choice that was snatched from her. Through metaphors for a woman's body, such as a foreign state and a sacred sanctuary, she defends her fundamental human rights. Furthermore, she underlines what a woman's body is not, i.e., a storage space, a greenhouse, and an empty vessel, an object intended to protect and nurture the seed a man decides to place in there. Mia's words could be understood as a late response to her initial interaction with the Archangel Gabriel when he compares her with a "refurbished house" (Act One).

In the last scene, what happens to her is brought into the open for everyone to see through the symbolic use of the blinding light of a helicopter with cameras when her story is made public via journalism. Yet, the person interviewed is Gary, a man who does not pause for a second to question the terrifying and appalling situation in which Mia finds herself, but sees only the miraculous aspect of it. It would appear that history repeats itself and the media will confine itself to this aspect, just as it traditionally was (and still is) the case with the religious debates on the Virgin Mary's Immaculate Conception of Jesus. The reporter speaks about the Second Coming, about "the man who first broke the story",

i.e., Gary, and about “the biggest news story” that “would truly change the world” (Act Two). During the interview, Gary himself also refers just to the Archangel Gabriel and the coming of Jesus. There is absolutely no mention of the woman who finds herself pregnant without having consented to it, which points out to the traditional absence of the women’s voice in rape narratives, be they fictional or real, an absence that only recently started to be challenged.

In line with the one-sided media coverage of Mia’s pregnancy as merely the sign of Jesus’ Second Coming, the people in Mia’s life focus their attention on certain aspects of the situation in which she finds herself, such as her presumed lack of protection during sexual intercourse and more importantly her knowledge (or lack thereof) the paternity of the baby. Among these biased and judgemental voices, Mia alone considers what happened to her as a violation of her body and will. What is ironic in this regard is that the Archangel Gabriel repeatedly mentions the risk of “compromising the [human beings’] free will” (Act One) as the explanation for God’s refusal to prove his existence beyond any doubt. Yet, there appears to be no impediment to compromising Mia’s free will in the process of giving birth to his son. Furthermore, nobody makes any comment when, towards the end of the play, she clearly calls what happened to her as rape. A shy exception is reflected in the moment Rebecca learns about the miraculous context of Mia’s pregnancy and makes a brief comment that God “just impregnates at will, a girl he barely even knows” (Act Two). However, her comment is not meant as a reflection of her support towards Mia, being instead a critique aimed at the way God interacts with his messenger, the Archangel Gabriel; Rebecca’s following words are “then sends you [Gabriel] down to sort out the mess” (Act Two). She takes issue with the fact that God gives minimal information to the Archangel Gabriel before sending him on such missions, but she does not seem to have any objection to God offering no information to Mia before impregnating her.

Although throughout the play the focus seems to be on God’s implication in Mia’s pregnancy, there are three candidates for the baby she carries. Chronologically, the first candidate is Mia’s ex-boyfriend; however, this possibility is rapidly dismissed. When Michael finally realises that the baby cannot be his – having been sent by God and since they broke up more than nine months ago– he accuses Mia of narcissism in accepting that she may be the ‘new Virgin Mary’: “Christ, your ego astounds me! Anyone else would

laugh him out of the fucking country, but you...” (Act One). Later on, he gives more details to the audience about what he thinks about Mia: “This is so typical of her. She always has to be different, she can’t do things the normal way, no ... (...) She has a baby; she can’t just have any baby, no, it has to be ‘God’s’ baby” (Act One). However, Mia does not feel ‘honoured’ to be in this position and accepts this impossible explanation simply because according to her, there is no other possible explanation (though soon after it becomes clear that she actually had sexual intercourse during the past nine months, with Gary/Lucifer). The second candidate for the paternity of Mia’s baby is God. In the Bible, when the Archangel Michael informs Mary that she carries the son of God, she replies: “I am the Lord’s servant” (Luke 1:38). To convince her about the possibility of having conceived while a virgin, the Archangel Gabriel offers to Mary the example of the old couple, Elizabeth and Zechariah, who have been granted the wish to have a child. However, Zechariah does not believe the news when the Archangel Gabriel appears to him and as a consequence, he is punished with not being able to speak until the birth of his son. The two stories being presented in the same biblical passage serves as a warning message that, if Mary had had an ‘improper’ reaction, she would have been punished as well. The imbalance of power between human beings and God makes any refusal of God’s explicit will a futile exercise. Similarly, the contemporary version of the Virgin Mary, Mia, has to accept that what the Archangel Gabriel tells her is true, but she does so in a resistant, not compliant, manner.

The last candidate for the baby’s paternity is represented by the dyad Gary/Lucifer. The rape by God may be a symbolic one, but the fact that Lucifer takes Gary’s body without Mia’s consent and has sexual intercourse with her is literal rape. What exactly transpires between Mia and Gary before Lucifer’s arrival is not clear. Mia seems to have totally blocked out the memory of what happened that night at the bar, but what is clear is that she was very drunk²¹. Gary can also be perceived as a victim in the sense that he did not give his consent for Lucifer to take possession of his body; nevertheless, unlike Mia, he remembers that they had sexual intercourse. Furthermore, Gary starts by declaring that he loves her, but when he learns about God’s role in the pregnancy, he is

²¹ The ethical and legal issues arising from having sexual intercourse with a woman who is not in a physical or mental state compatible with giving informed consent are the subject of the following play discussed in this study, *Freak* by Anna Jordan. For this reason, a more detailed analysis and theoretical considerations of this particular aspect of consent will be provided there.

worried that his soul needs saving because he has sex with her without being married and accuses Mia of tricking him. His reaction implies that he perceives himself as a victim; surprisingly, not the victim of Lucifer, but of Mia. Similarly, Michael also feels that she tries to entrap him and even the Archangel Gabriel feels betrayed that she had sexual intercourse with the enemy, i.e., Lucifer. Once again, there is no discussion about the fact that she was not aware that Lucifer was not the man she consented to have sexual intercourse with. The significant issue is ‘the bigger picture’ and the repercussions of bringing into the world a child who is claimed both by God and Lucifer. The answer to this dilemma is implied in the last two lines of the play: “We hear a baby cry. / Moments later, a second baby joins in” (Act Two). Mia is worried that having God’s or Lucifer’s child will lead to more division in the world, but the fact that she gives birth to twins brings about a sense of reconciliation, of hope that the world does not have to choose one side or another, that the ‘good’ and the ‘bad’ are simply labels for the same essence: humanity.

Neither the comic nature of the play nor the hopeful ending conceals the aspect of lack of consent in the impregnation of Mia. The representation of the female character departs from the biblical story of the Virgin Mary and her submission to God’s will. Mary’s impregnation can be defined as a symbolic representation of rape, and the same could be argued about Mia as well. However, in the play *Immaculate*, God is not the only one to interfere with her right to choose what happens to her body; Lucifer unquestionably acts against her free will and gives a more down-to-earth dimension to God’s symbolic rape. Mia’s actions are not as politically driven as Marie’s from the play previously discussed, *Threshold*, but her character too is characterised by agency and through her decision not to have an abortion and not to commit suicide (which seems like the two most probable outcomes), she makes a statement of self-determination. Mia appears in dialogue with the other contemporary Mary-like figures mentioned in this study who defend their right to choose how their story goes on after being raped, physically or symbolically, and who speak up against any system or person that may try to stop them, be they military forces and religious rigidity (as is the case with Marie in *Threshold*), scientific community (as is the case with Melanie in *Immaculate Misconception*), or even God and Lucifer themselves.

2.2. 'FEELING LIKE A PIECE OF MEAT' IN ANNA JORDAN'S PLAY *FREAK*

Described by the prominent theatre critic Lyn Gardner (2014) broadly as “the coming thing” (para. 3), the British playwright Anna Jordan has not only produced plays for the theatre; she is also the Artistic Director of Without a Paddle Theatre, Associate Director at Theatre503, a teacher of acting and playwriting, and a writer for the television. Among her stage plays are *Yen*, winner of the Bruntwood Prize for Playwriting in 2013, *Chicken Shop* (2014), and *Freak* (2014). Jordan's writing is permeated by specific themes such as family, coming of age, sexuality, and pornography. *Yen*, for instance, is a play about two teenage boys who live alone and who spend their time watching hardcore pornography and playing violent video games. One of the boys assaults their neighbour Jennifer, perhaps even rapes her, whereas the other boy takes his anger and frustration on the family dog, a silent victim in this domestic drama. According to the magazine *Culture Whisper*, Jordan states that she does not believe “in writing plays without humour and hope” (as quoted in CW Contributor, 2014, para. 1). Yet, there seems to be little to no hope in the play *Chicken Shop*. Beginning again with a teenage boy consuming pornographic materials, the play revolves around the life of Hendrix. In an attempt to prove his masculinity, he visits a brothel where he meets Luminita from Moldova, a victim of human trafficking by an Albanian man. Gardner (2014) characterises the play as lacking focus: “It's never clear whether this play is about young masculinity, poor parenting or sexual exploitation, and while it's fine for it to be about all three, it flits around without ever finding something to settle on” (para. 4). As justified as it may be, Gardner's comment is also quite restrictive, demanding clarity and conclusions as well as imposing standards on creativity. In fact, *Chicken Shop* is a play that shows precisely how young masculinity, poor parenting, and sexual exploitation are interconnected. The play appears to mirror the complexities and nuances of our contemporary society, where nothing is singular in its meaning.

Both plays, *Yen* and *Chicken Shop*, set the tone of the story in relation to young men as consumers of pornography publicised in movies or magazines. Pornography is tackled again by Jordan in *Freak* (2014), a play written the same year as *Chicken Shop*, but this time from a female perspective. Before delving into the play's analysis, this study will elucidate how feminist academic research addresses the subject of pornography and the

subsequent reactions of theatrical productions to it. The plays *Masterpieces* (1991a) by Sarah Daniels and *The Censor* (1998) by Antony Neilson will be employed to illustrate two opposing views on the issue. The impact of pornography on both men and women has been discussed extensively in the works of the prominent anti-pornography feminist scholars, Catharine A. MacKinnon and Andrea Dworkin. Alongside scholarly contribution to the field, the two activists also prepared the amendment to the Human Rights Ordinance of the City of Minneapolis in which they define pornography as follows:

The graphic, sexually explicit subordination of women whether in pictures or in words that also includes one or more of the following: women are presented dehumanized as sexual objects, things, or commodities; or women are presented as sexual objects who enjoy pain or humiliation; or women are presented as sexual objects who experience sexual pleasure in being raped, or women are presented as sexual objects tied up or cut up or mutilated or bruised or physically hurt; or women are presented in postures of sexual submission; or women's body parts are exhibited such that women are reduced to those parts; or women are presented being penetrated by objects or animals; or women are presented in scenarios of degradation, injury, abasement, torture, shown as filthy or inferior, bleeding, bruised, or hurt in a context that makes these conditions sexual. (as cited in Dworkin, 1985, p. 29)

This complex definition aims to cover every possible aspect of pornography that contributes to the sexual exploitation of women without leaving any space for an interpretation of pornography that may render it as a form of artistic expression or simply a profession like any other. Feminist dramatists have also expressed concerns regarding the influence of pornography and its potential for harm. “Written at the height of the feminist antipornography movement” (Gilleman, 2010, p. 76), Sarah Daniels’ *Masterpieces* was produced by the Royal Court Theatre Upstairs in October 1983. Akin to MacKinnon and Dworkin’s elaborate definition of pornography, Daniels (1991b) also tried “to ensure that nobody could misinterpret *Masterpieces*” (Introduction to Plays 1, n.p.). The play shows how watching *Snuff* (1975) – a movie that belongs to a genre with the same title that purports to show actual acts of sexual murder – can lead a woman, Rowena, to kill a complete stranger. Watching the movie might have been the tipping point, but Rowena’s act builds upon a climate of misogynistic jokes and a pandemic of pornographic magazines and movies. MacKinnon (1993) holds that “sooner or later, in one way or another, the consumers want to live out the pornography in three dimensions.

Sooner or later, in one way or another, they do” (p. 102). Accordingly, Gilleman (2010) states that Daniels’ play disproves that “pornography is (...) an innocent fantasy or an idea”; on the contrary, “in glorifying real acts of violence against women, pornography teaches men to objectify women” (p. 80). This argument stands in stark contrast to one of the play’s character’s view that “alcohol and cigarettes can kill people, looking at pictures never hurt anyone” (Scene 1). In the play, however, looking at pictures is what kills the man Rowena pushes on the rails of a train.

The primary focus of the play is not the perpetration of violence by women against men, but rather the inverse scenario. In the last scene, a policewoman tells Rowena that the snuff movie she saw is not simply a movie, not simply pictures, but reality. As a result of her profession, she has seen “hundreds of photos of little girls, young women, middle-aged women, old women...with torn genitals, ripped vaginas, mutilated beyond recognition” (Scene 17). One could argue that the actual events are not necessarily an imitation of violent movies such as *Snuff*, but that such a movie – and pornography in general – imitates real life. However, this argument could potentially hold merit under the condition that the events portrayed on screen are fictional rather than real. In pornography, however, what happens is real both for the women who are filmed and for the men²² who consume it, who get aroused by it, who masturbate, and who ejaculate as a result (even though not necessarily all men would act upon all the horrible ways in which women are objectified and humiliated in pornographic representations).

In reaction to the anti-pornography feminism expressed in the views of MacKinnon and Dworkin, in recent years, “pro-pornography academics have suggested that pornography is liberating, and so it is not about justice [as anti-pornography feminists hold], or morality [as religious conservatives hold], but sexual freedom” (Adams, 2004, p. 151). At the beginning of the play *Masterpieces*, Rowena expresses what can be called liberal views on the subject when she says, “I suppose if women want to do it and men want to look at it, where’s the harm?” (Scene One), or, “Maybe it does have a positive side. To enable inadequate men to act out their fantasies, save them [*the men*] from attacking anyone on the street” (Scene One, emphasis added). Nevertheless, at that moment, Rowena admits that she has never really considered the matter and she has never

²² This does not mean that women cannot be the consumers of pornography, but “the basic model and preponderant pornographic offerings cater to men” (Adams, 2004, p. 152).

seen such materials. Not necessarily an advocate of pornography, the British playwright and feminist April de Angelis argues that “there is nothing actually wrong with erotic material”, but “the way that women are used in the industry” is wrong (as quoted in Stephenson & Langridge, 1997, n.p.). A play that, in a way, presents the opposite side of the arguments made in *Masterpieces*, i.e., that there is something wrong with erotic material, is Anthony Neilson’s work *The Censor*. Written in 1997, “by a man at the height of feminist dissension over pornography” (Gilleman, 2010, p. 76), *The Censor* (1998) reverses the traditional roles of the pornographer from male to female. Miss Fontaine is the director of a movie containing “one sex scene after another” (Scene 3) who tries to convince a censor that there is a story behind them. For her, “minds not pictures are pornographic” (Gilleman, 2010, p. 87) and for this reason, ‘pornographic minds’ fail to see the stories behind the images. Thus, there is nothing wrong with the pictures themselves; the problem stems from the minds of the consumers. Nevertheless, such a philosophy is also blind to the *other* stories behind pornography, the stories of women who are forced into being a part of it, directly or not. John Berger famously argues that “the way we see things is affected by what we know or what we believe” (as cited in Berger et al., 1972, p. 8). Once a person becomes aware of what takes place behind the images, they *know* and it is difficult to see anything else but the abuse of women. Likewise, once she sees the extremes to which pornography can go in its objectification and abuse of the female body, the most horrible expression being the rape, torture, and purported murder of women in snuff movies, Rowena from *Masterpieces* cannot unsee it.

The subtle ways pornography forces women, from a very young age, to adhere to certain standards of sexuality imposed by pornographic images, to view themselves as playing a role in a porn movie while being intimate with a man or even when they are alone, are presented in Anna Jordan’s play, *Freak*. *Freak* was first produced by Theatre503 and Polly Ingham Productions at Assembly George Square during the Edinburgh Festival Fringe in August 2014 and at Theatre503, London, in September 2014 under the direction of the playwright. Structured around seven short scenes, the play tells the stories of Georgie and Leah, an aunt and her niece. Although their monologues delivered from their beds run parallel to each other at first, later, their voices start to overlap until they can finally communicate. Georgie is a thirty-year-old woman who

navigates a mental health crisis: her father is dead, her boyfriend breaks up with her, and she feels completely alone in the world. This results in a process of self-destruction, drinking, using drugs, and not eating properly. She leaves her job, spends the days masturbating on TV shows with apparently nothing erotic in them (*Homes under the Hammer* for instance, a British factual renovation and auction television series screened on BBC One in the mornings), and takes up a new job as a dancer at a ‘gentlemen’s’ club. She finds it very exciting to dance in front of men and be the centre of their attention, which makes her feel in control over their desire. Georgie describes her life as “an exclusive nocturnal parallel universe” (Leah’s naked experience²³). During the day, she watches porn, ignores her sister’s phone calls, eats noodles, drinks tea and vodka, and prepares her body for the night. The peaking point of the play is titled ‘The event’ and it narrates the night when Georgie meets “a group of stags in the VIP” (The event). She decides to join them for a drink, but they end up at a house for more drinks and cocaine. Soon after, they engage in a “textbook porno” (The event) where Georgie sees herself as the star. The situation escalates, one of them placing a glass bottle in her vagina, something she comprehends only upon hearing the glass breaking on a wall. Slowly, they lose interest and leave her on the floor. When she comes to her senses, she finds forty pounds next to her coat and takes a taxi to go home. At the end of the scene, Georgie and Leah make eye contact for the first time and switch beds, which means Georgie is now in her sister’s home to recover from a “nervous breakdown” (The aftermath).

Running in parallel to Georgie’s story, Leah’s story until the moment she has to give her bed up for the sake of Georgie, revolves around her attempts to discover her body and sexuality. A fifteen-year-old girl, Leah is obsessed with bodily hair particularly pubic hair, which she ‘Veets’ (epilates by using the hair removal cream Veet) daily. She is worried that her new boyfriend Luke, “the fittest most popular boy in year eleven” (Leah plucks), may touch her genital area and feel the hair. Every Saturday, when her family is away, Luke comes to her bedroom where they experience something sexually new. They also exchange messages and pictures with sexual content via Snapchat. In the meantime, Leah does not participate in the moments her parents and brother spend together, instead watching porn and comparing her bodily image with the ones she sees depicted in the

²³ The scenes have designated titles instead of numbers.

videos. She uses her phone camera to record herself, to see how her genital area looks, and to practice how she would look during an orgasm. In Leah's case, 'the event' is losing her virginity to Luke, which feels like an amalgam of excitement, disgust, and surprise.

After Georgie and Leah switch beds, nothing much happens in Georgie's life. Her narrative continues as a reflective exercise on her past. However, more distressful experiences await Leah. Since her bedroom is no longer available and Luke's house is not an option either, they go to Ashden's house – presumably a male friend of Luke – to have sexual intercourse. When Luke goes to the bathroom, this other boy enters the room and upon Luke's return, they start playing catch with Leah's top, while she stays there helpless in her jeans and bra. They all laugh about it and pretend that nothing has happened. It is later implied that her boyfriend suggests thanking Ashden for his hospitality through some sexual service as Leah's immediate sentence after mentioning this 'present' is: "Leanne [another colleague of theirs] sucked Luke off while Ashden fucked her in a cupboard on New Year's Eve" (The aftermath).

During the play's last scene, Georgie and Leah talk to each other and Leah insists on knowing exactly what happened to Georgie. Her insistence seems to spring from the fact that she has a secret she cannot share with anyone else and feels that the two of them might have a chance to understand each other. Georgie is reluctant to listen to her secret because she feels incapable of offering any helpful advice. Nevertheless, Leah tells her that she was drunk and "LET SOPHIE GO DOWN" on her (Going home, emphasis in original). When she refuses to do something Luke wants – it is not specified what – he breaks up with her and she looks for comfort in her best friend Sophie. Sophie describes how "an oboe player went down on her" (Going home) at the music camp and how it felt and asks Leah if she wants to try it as well, something she accepts. After this event, she stops returning Sophie's calls and worries that she might be gay. Georgie assures her that there is nothing wrong with having different kinds of experiences and the play ends with both characters holding out the hope that everything will be all right in the end.

At first glance, the relevance of including the play *Freak* in a study that discusses the representation of rape may not be that obvious. Georgie willingly engages in sexual activity with 'the group of stags'. Before the group sex begins, she recalls having the feeling of being "ready for anything". Furthermore, one of the men, "a little older, grey

around the sides” explicitly asks her if she wants to go on, saying, “Sweetheart, are you sure about this?”. In response, she gives her consent in the following way: “I silence his fears with a long French kiss, the kind reserved for boyfriends or husbands only. I tell him I want him to fuck me first” (The event). Though her response does not include the word ‘yes’ or something to that effect, her consent can be characterised as an express one – as opposed to an implied one – meaning that it is given directly and “clearly demonstrates an accession of the will” of Georgie (Block, 2004, p. 51). She seems aware of what she gets into and is willing, even eager, to do it. Additionally, the audience is privy to her inner monologue and reflections on the incident, leaving no question regarding her consent, thereby providing a perspective impartial to the potential distortion by the men to safeguard against a potential accusation of rape. Yet, as previously mentioned, for a person’s consent to be valid, they must be “mentally and physically capable of granting consent”. This capacity can be demonstrated by this person’s “ability to exercise reasonable judgement in comprehending what is being done to her” (Block, 2004, p. 51). Georgie’s severely impaired mental and physical state due to alcohol and drug consumption prior to engaging in group sex raises significant concerns about her ability to provide valid consent.

The connection between alcohol and rape has been documented in various contexts. The fact that it helps overcome sexual inhibition affects both the rapist, who feels “more powerful” (Szczesniak, 2004, p. 12), and the victim who may not realise the danger she finds herself in. For this reason, many rapists “mindful of alcohol’s effects, (...) have offered alcohol and drugs in order to obtain a woman’s sexual consent” (Szczesniak, 2004, p. 12). In the context of the play, the men are not the ones who approach Georgie; she is the one who goes to their table to have a drink with them. Only afterwards, when they all go to the house, do they offer her more alcohol and cocaine, a combination which has the effect of lowering any remaining inhibition and reasoning for both parties. Georgie is not the only one who changes her behaviour due to this high level of intoxication; on her way out, she sees one of the men, the ‘stag’, crying. This reaction seems to suggest that he regrets or feels ashamed of what has previously happened. In a study researching the general problem of men in groups, Kimmel (2003) asks: “What is it about groups that seems to bring out the worst in men?” (p. 268). This behavioural change is also noticeable in the play. Fitzpatrick (2018) notes that “the roughness of one

of the men rapidly becomes part of the group's bonding experience" (p. 223). According to Georgie, the stag does to her "all the things his girlfriend won't let him do (...) The others follow his lead" (The event). Acting as a group makes the five men compete over who gets more of Georgie's bodily parts, but their boldness vanishes when the group breaks down to being just individuals no longer under the leadership of the stag. The playwright's portrayal of the group leader as capable of remorse, shame, or guilt, is not intended to evoke pity for him and, by extension, the other four men. The reason behind the playwright's decision to include this moment in the play can be better understood when the name of the so-called stag is revealed: Georgie, just like the female protagonist. The coexistence of two characters sharing the same name serves to illustrate their duality as representations of male and female counterparts of individuals who, under specific conditions, exhibit behaviours that may not align with their ideals.

As mentioned before, alcohol and drugs help men overcome sexual inhibition and the same stands for women who consume these substances. Even so, as is the case with various aspects of the male and the female gender, double standards are also the norm. If a woman is intoxicated when she is raped, this is generally understood as putting herself at risk and, therefore, as being responsible for what might happen to her. In contrast, according to a study on the relationship between alcohol and drugs in rape and sexual assault, "men accused of rape while drunk tended to be seen as less blameworthy" (Lovett & Horvath, 2009, p. 129). Barrister David Osborne, a man who can directly affect the lives of rape victims, has made it into scholarly books on rape (*The Politics of Sexual Violence*) due to his infamous remark that drunken women cannot be raped: "consent is consent, blind drunk or otherwise" (as cited in Healicon, 2016, p. 93). Osborne's argument is not the only instance when lawyers insist on counting as consent a woman's 'drunk' consent (Lovett & Horvath, 2009, p. 125). This attitude reflects not only a misogynistic trait but also the neoliberal concern with individual responsibility which suggests that a woman should avoid risks and not put herself in dangerous situations (Healicon, 2016, p. 96). Describing the broader context of Georgie's life, Fitzpatrick (2018) observes that "the audience is offered Georgie as a victim of a neoliberal economy where she lives alone, works in a telesales office [the job she quits to work as a striptease dancer] (...) and where her choices of sexual freedom and consumer goods are hedged about by her limited economic means and her personal misery" (p. 221). Georgie not only

puts herself in a risky situation by leaving the club with the five men, but she is eager to find herself in this situation. Does that mean that she is not a victim of rape, as Osborne postulates?

In *Feminism Unmodified: Discourse on Life and Law* (1987), MacKinnon writes that in her view, “Politically, (...) rape [takes place] whenever a woman has sex and feels violated” (p. 82). MacKinnon is a legal scholar and she deliberately uses the word ‘politically’ because from a legal point of view, a woman’s sense of violation after having sex cannot equate with rape; she may simply feel guilty for the act. Georgie agrees to have sex with the group of men, yet, she ends up feeling violated. Her intense emotions could stem partly from feelings of remorse and self-blame regarding her actions and the treatment she endures from others, but another possible reason is pointed out by Fitzpatrick (2018) in her discussion of the play:

While Georgie has consented, she has not consented to this. She has not imagined injuries and violence and a real loss of control that is dangerous and harmful; her consent was predicated on the familiarity with pornography, which is performance. She therefore has not considered the actual physical damage inflicted by these sex acts. (p. 224)

Leah informs the audience that her aunt is residing in their home as a result of a nervous breakdown, which involves her exposing herself to male individuals from a Turkish supermarket, asking them to “fuck” her (The aftermath). She accidentally falls and the men take her to a hospital. Upon examining her, the doctors “said that there was physical evidence ... that she has been raped” (The aftermath). Thus, forensic medicine characterises her body as a space on which rape, not sex, was performed. Georgie, on the other hand, does not bring herself to call it so. Leah’s insistence to learn what actually happened receives a vague answer:

Georgie: Look I don’t know what happened. Okay? I went out, got drunk, okay, got *more* than drunk ... probably. Behaved like a prick. Made a fool of myself. Can’t remember.

Leah: Bullshit.

Georgie: It’s not bullshit, Leah.

Leah: But what about all your injuries?

Georgie: I probably just ... fell over a bit.

Leah: Yeah right. (Beat.) Bet you told Mum what happened.

Georgie: *No I didn’t!*

Leah: What so no one knows?

Georgie: No. (Going home, emphasis in original)

She begins by covering the fact that something other than an accident took place, but her last words make it clear that this is not true. Moreover, she knows very well what that something is, but is unwilling to share it with anyone. The reason why Georgie hesitates to call the night she spends with the five men rape is suggested a few lines below when Leah confesses that she had a sexual experience with another girl. Georgie wrongfully suspects that the secret experience Leah refers to is rape. To this, Leah comments: “I told you I let it happen. How can that be rape?” (Going home). Georgie also lets the group sex happen, but what happens to her, from a legal point of view that requires a woman to be mentally and physically capable of giving her consent to sex, could be called rape. However, the legal definition of rape poses significant challenges when applied to Georgie’s case. The Sexual Offences Act (2003) stipulates that a person commits the offence of rape if he “does not reasonably believe” that the other person consents; “whether a belief is reasonable is to be determined having regard to all the circumstances, including any steps A has taken to ascertain whether B consents” (*Rape*). As previously outlined, one of the men explicitly asks Georgie about her readiness to participate in group sex and she firmly reassures him of her willingness. This complex situation raises crucial legal issues pertaining to consent but also makes it challenging to categorise the men’s behaviour as rape.

However, the experience has a powerful impact on Georgie’s psyche. While at the beginning of the play, she dreams about being on the Fourth Plinth of Trafalgar Square, “dancing; winding; writhing” with “every man hard [for her]” (Georgie dreams), she now dreams of “fingers and fists in holes and flesh being squeezed and twisted”. She remarks: “I dream about such violence” (The aftermath). It seems like she no longer fantasises about the pleasure women in porn movies experience when their holes are filled with fingers and fists and their flesh is squeezed and twisted. Burt (2003) remarks that pornography reinforces rape myths “by portraying rape incidents in which the woman ultimately responds with enjoyment, and by frequent and repeated association of sex and violence” (p. 137). The relationship between pleasure and violence in female sexuality has been an intense point of debate in psychoanalysis. According to Brownmiller (1975), “Men have always raped women, but it wasn’t until the advent of Sigmund Freud and his followers that the male ideology of rape began to rely on the tenet that rape was something women desired” (p. 315). Two of Freud’s followers, singled out by Brownmiller as “the

brightest females in the Freudian constellation” (p. 320), Helene Deutsch and Karen Horney, held different views on female masochism. Even though they both accept it as an existing feature of female psychology, Deutsch saw masochism as a “normal, inevitable result of female biology”, whereas Horney argued that it was a “neurotic manifestation culturally induced and culturally encouraged” (p. 321). For Brownmiller, the ‘culture’ is comprised of men’s own fantasies imposed on women. Therefore, when women fantasise about sex, “the fantasies are usually the product of male conditioning and cannot be otherwise” (p. 324). Rape fantasies are a feature of female sexuality, but feminist thinkers and authors insist that they “do not prove that women crave sexual violation” (Sielke, 2004a, p. 72). Benjamin (1983) argues that “the danger (...) that women and other victims of violence will be blamed or will blame themselves for ‘provoking it’” has led to the attitude that “the discussion of erotic domination or rational violence in which participation is voluntary or fantasized seems to some an apology for male violence in general” (282). In *Freak*, the fantasy of erotic domination and violence is channelled through Georgie’s dreams of being the object of desire for masses of men and of being taken and torn by King Kong. Her daytime fantasies, like the moment she leaves the club with the group of men to go to the house or the one in which she pretends she is kidnapped, also suggest that rape fantasies, pain, and violence are a part of her life.

The question that arises then is why would the playwright bring to the stage such intimate descriptions of female fantasies about violence and sex, which is soon followed by the narration of such sexual violence? Interviewed by April de Angelis for the BBC documentary *Theatre of the Abused* (Tresilian, 2014), Jordan says:

I wanted to take a bit of a fresh look on objectification of women, the role that women played in objectifying themselves, whether that was through a consistent bombardment of unhealthy images and ideals. But I also wanted to look at the role objectification played in darker parts of female sexual desire and fantasy, control, submission, aggression, and sometimes violence. (23:48-24:17)

The playwright brings to the stage a female character who acts out on her fantasies and desires, turning herself into an object of desire for men, which, in the beginning, makes her feel empowered. Georgie uses her agency to make decisions – though poor – and does not care if her actions or choices do not align with societal expectations. She openly speaks about her familiarity with porn, about masturbation, and sexual incidents from her adolescence. But there is a very discernible level of masochism in her behaviour, a deep

need to suffer, and to punish herself. The feeling of empowerment she experiences is not presented to the audiences as the outcome of healthy female sexuality, not as something to be glorified, but as Horney postulates, as a ‘neurotic manifestation culturally induced and culturally encouraged’. The night she spends with the five men can be regarded as the lowest point in a series of self-destructive acts that end up scarring not only her body but also her psyche.

There can be no doubt that what Georgie experiences is a traumatic event, regardless of what it may be called, i.e., rape or group sex. She describes her emotions during the event in the following manner: “Now my thoughts, my words, my will; none of them matter because they are well and truly In Me. And it hurts. I’m scared that something inside me might break” (The event). The way she deals with what is happening to her is through an act of dissociation: “It’s like I leave my body and I’m able to look down on myself. (...) I’m being pulled this way and that” (The event). In a study about women who sell sex, Coy (2009) found that “the separation of self from body and the need to distance the thinking, feeling self from the physical body” was a widespread defence mechanism employed by the women to deal with each “commercial sex encounter” (p. 196). It is worth pointing out the fact that, although she gives no indication to this effect, the men perceive the night they spend together as a commercial exchange, as an interaction between a sex worker and her clients, evidence of this being the forty pounds she finds next to her (and takes) when everything is over. Despite the fact that the event leaves her in a horrible state and that she has an expected meltdown after the violence she endures, Georgie appears to recover quickly and does not look at the future in horror.

Before proceeding with the discussion of other aspects of the play, the issue of responsibility should first be clarified. Georgie is indeed responsible for what happens to her and her narrative does not suggest otherwise. It is her adult decision to get into a taxi and go to an unknown place with a group of strangers. However, she is not the only responsible party. She is responsible for the way everything starts, but the situation gets out of her control once the actual group sex starts. In the beginning, one of the men asks her if she is sure she wants to continue with the group sex, but later, nobody asks her if she feels in the mood to have a glass bottle inserted in her vagina. A similar incident takes place in Bond’s play *Dea* (2016), when Dea’s son forces her to insert a beer bottle into

the vagina of a female prisoner's corpse. This is an act of punishment for the prisoner who is assumed to be withholding information, but it also serves as an act of bonding for the soldiers and a means of reinforcing their masculinity. When the prisoner was still alive, none of the soldiers could perform the act of rape, not even Dea's son who repeatedly orders them to do so and who shoots the prisoner in the end. In *Freak*, this act causes disagreement within the male group, with certain members perceiving it as excessive. At least at this moment in the play, when she responds with a scream to the pain caused by the inserted foreign object, making "this awful, primal, non-female noise" (The event), Georgie had the option to request them to stop. This could have potentially been a pivotal factor in framing her experience as rape. However, even then, she says, "I wait to be filled up again, but they leave me empty" (The event). Georgie adamantly maintains a perception of herself akin to being merely an object to be used by these men at their discretion.

Predictably, the dynamic between Georgie and the men transcends mere self-objectification, as it evidently demonstrates their failure to regard her as a person. As Georgie recalls "They're saying 'Her' and 'She'. Like I'm not there" (The event). In fact, she is not there as a person, only as an object to be passed from one man to the other. Even if this is something that she initially wanted when she starts her job at the 'gentlemen's club' saying, "I don't mind being a thing. I don't want their respect I want only their animal desire" (Leah's naked experience), during the act she ends up hoping she "would be more *involved*" (The event, emphasis in original). One crucial difference between the men and Georgie is that they do not end up at the hospital with injuries nor do they have a mental breakdown. In a paper on sexual victimisation, Gavey (1999) warns that "if we [feminists] see our role as giving women voice, then it may not be legitimate to 'put words in their mouths', to describe experiences as rape that women themselves do not describe in that way" (p. 68). Despite the physical and emotional injuries that she sustained, Georgie does not see herself as the victim of a dreadful deed. Depicting her in such a manner would represent an act of violation, which this study deliberately refrains from doing.

There is also another less explored façade to the issue of responsibility and that is social responsibility. Healicon (2016) argues that reducing sexual violence only to the victim and the perpetrator is deceiving. In fact, "others are involved in incidences of

sexual violence both actively and explicitly through participation, observation, and trivialisation but also implicitly through denial, avoidance, ignorance, and indifference” (p. 63). In the play, Georgie and the men are not the only participants in the event that has left her with physical injuries and a mental breakdown. For instance, they take a taxi to go to the house where the group sex takes place. Georgie finds herself in the middle, with the men touching, kissing, and taking photos of her. When they reach the house, Georgie recalls the taxi driver saying under his breath “I’m glad you’re not my daughter” (The event), instead of ‘I’m glad you’re not my sons or my children!’. Opting not to call the police or at least ask her if she needs help (her answer most probably would have been no), this other person simply observes and trivialises such a severe incident. It may be that Georgie willingly gets into the taxi and the house, but this could have been a moment of intervention and taking social responsibility instead of passing judgement.²⁴

A recurring feature of Georgie’s narrative to describe her interactions with men²⁵ is represented by animal metaphors and references to meat. According to feminist and animal rights advocate Carol Adams (1990/2010), “when women are victims of violence, the treatment of animals is recalled” (p. 68). The connection between pornography, sexual violence, and the abuse of animals seems to be one of the pillars of Anna Jordan’s plays such as *Yen* and *Chicken Shop*. These plays portray intersectional representations of violence through a young boy’s assault on a girl and this boy’s brother beating their dog in the first case, and human trafficking and the consumption of meat in the second. Such examples support Adams’ argument and enlarge the perspective to show how rape and other forms of violence, sexual or not, are the manifestation of a system of power relations informed by elements of dominance and exploitation, exploitation of women, of animals, or/and of natural resources. *Freak* is also embedded with traces of this holistic approach to violence. There are three instances when Georgie mentions meat²⁶ while narrating her

²⁴ Here it may seem like Georgie’s behaviour is being judged, but this is actually not a critique of her choices about her body and life. If her experiences are framed within a negative commentary, the reason behind this is the pain she goes through and her general dissatisfaction with her life.

²⁵ It has to be underlined that not all men in her life belong to this category of violent encounters; both her father and her ex-boyfriend are associated with warmth and care, and it is most probably their absence from her life that puts her in these self-destructive situations.

²⁶ There are other indirect references to meat, such as the ‘spit-roast’ image of two men inside her, with one at the front and the other at the back. This image resembles the cooking of a piece of meat on a spit. Another reference is the smell of bacon Georgie gets after the men leave her on the floor, which probably comes from the kitchen as the men prepare breakfast for themselves.

story. The first is when she recalls a vivid dream in which she is the female protagonist of the *King Kong* movie. The word ‘meat’ appears in the following context: “He [King Kong] breathes hot wet gorilla breath which smells of blood and meat and drenches my body. (...) I know the end of the world is coming but before it comes he’s going to take me. Break me. Tear me. End me. I panic. I scream! I wake up. I’m coming” (Georgie dreams). The second instance is when Georgie performs an erotic dance routine for male clients at her new place of employment: “They like it when I bite my finger and look confused and innocent. And they like it when I look sort of afraid. But I am not afraid. I am formidable. All meat all sex all vulnerable all powerful” (Leah’s naked experience). The third instance is during the group sex when she goes completely vacant, with “no brain engaged just meat and holes” (The event). Also notable throughout the play is a gradual increase in the proximity of the male figures up to ‘the event’. Initially, Georgie is safe from the imminent danger she dreams about; when she wakes up, King Kong disappears. Later, the men are in the same enclosed space as her, but there is still a safe distance between them. In the most intense moment of the play, i.e., the group sex, however, the men have taken possession of every inch of her body and she is reduced to a ‘piece of meat’²⁷, a pale skinny young woman surrounded by five ‘stags’. She is no longer ‘formidable’, ‘all powerful’, but unimportant and powerless.

Having as a starting point the Ancient Greek myth of Zeus and Metis, in which Zeus swallows Metis after raping her, Adams (1990/2010) argues that “an essential component of androcentric culture” manifests itself through “viewing the sexually desired object as consumable” (p. 75). Georgie’s narrative begins with her as a potential body to be consumed by King Kong and by the men at the club and ends with actually being ‘consumed’ by the men. It is intriguing to observe that, during the group sex, Georgie does not perceive herself as ‘meat’ or as an animal consumed by the men in their human form. What she sees when she dissociates herself from her body are some predatory animals tearing up a dead non-predatory animal. She compares the image with “some sort of wild bears fighting over a young dead deer or something. A dead fawn” (The event). A young deer or a fawn are animals symbolising a certain degree of fragility and innocence. Furthermore, this small animal is already dead when the bears fight over her,

²⁷ The phrase is used by the playwright in her interview with April de Angelis to refer to the condition of Georgie during the group sex (Tresilian, 2014) and it also informs the title of this study.

which is a metaphor for the state of utter surrender that Georgie experiences at that moment.

Although she compares herself with an herbivore animal, smaller and more vulnerable than the bears who are much larger and carnivores, she does not see herself as different from them since these representations belong to the same level of existence, i.e., the animal kingdom which in the context of the play means violence, brutal force, and sexuality. She does not perceive the dynamics between herself and the men as a matter of gender; in fact, she reckons she is one of the 'lads'. This attitude characterises her adolescence as well, when her father used to take her to play football and she "was his boy" (Georgie's epiphany) – an activity which is in contrast with her sister being taken by their mother to ballet. After her father dies, she continues to go to the park where they used to play football, but this time it is not for sports. Her interaction with the boys now consists of "Squeeze a tit for a finger of Twix. Hand jobs for a Lambert. Suck it for a Strongbow" (Georgie's epiphany). Georgie believes that "the only two things I've even been good at were fucking and football" (Georgie's epiphany). It seems like after the loss of her father, only sex can connect her to the male sphere, an example of which is also the striptease club. The fact that her reminiscence on the past and the description of the moment she gets the job at the striptease club appear in the same paragraph reinforce this understanding.

The story of Georgie's violent encounters is seamlessly interwoven with Leah's discovery of sexuality. The audience is asked to relate one level of the narrative to the other, Georgie's acting as the incarnation of male desire, to Leah's behaviour in her relationship with Luke and when alone in her bedroom. Georgie says: "This is what I wanted. But I thought I would be *involved*" (The event, emphasis in original). She is not only less involved than she thought she would be in the group sex but she is not an active participant at all. Similarly, Leah observes Luke during her first sexual experience: "He seems to be in a place that I can't join him. (...) I think that maybe I could just slide out from under him and tiptoe downstairs and watch telly while he thrusts away" (The event). Both female characters observe and actively contribute to the objectification of their own body and as Leah puts it, enjoy "the feeling sexy bit", but not "the way sex actually felt" (Going home). Leah's experience is not as violent as Georgie's, but it is also not very smooth or rewarding. When she goes with her boyfriend to his male friend's house to

have sexual intercourse, the two boys play catch with her top while she tries to cover herself. She wants to fit in and laughs with them, “like nothing had happened” (The aftermath), but the word ‘like’ suggests that something had happened, something that made her feel uncomfortable. When her boyfriend implies that they should have a threesome with Ashden (one of her female friends already participated in this form of sexual activity with the same two boys), she thinks that

Leah: It might be really...wild to do two boys together. I mean I’m so flattered, right, the two fittest boys in our year? I can be a freak. I can. Two months ago no one even knew who I was at school and look at me now. (The aftermath)

However, in the following scene, it becomes apparent that she does not go through with this fantasy, as a result of which, it is implied that her boyfriend breaks up with her and posts on her timeline the word ‘Vanilla’, a word to describe someone unwilling to engage in some exciting activity, sexual or otherwise. These young people experience significant pressure to adhere to certain expectations, which may be particularly intense for the girls. This impression can, however, be shaped by the fact that the audience listens to a girl’s perspective and not a boy’s. When Leah decides to take a break from experimenting with sex, she worries that people will somehow realise that she is not sexually active. She feels that she needs “to act like a woman” (Going home) and it would seem that pornography is her source of information; being a woman means first and foremost, being sexually active. Furthermore, this is a performative act and to adhere to these standards of ‘womanhood’, Leah practices in the mirror how her body and face have to look during sex in order to resemble the images she sees in porn videos, but just like Georgie’s group sex experience, reality does not fulfil her expectations.

For the playwright, “a consistent bombardment of unhealthy images and ideals” (Tresilian, 2014, 23:50) may account for why women come not only to be objectified but to objectify themselves too. Personal correspondence with the playwright (Jordan, January 11, 2024) revealed that the conception of the play was influenced by Ariel Levy’s book *Female Chauvinist Pigs. Women and the Rise of the Raunch Culture* (2005). In this work, Levy takes issues with the female version of Male Chauvinist Pigs, that is “women who make sex objects of other women and of ourselves” (p. 4) and asks some pertinent

questions, which, as demonstrated in the preceding discussion, cut to the core of the play *Freak*:

How is resurrecting every stereotype of female sexuality that feminism endeavoured to banish *good* for women? Why is laboring to look like Pamela Anderson empowering? And how is imitating a stripper or a porn star – a woman whose *job* is to imitate arousal in the first place – going to render us sexually liberated? (p. 4, emphasis in original)

These questions pertain not only to pornography, but also to magazines, TV shows, and pop culture. Both Leah and Georgie are avid consumers of pornography and engage in sexual interaction from this standpoint; Leah watches herself naked in the mirror and tries to emulate the positions and facial expressions of women from porn videos; Georgie feels empowered and in control only when groups of men are aroused by her sensual moves and naked body.

Furthermore, female self-objectification is very important in relation to the pop culture references in the play *Freak* and how women see themselves. There can be no doubt that pornography and erotic dancing are not ideal models for young women, but it is worth exploring the degree to which the pop references included in the play, either through stage directions, song titles, names of artists/groups, or well-known lyrics, could also be considered a channel of ‘unhealthy images and ideals’. The play begins with the song *Freak*²⁸ by Estelle, parts of which are recited by Leah while she “crouches, animalistic” (Georgie dreams). The word ‘freak’ also informs the title of the play and it appears in the story once, when Leah contemplates the possibility of having a threesome with her boyfriend and Ashden. She sees this act as something only a freak could do: “I can be a freak. I can” (The aftermath). The song’s lyrics encourage girls to embrace “their inner freaky freak” in relation to sex, but the motivation behind this seems to be guided by the male, not female, perspective and desire. What this hypothetical man wants and needs is what matters. Among the requirements for satisfying his desires, a woman has to be “hand cuffed out”, wear “leather gear” and “9inch heel”, be slapped, her hair to be pulled, and moreover, she should be like this “everyday of every week”. It is not difficult to observe why this particular song – that sets the tone for the whole play – cannot be characterised as a healthy image for women to adhere to. In her essay *Visual Pleasure*

²⁸ According to Fitzpatrick (2018), this song was also the pre-show music for the play’s premiere in August 2014 at the Edinburgh Fringe Festival.

and *Narrative Cinema* (1975), Laura Mulvey (2001) argues that, the cinema's "cult of woman as spectacle produces a corresponding male gaze". Furthermore, "this gendered gaze produced contradictions, especially for the female spectator, whose position would necessary oscillate between an alignment either with the male gaze or self-conscious detachment from it" (p. 7). *Freak* clearly highlights how women, such as Georgie and Leah, do not detach from but internalise the male gaze, reflecting at the same time the prevalence of this experience.

Navigating the world of sexuality and the consumption of pornography are the pivotal features of Georgie and Leah's stories, but songs are also a way of bringing them together. The third scene of the play begins with both Georgie and Leah reciting lyrics from the song *Dirty Talk* by Wynter Gordon. Unlike Estelle's *Freak*, the official video clip of Gordon's song portrays the singer alone, the focus being clearly on what she – or the hypothetical woman she sings about – wants. Although the image of this woman as a sexual being does not differ in a radical manner from the one in the previous song, the crucial difference is the pronoun 'I' and the focus on a woman's desires. Society may not allow women to have these desires, but one of the lines that appear, again and again, states, "I am no angel". This is the song's message for women: to stop trying to conform to the 'angel in the house'²⁹ patriarchal stereotype and embrace their sexuality. An unapologetic reclaiming of a woman's sexual freedom lies at the core of both songs, but they seem to have totally opposing purposes: in the first case, the point of reference is men's pleasure, and in the second, women's.

In the same scene, Georgie recalls the moment of her 'dance audition' when she undresses "to the strains of the Pussycat Dolls" (Georgie's epiphany). This female group's songs are employed in the context of women exposing their naked bodies for men's pleasure and thus the reference to this group makes it difficult to see its inclusion in the play as pertaining to a desirable ideal for women. The following musical reference is to Rihanna's videos which Leah watches to learn "how to be sexy" (Leah's naked experience). Leah learns how a woman should be – more precisely what being a sexy woman means – not only from porn videos but also from videos of pop songs. The juxtaposition of these points of reference does not render the videos of Rihanna's songs

²⁹ The phrase comes from Coventry Patmore's 1854 poem with the same title; it has come to represent the ideal woman as selflessly devoted to her children and submissive to her husband.

a particularly welcomed imprint on a teenage girl's coming to terms with her bodily image.

Finally, Georgie and Leah recite lyrics from Beyoncé's *Rule the World (Girls)*. Just like *Dirty Talk*, this song is also about empowerment (though it has to be noted that this empowerment reflects not only standing out for oneself but also dominance over men) and it cannot be a coincidence that only these two songs are sung by the protagonists together. This implies that it is crucial for women to identify their desires and communicate with each other, as only through this process can they attain strength and empowerment, which also serves as the ultimate message of the play. Both Georgie and Leah struggle to find their place in the world and feel like a 'freak', but once they begin communicating, they start feeling more comfortable with themselves. Ultimately, this reflects the anti-rape movement's attempt to bring women together through conferences and consciousness-raising actions. The same climate was spontaneously appropriated in today's times by the #MeToo movement; through the act of sharing their stories, women around the world have found that their experiences are legitimate, reflecting not isolated occurrences but a widespread pattern of violence against women.

In her documentary *Theatre of the Abused*, April de Angelis asks Jordan what she expects from the audience watching the performance of the play. The playwright replies that she wants the audience to debate "the kind of moral questions that come up" (Tresilian, 2014, 24:45). As the discussion of this study hopefully shows, *Freak* abounds in moral questions to which there are no simple answers. The way in which pornography infiltrates the sexual interactions between men and women, personal and social responsibility, and communication and solidarity between women are some of the issues that lay at the core of the play. Unlike other pieces of theatre dealing with pornography, as it impacts boys and men (and only implicitly girls and women), *Freak* turns the focal point on girls and women as consumers of pornographic materials. The experiences of Georgie and Leah do not match these projected expectations, no matter how hard they try to crop the figures of the women in porn videos and copy-paste their images in the scenes.

Leah feels the pressure to act in the way women act in porn videos, be sexy like pop artists, and be as 'freaky' as her other female friends, but she ends up in need of a break from this pressure before too much damage is done. A small decision that she rightfully

hesitates to take, “So I think maybe I’ll just join them for a drink. Yeah. Maybe. One. Drink” (The event), sends Georgie into a space that brings her physical and mental pain. Yet, her narrative implies that this is precisely what she looks for, to suffer, and the men she meets on the night they celebrate the upcoming wedding of one of them, are more than eager to fulfil her wish. From a radical feminist perspective, what happens to Georgie could be called rape – though she does not see it this way – because she is not in a mental and physical state to grant consent. In the play, five men on a stag night, an event associated with certain clichés, such as the presence of an erotic dancer and the consumption of alcohol, take advantage (even if they are not the ones who initiate the contact) of the opportunity offered by Georgie’s self-destructive behaviour and clouded judgement which is blurred even further when they offer her more alcohol and drugs. Yet, this scenario differs from one in which a group of men bring to their place a woman who has lost her consciousness or who loses her consciousness during the sexual act, something which often takes place in our society. Here, Georgie never passes out and, no matter how badly they treat her, she offers them no indication that their behaviour is inappropriate or undesired.

Finally, just like Jordan remarks, a person’s viewpoint shapes the interpretation of the act in which Georgie gets involved. However, “Georgie’s agency is at the heart of the play”. She is not “*just* a woman that has been a victim of the male gaze and male fantasy” (Personal communication, January 11, 2024, emphasis added), but a complex and intriguing character who departs from well-known clichés about women’s fantasies, sexuality, and agency. Although it seems challenging to pass a verdict on the night she spends with the five men, the play provides a premise on which we can discuss rape. Equally significant, it brings to the fore a rather remarkable and unexplored aspect, women’s agency in sexuality and the taboo subject that “people really do consent to relationships of domination, and that fantasies of domination play a vigorous part in the mental lives of those who do not actually do so” (Benjamin, 1983, p. 286). Georgie translates her imagined scenarios into reality, experiences disillusionment, but assumes responsibility for her choices and is able to redirect her attention towards a future which does not seem as bleak as the play’s present.

2.3. JUSTICE IS BLIND, DEAF, AND MUTE TO RAPE VICTIMS' PIERCING CRY

According to German historian Hiram Kümper (2014), consent (as in lack thereof) came to define rape early in the history of law, more precisely in the twelfth century. Nowhere is consent more crucial than in acquaintance rape, since it is presumed that no woman would willingly engage in sexual intercourse with an unknown man who attacks her in a dark alley, an incident known as 'stranger rape'. Under the umbrella term 'acquaintance rape' fall cases of marital rape, date rape, rape by a family member, a friend, an ex-boyfriend, or an ex-husband. The Schools Consent Project, a UK-based charity organisation founded in 2014, which aims to give education on the topic of consent, estimates that the victim and the perpetrator know each other in 8 out of 10 cases of rape (Schools Consent Project). According to Schmid (2004a), certain conditions increase the probability for an "acquaintance rapist" to be charged and tried, such as "a prompt report to the police, the existence of witnesses who can testify to similar crimes committed by the suspect, physical injury to the survivor, and corroboration of the individual's story" (p. 55). The category of acquaintance rape that is the least likely to be seen as a crime is marital rape (Banerjee & Rao, 2022), sometimes called 'wife rape' due to the fact that, just like other forms of sexual violence, the victims are mostly women. The reluctance to legally accept marital sex without consent as rape dates back to Sir Matthew Hale, Chief Justice³⁰ in England in the seventeenth century. In his treatise with the title *The History of the Pleas of the Crown* (1736), Hale "set forth his influential summation of the development of English rape law" (Cardyn, 2004, p. 94). In the context of rape, perhaps the most enduring idea of this work is that "the husband cannot be guilty of a rape committed by himself upon his lawful wife" (as cited in Cardyn, 2004, p. 94). Since at the time, a woman was perceived as the property of her husband under the legal concept of 'coverture' (a woman's existence being literally covered by her husband) (Purdy, 2004, p. 122), the act of marriage meant that she effectively renounced the right to withhold sex once married.

³⁰ Hale held the title of 'Chief Justice of the King's Bench', the equivalent of which in today's context is 'Lord Chief Justice'. However, from 1 October 2023, the title has been adjusted for the first woman to serve as the head of the Judiciary of England and Wales as 'Lady Chief Justice'. This person is also the President of the Courts of England and Wales and is responsible for representing the views of the judiciary to Parliament and the Government (UK Parliament, Glossary).

Sir Hale's influence has not been limited to the geographical borders of England. Together with the English law that he helped shape, it travelled to the English colonies of North America as well (Martin et. al., 2007). Interestingly, the overthrow of his understanding of rape was firstly and more forcefully demanded not from England, where his ideas were implemented initially, but in the United States by American activists. Largely thanks to the Women's movement, the majority of the states abolished the marital rape exemption by the 1980s. The first man to be prosecuted for the rape of his wife was John Rideout in 1978. The case, however, is also known for the fact that Greta Rideout ended up reconciling with her husband, even if only for a brief period. This 'change of heart' has been employed by those opposing the criminalisation of marital rape as proof that it must not have been a very traumatising experience if she wished to get back together with her husband afterwards (Russell, 2003). In most Western countries, marital rape became a crime during the same time and it was recognised as a violation of human rights by the UN in 1993 (Fitzpatrick, 2018, p. 162). The beginning of the 1990s also marked the admittance of the British law that it was possible for a man to rape his wife. In other European countries, like Romania and Türkiye, marital rape was recognised as an illegal act even later. However, these legal changes are yet to be reflected in societal attitudes. For instance, a survey from 2018 found that, in the UK, one-quarter of the adults do not think that marital sex without consent is rape (Topping, 2018). One of the reasons why this is the case may be related to the fact that marital rape has been recognised as a crime relatively recently, thus both men and women have difficulties in actually comprehending that a woman (and a man for a matter of fact) can refuse to have sexual intercourse with her partner. Furthermore, financial and psychological coercion, as well as physical violence of a non-sexual nature, are factors that may lead a married woman to say 'yes' to sex when, in fact, she means 'no'. For this reason, Russell (2003) points out that "wife rape is not a problem that will ever be solved by turning to the law. As long as men are the ones to make and implement the laws, there will be no justice for women" (p. 80). Thus, a meaningful improvement can only be expected when women fully acknowledge that they have the right to refuse sexual interaction with their husbands (p. 80). Emphasising women's agency over the role played by the legal system is, however, not a viable approach; women's awareness would amount to nothing without the law to

ensure that men, who rape their wives, will face the consequences of their actions and vice-versa.

In parallel with the statistics on acquaintance rape, most of the contemporary British plays that deal with the subject of rape touch upon stories where rape takes place between people who know each other. Interestingly, in theatre, there seems to be an attempt to shatter the myth that rape by a stranger is the ‘real rape’ and the only one that deserves the attention of the media, the law, or the public. One telling example of theatre’s attempt to tackle the issue of acquaintance rape is the play *Consent* (2017a) by Nina Raine. *Consent* was first performed as a co-production with Out of Joint in the Dorfman Auditorium of the National Theatre on 4 April 2017, a few months before the #MeToo movement started to grow on social media. The play was transferred to the West End in May 2018 and by that time, “society was even more fraught with public tension surrounding the issue of consent in sexual relations” (Andes, 2019, p. 391) than it had been when the play premiered in 2017. Structured around two acts and fifteen scenes, the play addresses the issue of rape from a rather unique perspective, which is by contextualising it within the British justice system. It is the system itself, in Aston’s (2020) words, which is put “on trial for its failure to achieve justice for women in rape cases” (p. 33). The plot revolves around the rape case of a woman called Gayle who accuses a male acquaintance of raping her on the day of her little sister’s funeral. Once she makes the official complaint, Gayle finds herself in a system that scrutinises her behaviour and mental state carefully but denies her the right to even mention the perpetrator’s violent past, a factor that plays a vital role in the way she behaves during and after the rape. The playwright was moved “by the details of a real-life sexual assault case, in which the fragile mental health of the complainant was cited in court, but the fact that the defendant was on bail for a violent crime was not”, something that she found very unfair (Jones, 2017). In the play, the way in which the legal system operates to the detriment of rape victims is exposed through moments from the courtroom and pieces of casual conversation between lawyers outside the court.

In *Consent*, members of the legal system conceptualise rape either through their professional exposure or, in Edward’s case (the barrister defending the man charged with the rape of Gayle), through a more personal connection when his wife, Kitty, accuses him of rape. Edward and Kitty’s other lawyer friends, Tim and the couple Rachel and Jake, as

well as Zara who is an actress, are also entangled in these rape accusations, in ways that will be discussed later in this study. However, nothing in the play suggests that any of these lawyers who speak on behalf of (or against) rape victims, has been a victim of rape themselves. Indeed, maintaining some degree of detachment is necessary for a person to perform well in their profession and the legal profession is no exception. What would happen though if a lawyer had an experience that contradicts everything they theoretically knew about rape? Would this experience necessarily change their attitude towards other rape victims or the way they perceive the law itself? When Edward is accused of raping his wife, it does bring him closer to a more concrete façade of rape despite the fact that there is a vast chasm between this level of involvement and being a victim of rape himself.

The intersection of perspectives between being a lawyer and a victim of rape has been explored in a rather unique way in another contemporary play, Suzie Miller's *Prima Facie*³¹ (2022), which vividly brings at the centre of the stage what happens when Tessa, a successful female lawyer accustomed to defending men accused of sexual assault, is herself raped by a male colleague during a date. Deciding to press charges, Tessa exposes herself to the side of the law that puts the victim on trial instead of the rapist, a standpoint that her sanitised exposure to the law has previously prevented her from considering. Moreover, she is confronted with the crude realisation that the legal system is a patriarchal institution where men protect each other at the expense of their female colleagues. One particularly agonising scene in which Jodie Comer as Tessa performs the moment of rape is comparable only with Franca Rame's piece of physical theatre, which, like *Prima Facie*, is also a one-woman show (*The Rape*³², 1988). In this performance, Rame re-enacts her personal experience of rape, the horrifying moment when she is abducted by a group of men, raped, and tortured in the back of a van. Both *Prima Facie*³³ and *The Rape* are driven by a spirit of activism as well as a desire to raise awareness on rape and change society for the better. In both performances, every movement, every breath, and every

³¹ The meaning of the Latin phrase 'prima facie' is 'at first sight' and, in the legal context, it can be used both as an adjective and an adverb. In the first case, it "describes a fact or presumption that is *sufficient to be regarded as true unless otherwise disproved or rebutted*" and in the second case, "prima facie means that it is regarded as true on first appearance but subject to additional examination or investigation" (Legal Information Institute, n.p., emphasis in original).

³² The original Italian title of the play is *Lo Stupro*.

³³ *Prima Facie* supports the Schools Consent Project, a charity that aims to educate young people about consent and sexual violence.

facial expression takes the audience from the comfort of their seats to a terrifying journey through rape.

There are various ways of exploring the staging of rape scenes, but physically revealing the act of rape through the performer's body is a technique rarely employed in British theatre. The reason is probably the justified fear that portraying such violent scenes could be regarded as an abuse of the female body and that the members of the audience may find it triggering or even arousing. Nevertheless, what a woman experiences during rape, mainly when the figure of the rapist is absent, may be worth exploring on stage because it carries the potential to actually *show* to the audience that rape is an act of violence imprinted onto a woman's body, not a sexual act between two people; every so often, *speaking* about such an important issue is simply not enough. The creative team involved in the production of a play that does not restrict itself to a verbal account of rape has to be very careful when tackling the challenge of visually representing rape scenes. Yet, the examples of *Prima Facie* and *The Rape* prove that such an endeavour can be successful regardless of the challenges it poses.

In Raine's *Consent*, which tackles two cases of rape, Gayle's charge against a male acquaintance and Kitty's accusation against her husband, rape does not take place on stage. The implication of this choice is that, unlike plays like *The Rape* or *Prima Facie*, the actual occurrence of rape is left to debate. Thus, rape transforms from a physical experience that affects the woman assaulted into a dialectic exercise, a verbal exchange between people (lawyers, jury members, audience) who are not directly involved. In a sense, the intent of both the playwright and the director of the National Theatre's production of the play, Roger Michell, seems to be precisely to open a controversial debate between audience members or with oneself. Michell's expectation from the play is encapsulated in the following words: "If [the audience] go out thinking, 'Did he? Did she? Who's in the right?'" – that's exactly what I want" (as cited in Jones, 2017). According to theatre critic Michael Billington (2017), the play achieves this goal and "stimulates debate rather than stifles it" (para. 5), without this meaning that, at the same time, the play does not elucidate an emotional response from those engaging with it. Nevertheless, as this study will illustrate, the audience's oscillation between believing the man accused of rape or the woman who makes the accusation applies more specifically to the incident between Edward and Kitty, as Gayle's experience is more straightforward. It is doubtful

that anyone reading the play or watching the performance might conclude that Gayle may 'not be in the right' or that she lies about being raped. Yet, the character of Gayle, the woman who is an actual victim of rape, and her experience of rape are introduced to the audience contingently when Rachel, a lawyer, asks Edward, another lawyer, about his current case. In fact, he does not represent Gayle; he is the defence lawyer representing the man accused of raping her. Not only is she not present on stage at this moment and is mentioned simply in a conversation as if she does not represent the central element of the rape case in question or as if this is not something that happened to her, but also her existence is merely linked to the man who rapes her as well as to his substitute during the legal process, namely his lawyer.

In the play's first scene, Edward summarises his current case by saying that he represents a man who "raped this woman, Scottish³⁴ lady, no witnesses" (Act 1, Scene 1). What is interesting, and to a certain degree disturbing, about the way the group of lawyers express themselves is that they use the pronoun 'I' in an act of identification with the person they defend. Edward, for instance, completes his sentence with the words "she's a bit of a drinker, so am I, her word against mine" (Act 1, Scene 1). Similarly, Jake summarises his own case in the following manner: "I've been raping pensioners" (Act 1, Scene 1). This linguistic choice blurs the lines between personal identity and professional duty, an act in which the lawyers seem to assume their clients' identity and experience their accusations as their own. It appears that the playwright "discovered their peculiarly offhand way of speaking over the course of a research lunch in an 'unglamorous, threadbare' courthouse canteen" (as cited in Jones, 2017). In an interview for the National Theatre, Priyanga Burford, the actress impersonating Rachel, states that the barristers met by the crew during their research into the British legal system, were "a bit like ER doctors" and in their conversations about rape "there's a black sense of humour, there's a gallows humour about it, otherwise they can't do their jobs" (National Theatre at Home, *Consent: Interview*, 00:05). This kind of detachment may be considered as a sort of coping mechanism as they have to face the harsh realities of life on a daily basis. However, the use of the first-person singular pronoun introduces an element of mockery into the lawyers' discourse particularly when their remarks extend to the victims as well,

³⁴ In the performance of the play at the National Theatre (2017b), the character of Gayle is described as being a 'London' lady, not Scottish.

a nuance that appears to be in sharp opposition to the seriousness of the crimes their clients are accused of committing. This blurring of boundaries raises questions about the lawyers' moral compass and ethical obligations not only towards the people they defend, but also towards the plaintiffs.

Gayle is given the opportunity to appear on stage after the main characters of the play are shown catching up in the play's first scene. She appears for the first time in the play during the trial of her rapist when she is interrogated by Edward. This development is supposed to mean that the audience, who already heard about Gayle's rape from the mouth of the lawyer who represents her rapist, now has the chance to meet her and listen to her version of the events. Yet, her narrative is polluted with the information already given by Edward, namely that there is no witness to testify to her story; that she has a drinking problem; and that the whole case is a matter of 'she said/he said'. If the play is indeed about a rape case that asks the audience to perform a role similar to that of a jury in a trial, as Jones (2017) suggests in her review of the play's production on the National Theatre's stage, then the audience has been denied the chance to approach the case with an impartial attitude towards Gayle. The audience, just as any member of the jury would be, has already been manipulated by the information given by the rapist's lawyer. One of the law reforms for which feminists and activists fought very hard is for judges to abandon "a 'cautionary instruction' to juries that was modeled after Hale's (in)famous statement" (Schmid, 2004b, p. 188) that rape is an easily made accusation and difficult to be proven. The play, however, unmasks how even if in an actual trial the judge does not utter these words anymore, the members of the jury – who are members of the society just like the audience – are still prone to listening to the victim's allegations through this 'cautionary instruction'. Hence, individuals, whether they are members of the audience or jury in a trial, exhibit biases against victims of rape. Furthermore, when Gayle finally meets with Tim, who is responsible for conducting the case against the man who raped her, she realises that even he is not on her side and this revelation leaves her utterly alone in an unknown and hostile territory.

Writing a play about the legal system requires a certain degree of knowledge of how this system operates. In an interview for the National Theatre, Raine remarks that the subject of rape is a sensitive one and as a playwright "you don't want to feel that you're faking it and just sort of writing some idea of it". To achieve the desired amount

of realism in revealing how the law applies to rape and bring a certain degree of accuracy to the play, the playwright attended “a lot of cases and picked up a lot of tiny details of reality and tried to knit them together” (National Theatre at Home, *Consent: Interview*, 00:17). These endeavours resulted in a play that is highly informative about the practicalities of the British legal system. For instance, one is made aware of the perplexing fact that in a criminal case, the victim is not appointed a lawyer because her status is simply that of a witness for the Crown’s case against the defendant. When Gayle is informed about this detail, she experiences confusion and shock that very soon turn into indignation, emotions most probably felt by many rape victims once they enter the uninviting realm of law. However, one does not need to be a rape victim to be “really shocked and surprised” about the unfairness in assigning a lawyer to a defendant, but not to a rape victim; this has also been the reaction of Raine when researching for the play (as cited in Aston, 2020, p. 52). *Consent* problematises not only the fact that the legal system does not allocated a lawyer to a victim of rape but also the manner in which the information is delivered to a victim of rape. Right before the trial, Tim enters the room where Gayle awaits. It appears that a representative of the Witness Service should have been there to prepare her for what is going to take place in the courtroom, but Tim reckons “she went to get a coffee”. “Rather than hang about” (Act 1, Scene 2), he decides to introduce himself and inform her that the trial will begin later than planned. Tim approaches Gayle as if she is supposed to know who he is and when she inquires about his identity, she receives the following confusing answer:

Gayle: Who are you?

Tim: Oh sorry! I’m the prosecuting barrister (...)

Gayle: But are you my lawyer?

Tim: ... Strictly speaking I’m not your lawyer, no.

Gayle: Who are you then?

Tim: I’m – I’m the lawyer for the crown, the crown’s case. (...) technically you’re a witness, the case is against Mr Taylor.

Gayle: Does he get a lawyer?

Tim: Yes (...) (Act 1, Scene 2)

It is not unreasonable to expect that when a person brings to the authorities a severe accusation like rape, they will be guided step by step into the process of taking this complaint further, into the court of law. Nevertheless, Gayle’s experience contradicts this expectation. Even though the time of the trial approaches, nobody seems to have informed

her about the practical aspects of it. In a brochure for victims of rape or sexual assault prepared by the Ministry of Justice of the United Kingdom, it is stated that the Witness Service can help victims “understand the court process and feel more confident when giving evidence” (MoJ Victims’ Guides: Going to court, p. 2). Furthermore, it seems that Gayle is ‘lucky’ to have a prosecutor on her case who instead of waiting for the trial to commence decides to come and speak with her. Otherwise, she might have entered the trial without having the slightest idea that she is simply a witness to something that happened to her and, moreover, a witness without legal representation. What is utterly disappointing about these aspects is that they do not represent creative interventions on the part of the playwright, but real slices of law. As a result of Raine’s thorough research into rape cases brought to an actual court of law, the play goes beyond the telling of a story and reveals systematic problems and institutional biases that hinder rape victims from accessing justice and receiving the support they desperately need.

At this point, an observation has to be made concerning the rationale behind a rape victim not being allocated a lawyer. Tim explains to Gayle that she does not have the right to legal representation because ‘the Crown’, an abstract figure that encompasses the monarch as well as the government, is responsible for defending her rights. Such an arrangement bears a certain unpleasant resemblance with earlier times in history when the legal system saw rape as an injury done to “the man who owned the woman – either her father, who had lost the marriage value of a virgin daughter, or her husband, who had lost the ability to enjoy her as exclusive sexual property” (Burt, 2003, p. 132). In the context of the twenty-first century, the rape of a woman is an injury done to ‘the Crown’, another patriarchal figure. Both the monarch and the government are at the moment, and have been for the most significant part of British history, male figures and the equivalent of what Phipps (2020) calls the “White Knight or Angry Dad³⁵” (p. 96). Additionally, this study has argued that Gayle’s existence is linked to the man who rapes her and her *male*

³⁵ In her book *Me, Not You* (2020), Alison Phipps argues that mainstream or white feminism expects various institutions such as the state (or the Crown in the British context) to punish the ‘bad men’ who hurt (white) women. She compares this kind of protection to “the colonial master’s intervention, the ‘empathy’ of the Angry Dad” (p. 79). She further remarks that “this White Knight or Angry Dad is patriarchy personified” (p. 96) and the reason why white feminism substitutes women’s power with such a figure/institution is related to their lack of “legitimate authority and economic power in a still patriarchal-world” (p. 79). This may be a valid statement, but in the final analysis, the way to make a real change seems for more women (not only white middle-class heterosexual) to gain ‘legitimate authority’ and ‘economic power’, not to eradicate the entire criminal system.

lawyer. If one were to virtually draw her location in relation to the figures that play a crucial role in her rape, the resulting drawing would show her as a silent pion in the middle of a square whose angular points represent the monarch, the government, the rapist, and his lawyer. Gayle is thus surrounded and silenced by different façades of the patriarchy, each of them making decisions about her life; the Crown decides that her case is strong enough to go to court; the rapist decides that she wants to have ‘sexual intercourse’ with him; and his lawyer decides that she is an unreliable witness. Despite not having a say in any of these matters, Gayle is the one who suffers the consequences.

The play reveals another practical information about the way in which a rape victim is silenced and strained of her agency, in this instance, less directly, namely that “the prosecutor cannot talk to the victim [and conversely] about events since this would constitute coaching” (Aston, 2020, p. 52). While a man accused of rape has the right to a lawyer, the woman who makes the accusation does not have access to ‘coaching’. Despite Tim’s insistence that she should not give him any information about the rape, “it’s quite important you don’t say it to me, not now” (Act 1, Scene 2), Gayle partly tells him what her male acquaintance, Mr Taylor, did to her. On the night following the funeral of her little sister, she goes to bed but wakes up with him on top of her. Without being affected by her efforts to rebuff him, he takes down the bottom of her pyjama, unsuccessfully tries to penetrate her, and starts licking her genital area. The last words in Gayle’s narration are “He raped me” (Act 1, Scene 2), but it is ambiguous if there was any penetration in the following moments. The difference is significant because according to British law, for an offense to be prosecuted as rape, the man has to penetrate the vagina, anus, or mouth of the victim with his penis (Sexual Offences Act, 2003). Otherwise, what Gayle describes is more likely to be classified as sexual assault, which is defined as sexual touching without consent (Sexual Offences Act, 2003). Differentiating between the two is not intended at belittling Gayle’s experience, but to highlight that she does not get to tell the whole story, with the necessary details that would convince the barrister, the jury, and the judge that she was, in fact, raped.

The second time Gayle appears on stage is during the actual trial of her rapist when she is interrogated by his lawyer, Edward. The playwright’s conscious choice to include only this particular bit from the trial in the play has two implications for the relationship between rape and law. Firstly, it emphasises that, in a rape trial, the victim is the one

being tried and her version of the events is under interrogation³⁶. The scrutiny women are subjected to is also reflected in the cover of the Nick Hern Books edition used in this study. The image resembles an oil painting and portrays in detail two heads, one belonging to a woman and the other to a man. The two appear to be kissing, but the viewer can only see the woman's face; the man being depicted from behind. The cover invites the viewer to observe some details of her face and how she experiences the kiss while hiding the man's identity.

The second implication of delivering to the audience only a single part of the trial is to serve as a reminder that the information imparted is fragmented and incomplete at best. Edward's view that, in a trial, "There are a lot of chaotic facts and you want to pick your way through and convince the jury of *one* simple line" (Act 1, Scene 6, emphasis in original) further supports this inference. Expectedly, the line followed by any defence lawyer in any trial is the one that shows their client in the best possible light, while at the same time dismantling the accusations brought by the complainant and portraying them in an unfavourable light. When it comes to rape, however, the defence lawyers centre their attention not on their client, but on the victim's integrity.

The exchange between Edward and Gayle exposes the lawyer's strategy, i.e., to focus on Gayle's character and her behaviour prior to and in the wake of the event. Brownmiller (1975) observes that "The standard defense strategy for punctuating holes in a rape case was (and is) an attempt to destroy the credibility of the complaining witness by smearing her as mentally unbalanced, or as sexually frustrated, or as an oversexed, promiscuous whore" (p. 238). In the play, Edward's cross-examination starts with insistent questions related to Gayle's level of intoxication, questions abruptly followed by "Did you invite Mr Taylor to join you in your bed?" (Act 1, Scene 4). When she replies negatively, Edward leaps to the morning after the rape, focusing his attention on a phone call she receives from her brother Teddy³⁷. We are informed that, on the telephone, Gayle tells her brother that she cannot speak at that moment, but will return his call later. Following this lead, Edward insinuates that by not seizing the opportunity to inform

³⁶ This paradox has also been discussed in the first chapter of this study with regard to the play *It's True, It's True, It's True* (2019) by the Breach Theatre.

³⁷ One of the previous questions asked by the barrister was related to the amount of alcohol consumed by Teddy, presumably in an attempt to discredit him as a witness. In the National Theatre's production of the play (2017b), the brother's name becomes Gary.

someone of the rape, she fails to react in a way a woman in her situation normally would. Oddly, what is perceived as a woman's 'normal' response to rape is widely determined by men such as police officers, lawyers, and judges who should have no say in the matter³⁸. Basing her statement on testimonies from rape victims, Brownmiller (1975) warns that a woman's response to the traumatic event of rape is not necessarily the same as another's: "She may cry, scream or tremble; she may be rigidly composed; she may smile inappropriately or tell the story with bursts of laughter" (p. 361). Gayle explains that what Edward distinguishes as 'inappropriate' behaviour for a woman who was raped is, in fact, the consequence of her fear of the assailant. As she suspects he did not leave the apartment, this concern prevents her from entering the sitting room to take her mobile phone. Not having a telephone at hand may also account for not calling the police immediately after the rape. When the perpetrator leaves, she can eventually return her brother's call and let him know what has happened. He comes to her apartment and, as Edward insidiously points out, they have one more drink. Then, Edward brings up a message exchange between Mr Taylor and Gayle where he thanks her for the previous night and hopes that she feels all right. This message is perceived as the expected reaction from a man who claims that he had sexual intercourse with a woman the night before, whereas her answer "*Yeah I'm fine [sic]*" (Act 1, Scene 4, emphasis in original) is not the expected reply from a woman who claims that she was raped by this man. However, it is quite evident that such expectations are dictated by a legal system that is a component of the male-dominated society.

The way Edward expresses his disbelief in Gayle's testimony throughout the interrogation does not follow a straightforward approach. On the contrary, he conveys his message to the jury and the judge through intonation, pauses, and by condescendingly repeating her own words, all these techniques used by him to present her as an unreliable witness. The lawyer's final attempt towards this goal is to open Gayle's mental health records to discussion in the courtroom. It appears that the jury had already listened to her psychotherapist's testimony describing Gayle as "quite sad and fed up about her life" (Act 1, Scene 4). From this description, Edward sees fit to ask her if she is paranoid, imagines

³⁸ Presently, the most intense point of debate regarding British law in relation to sexual violence is the appurtenance of several judges to the Garrick Club, a male-only club in London founded in 1831. Feminist legal scholars such as Dr. Charlotte Proudman believe that male judges belonging to a club that excludes women should not be allowed to preside over cases of rape and sexual violence against women.

things, or is hypervigilant. The whole line of interrogation aims to portray her as an untrustworthy person who consumes too much alcohol and who has a mental disorder. In this way, Edward systematically tries to undermine the victim's story by attacking not only her testimony but the victim herself. In 1975, Brownmiller argued that a defence lawyer's strategy to shatter the credibility of the rape victim focuses either on her mental condition or her sexual background and appetite. While the first path is clearly displayed in Edward's attempt to portray Gayle as mentally unstable and unreliable, her sexuality does not surface in the cross-examination. The reason why a lawyer cannot bring to the court this aspect of a woman's existence is the 'rape shield law' that prohibits the victim's "previous sexual histories from being revealed" (Holst, 2004, p. 199). As Bohmer (2003) informs:

Traditional rape law allowed evidence to be admitted on this issue, on the grounds that past sexual history was relevant to whether the victim was likely to have consented to the alleged rape. According to this logic, a virgin was less likely to consent to sex than one who had previously engaged in sex, especially if that person were shown to be 'promiscuous'. (p. 254)

The myth that certain 'kinds' of women are more willing to have sexual intercourse than others may not be directly employed in court at present, but this does not mean that the attitude of the members of the legal system (and society in general) has also shown a significant improvement. After the trial is over and the jury finds Mr Taylor not guilty of rape, Edward remarks that "she liked it a bit of rough, if you looked at her previous boyfriends" (Act 1, Scene 6). Edward's knowledge of Gayle's 'sexual idiosyncrasies' begs the question as to why the defence lawyer would even investigate her sexual background if there is such a concept as a 'rape shield law'. A possible explanation is that he needs this information to make an assessment of Gayle's character. Alternatively, he might have planned to include it in the trial in an oblique way, a practice that has been occasionally followed³⁹ by defence lawyers since the law that renders a victim's sexual history confidential was passed.

³⁹ A case in point is the 1991 rape trial of William Kennedy Smith, a member of the Kennedy family. He was found not guilty of rape and this favourable verdict could be attributed to his lawyer's masterly use of language and circumvention of the law. By referring to a former boyfriend (not husband) as the father of the victim's daughter, Smith's lawyer included in the trial a reference to the victim's sexual history (Matoesian, 2004, p. 205); having a child without being married presumably pointing out to her 'promiscuity' and therefore unreliability.

In *Consent*, the ways in which lawyers (ab)use the legal language are prominently displayed soon after the trial scene, when Tim and Edward meet at a café with Zara, Kitty's friend with whom she tries to set Tim up. The purpose of the meeting is for them to help Zara prepare for an acting role where she impersonates a criminal barrister. Edward starts by describing a trial as a fight "between two opposing narratives" (Act 1, Scene 6). In his experience, the most important factor for one narrative winning over the other is insinuation and the tool to win is unambiguously language. For Aston (2020), "Raine is a dramatist who excels at conveying the power relations produced through the command, or lack thereof, of language" (p. 45) and perhaps this quality of writing cannot be more fruitfully exploited in any other context than that of the legal system. As Matoesian (2004) puts it, "Rather than being a neutral tool for representing reality, language shapes, constitutes, and mediates legal reality at every turn in the trial" (p. 205). Being the person responsible to "fuck up that [the victim's] narrative", Edward asks closed questions, which he nonchalantly defines as "nasty questions where the choice is not genuine". He illustrates the process with the following questions: "You *wanted* him to have sex with you, didn't you? Yes or no?" (Act 1, Scene 6, emphasis in original). This hypothetical example has its equivalent in a non-hypothetical situation when he cross-examines Gayle:

Edward: Did you invite Mr Taylor to join you in your bed?

Gayle: (incredulously) Did I...?

Edward: It's a simple question, yes or no will suffice. Did you invite Mr Taylor to join you in your bed? (Act 1, Scene 4)

According to Ehrlich's (2001) research into judicial discourse, open-ended questions are not frequently implemented in cross-examination, "because they allow witnesses greater latitude in formulating answers" (p. 108), something that a defence lawyer does not wish. Understandably, Edward acts in the best interest of his client, which in this case is Mr Taylor, but the fact that he describes her as "a complete pisshead who kept changing her story" (Act 1, Scene 6) shows a derogatory attitude towards her and raises doubts about his moral tact. At this point, it must be stressed that, in the play, Gayle actually never changes her story. For the few times she gets a chance to speak, she describes her experience (as much as she is allowed to share) through precisely the exact details.

However, Gayle creates for herself an opportunity to finally utter the parts of her rape experience that have been obscured by the legal system. This takes place in the middle of a Christmas celebration hosted by Edward and Kitty when unexpectedly, Gayle appears at the door of their house. Despite the celebratory occasion, the three couples' conversation (in the meantime, Tim and Zara have also become an item) once more revolves around rape. Edward in particular expresses even harsher views on rape victims compared to the previous gatherings and states that he's "fed up with them. They're all mad. No smoke without fire" (Act 1, Scene 9). This is the atmosphere into which Gayle makes an entrance, "Like a Fury from an ancient Greek tragedy" (Sierz, 2017, para. 3). After remarking on the irony of seeing both the prosecutor on her case and the barrister who defended her rapist partying together, she asks: "Why wasn't I allowed to say that he beat up my friend when she dumped him? That he stamped on her thigh and broke it, that he was already on bail for that?". When Tim tries to interrupt her, she adds "That's why I *answered* his fucking text [the text asking if she is fine]. I didne [*sic*] want him to come back and do *me* in. But they told me I cannae [*sic*] say anything about his 'past'" (Act 1, Scene 9, emphasis in original). Edward explains to her that a judge decided that Mr Taylor should be tried on the facts of the case alone, to which Gayle rightfully opposes: if his past ought not to be brought into the courtroom, then why was her mental health file open for investigation?

Perhaps the most emotional moment of the play is the one in which Gayle reveals the reason she was having therapy:

Gayle: 'Cause [*sic*] I was *raped*, that's why. Years ago. Before Patrick Taylor. Ten years ago. Me and my sister⁴⁰ hitchhiking, two blokes, picked us up and took us to the woods. They did us side by side. That's why I was *having* therapy. Ten years later. *Because* I was raped. (Act 1, Scene 9, emphasis in original)

The play does not clarify if Gayle makes an official complaint when she is raped for the first time, but judging by her lack of knowledge about the legal system, it can be inferred that she does not. Contradicting Edward's presumptuous opinion that women, who report rape after a long period of time, do so to justify their "failed life" (Act 1, Scene 9), Gayle mentions this rape to indicate the *law's* failure in protecting women who have been victims of rape. Even though she was still having therapy ten years after the event, the

⁴⁰ It is not clear if the sister Gayle refers to is the little sister after whose funeral Mr Taylor rapes her.

play does not suggest that she was not able to have a normal life, at least not until she makes an official complaint about the second rape.

The experience of having been raped twice and being further victimised by the legal system leads Gayle to commit suicide by hanging soon after she confronts Edward. This bit of information is abruptly delivered to the audience through Kitty's mouth to explain a change in the behaviour of her husband. After the event, it appears that Edward has withdrawn from his family to dedicate himself to his work. What is interesting here is that Gayle's suicide is not discussed in the play in relation to the adverse effects the trial has on her as a rape victim but with regard to the negative effects it has on the lawyer who defended her rapist and on his family. As a dramaturgical choice, delivering the news of Gayle's suicide in this manner strengthens the argument previously made in this study, that her existence (even the end of her existence) is linked to her rapist, either directly or through his proxy, Edward.

The impact a trial can have on rape victims has aptly been called 'secondary rape', or 'rape of the second kind' (Matoesian, 2004, p. 203; Ehrlich, 2001, p. 1). Gayle is a clear example of the devastating effects such an experience can have on a woman in her situation. She starts as a confident person who knows for sure that she has no fault in the rape incident. She wants to face the man who raped her and refuses to give her testimony from behind a screen⁴¹: "I will look at him and say what he did" (Act 1, Scene 2). She is powerful on the stand and does not yield when challenged by the defence lawyer's cross-examination. Despite this display of courage⁴², she ends up as a woman who is afraid – and rightfully so – to leave her apartment because the man, who raped her, is still free and, even worse, knows where she lives. This means he can abuse her again as he is now confident that he will not be punished for it. Up to this point in the play, it would seem that the victimisation of a female character, who experienced rape, has not been avoided

⁴¹ Screens are curtains or panels placed between the defendant and the witness when the latter gives evidence against the former, in an attempt to protect the witness (MoJ Victims' Guides: Going to court, p. 8).

⁴² Claiming that Gayle displays courage throughout the whole process does not mean that a woman reacting in different ways shows a lack of courage, as in the case of a woman who chooses to be protected by a screen when she testifies against her rapist. Even if Gayle is in the end crushed by the unfairness of the verdict of the trial (which again does not mean that she is weak), it has to be noted that it must be very difficult to stay strong throughout the violating experience of a rape trial.

by the playwright, however, as it will shortly be revealed, Raine chooses an intriguing device to balance this portrayal.

The beginning of the second act marks a narrative shift from Gayle's rape case, which dominates the first act, to Kitty and her rape accusations against her husband Edward. During the Christmas party, right before Gayle interrupts their gathering, Edward and Kitty have a heated argument about his past affair, a deed for which Kitty was not able to truly forgive him. As she later explains, that evening is when she decides to make him also feel the pain of being cheated on. In the first scene of the second act, Edward expresses his suspicion that she is having an affair, suspicion that she eventually confirms. The man she chooses to take revenge on her husband with is their friend and Edward's colleague Tim. Edward's response to the confession of this affair – but even more to Kitty's declaration that what started as an act of revenge turned into love – transforms from anger to agony. The following lines and stage directions sum up the episode following their argument, which Kitty will later report as rape:

He starts to cry.

Kitty: I'm sorry.

Beat.

Ed...

He straightens up. He takes her in his arms. She resists.

Edward: Please.

She lets him hold her.

Please.

He starts to take her clothes off. She resists.

He cries. (Act 2, Scene 1)

This brief excerpt leaves no doubt that Kitty does not welcome her husband's touch and tries to rebuff him. The National Theatre's production of the play⁴³ (2017b), on the other hand, stages this moment in a more equivocal manner. When Edward starts crying, Kitty is shown touching him, hugging him back when he embraces her, and putting her hands on his face when he kisses her. All these physical movements suggest that she reciprocates his advances. Furthermore, the moment when the play text notes that he starts undressing her is not included in the performance. The audience hears Kitty saying 'no', but this refusal might be interpreted as being aimed at his attempt to ask for forgiveness, not at

⁴³ The National Theatre's production of the play was accessed online via the National Theatre at Home platform. All future references to the performance are from this production of the play.

engaging in sexual intercourse. Kitty's negative response seems to mean she rejects Edward's apology, yet, she proceeds to have sex with him, two apparently divergent acts. The way in which this episode is portrayed renders Kitty's marital rape accusations more ambiguous, particularly when contrasted with Gayle's case, which only emphasises that marital rape is the most obscure form of rape. What takes place in the 'marital bed' as well as the instant when the situation turns from an acceptable interaction between spouses into rape is difficult to comprehend and predict.

The stage adaptation of the play makes it challenging for the audience to believe that Kitty is raped by her husband. To a certain degree, this is true for the couple's friends Jake and Rachel too. However, it is noteworthy that the audience as well as the two lawyers learn about the events that transpired between the spouses from Edward's mouth, in precisely the same way as they learn about Gayle's rape. Perhaps surprisingly though, of the two friends, the person who believes Edward's claim that it was consensual sex and not rape, is Rachel. Jake's understanding of the event is pertinently summarised as follows:

Jake: You knew she didn't want to. She said she was leaving you. She said she was in love with Tim. And then you have sex with her. Without her consent. It's a classic case of marital rape. (Act 2, Scene 2)

In Edward's perception, disregarding his wife's refusal means "showing passion", but when faced with his fellow lawyer's statement of facts, he admits that "In that case, I suppose I could say, *technically*, I raped her" (Act 2, Scene 2, emphasis in original). Without being affected by this admittance of guilt, Rachel still declares herself on Edward's side. Contradicting Brownmiller's (1975) conviction that "Women believe the word of other women. Men do not" (p. 387), in this instance, it is a man who believes the words of Kitty, not a woman.

Contemporary British theatre presents plenty of other examples of women who do not believe other women that they have been raped. In Vicky Jones' play *The One* (2014), Kerry, a secondary character in a story about a couple's destructive journey through love, desire, and violence, confides in the protagonists Jo and Harry that her boyfriend might have raped her. Kerry and Harry work together and both of them were Jo's teachers when she was a college student. While Harry is supportive and understanding, Jo says if "she didn't say anything and didn't physically try to stop him" (Scene 3), then what took place

between them is not rape. The dialogue that follows this observation reveals that, just like Kerry's boyfriend, Harry often acts in ways that go against Jo's wishes. These sexual interactions, however, do not make Jo feel as if he raped her and this may account for her refusal to characterise what happened to Kerry as rape. Two other plays discussed in the first chapter of this study, namely *The Village* (2018) by April de Angelis and *It's True, It's True, It's True* (2018) by the Breach Theatre, also display a lack of empathy from women who have not experienced the horrible act of rape themselves towards those who say they have. These examples cast a shadow over the feminist belief – firmly held in this study as well – that more women in the legal system would inevitably mean more empathy towards rape victims. Nonetheless, in order to formulate a negative conclusion in relation to the implications of having more women in the field of law (or any other authoritative positions as a matter of fact), their presence should be more than a decorative attempt for inclusiveness. Only then, there is hope that women would start viewing the world not through the lens of patriarchy and a systematic lack of empathy, but through the eyes of the people who have been its victims for so long.

As a patriarchal institution, the legal system exhibits an empathetic lack towards rape victims and operates to their detriment. In the play, the effects of this attitude are exposed through the story of Gayle, a woman who is not believed when she claims to be raped and, as a result, ends her own life. This perspective makes for the victimisation of women to be reproduced in the context of theatrical representation as well. Nonetheless, the playwright balances this problematic aspect by assigning another role to the actress who impersonates Gayle, Heather Craney, in the second act of the play, namely that of a solicitor called Laura. In her new role as Laura, Craney displays a very different image than her character in the first act. Aston (2020) views this change of role, as “the schizophrenic split between the woman who was shamed and failed by the legal system and the professional who simultaneously advises Kitty *and* Edward on whether either of them has a case” (p. 53, emphasis in original). While as a rape victim, she speaks with a Scottish accent, as a representative of the law, she speaks in RP⁴⁴. In her second role as Laura, she no longer represents an outsider whose national identity and way of talking set her apart, but the authoritative voice of the mainstream.

⁴⁴ Received Pronunciation (RP) is the accent traditionally regarded as the standard and most prestigious form of spoken British English.

The National Theatre's production of the play also ensures that her physical appearance reflects her change of status, as in the second role, Craney wears elegant clothes and glasses and has a ponytail. All these choices make for a more composed appearance, especially taking into consideration that the last image of Gayle the audience has in their minds is not the composed one during her rapist's trial, but the one from the Christmas celebration when she appears dishevelled and very distressed. There can be many reasons why she gives the impression of being composed at the time of the trial: it can be a reflection of her confidence that justice will be served; an attempt to appear reliable to the jury and the judge; or the desire to not give the rapist the satisfaction to see her collapse. Regardless of which explanation holds true, her expectations are not met and she is crushed under the unfairness of the trial and the verdict. Unlike Kitty, who is touched when she sees how the legal system abused Gayle, Laura the solicitor is not moved when she learns from Kitty that Edward raped her; she even advises against pressing charges. As it was previously mentioned, she gives legal counselling to both Edward and Kitty at the same time. She does so while seated on a chair and the two clients move around her. At times, this technique makes it difficult to understand to whom she addresses her words. Nevertheless, when she says "Believe it or not, I am on your side" (Act 2, Scene 3), it is quite evident that, just like Rachel, she is on Edward's side. By assuming this position, Gayle/Laura is not a victim of the system anymore but places herself on the other side of the law, the side that 'shames and fails' women who report rape. This choice on the part of the playwright reveals the thin line between being in a victim position and reinforcing the system; even women sometimes are not able to understand the experience of rape and may side with the perpetrators, something that has repeatedly been emphasised in this study.

The role of Edward in this second instance of rape is not that of a lawyer anymore, yet, he *is* a lawyer and he knows how to use the law to his advantage. To destroy the credibility of the witness, in this case, his wife, he plans to employ a strategy similar to that which he uses against Gayle in court: to present her as mentally unstable, violent, and emotionally immature because "she never had boyfriends before" him (Act 2, Scene 3). The last argument is the exact opposite of what he says about Gayle, that "she liked it a bit rough" (Act 1, Scene 6), judging by her previous boyfriends' testimonies. These contradictory remarks convey the message that, in a male-dominated society, a woman's

sexuality represents a problem regardless of which end of the spectrum it posits itself; if she has no interest in men and therefore sex, she is ‘emotionally immature’ and if she has many boyfriends and enjoys sex in ways deemed inappropriate for women, she is ‘promiscuous’. Double standards are the norm, as ‘rough’ sex is acceptable only as long as men are the ones who desire and initiate it. Women’s choices in sex are regulated by men and any deviation from the norm is used against them in varied contexts, one of them being rape trials.

Nonetheless, Kitty’s deficient sexual history is not the central aspect he focuses on. The audience learns from Kitty’s discussion with Laura that he threatens to ask for sole custody of their child on the basis of her mental instability. In the previous scene, when Edward tells Rachel and Jake about the event that Kitty reports as rape, he makes a point of her depression. Rachel is opposed to this out-of-character description and says that Kitty is not depressed, to which he replies: “Yet” (Act 2, Scene 2, emphasis in original). He is justified in his predictions because later in the play Kitty tells Laura, “That’s the fucking thing! I can’t sleep. I’m on Temazepam⁴⁵. He can make the narrative plausible. It’s terrifying. I mean, he’s a barrister. It’s what he does” (Act 2, Scene 3). It is plain that Edward is mapping out a narrative right from the beginning. Thanks to his professional experience and having witnessed this scenario time and again repeating itself in legal cases, he knows what a trial would do to Kitty and expects her to be depressed as a result of it. As prime operators of the system, men like Edward write the narrative of the law and, regretfully, when women assume the role of operators of law, they imitate them. Lawyers who do not reproduce these attitudes do exist, but the general image and the one conveyed by the play, lead to this conclusion and serve as a critique of the members of the legal system regardless of their gender.

The play *Consent* tackles two rape cases and in both instances, the victim is acquainted with the perpetrator. Scholars have argued that rape by someone known to the victim has the potential of being more damaging than when the perpetrator is an unknown man, partly “because of the loss of trust in intimate relationships” (Purdy, 2004, p. 123). Famous legal feminist scholar, Catharine MacKinnon (1989) also stresses that “Women often feel as or more traumatized from being raped by someone known or trusted,

⁴⁵ Temazepam is a medication used for severe cases of insomnia.

someone with whom at least an illusion of mutuality has been shared, than by some stranger” (p. 177). Yet, in the play, both Gayle and Kitty seem to be more traumatised by other aspects of the rape, not by the fact that they are raped by a male acquaintance or a husband respectively.

The identity of the rapist itself seems not to be the only problem, as numerous other factors play a role in the way the female characters in the play experience rape, during and after the event. In Gayle’s case, the aggravating factors are Mr Taylor’s violent past and the fact that he rapes her in a moment of immense vulnerability, i.e., immediately after the funeral of her little sister. There must be a reason why Raine chooses this moment for Gayle to be raped by Mr Taylor, but the play does not provide enough clues to decipher it. One tentative suggestion can be that the playwright aims to emphasise that men take advantage of the moments when women are vulnerable to pressurise them into having sexual intercourse, particularly when we take into consideration that what Gayle reports as rape, Mr Taylor describes as consensual sex. Perhaps worst of all these aggravating factors, this is not the first time she has been raped, so she cannot perceive it as an isolated case, but as a permanent risk. Although it is not specified in the play, it can be inferred that the sister who was raped next to her in the woods many years before is the same sister after whose funeral she is raped for the second time. If so, Raine’s decision to place the second rape after her funeral adds a different dimension to the story; it may account for why Gayle decides to press charges against Mr Taylor, perhaps in an attempt to get justice not only for her rape but also to get a kind of symbolic justice for the rape of her sister.

It is clear that the first experience of rape had a profound impact on Gayle’s mental state without this meaning that she is not able to live a normal life afterwards. When Gayle’s rape trial starts, she is seeing a physiotherapist to help her process the rape that happened to her ten years before, but she is remarkably composed throughout the whole process. Only at the end, after her rapist is found not guilty, does she collapse. Kitty, on the other hand, seems to collapse even before making the official complaint. The fact that she is overwhelmed may be related to her proximity to the legal system. Although she is not a lawyer herself, she is surrounded by lawyers and has repeatedly seen what their approach, and her husband’s (the man she accuses of marital rape) attitude in particular, is to rape victims. Furthermore, she has witnessed what the rape trial does to Gayle. An additional factor for her reluctance to go on with the rape complaint is her reasonable fear

that Edward being a successful barrister who knows very well how the system works, may take her child if she accuses him of rape and perhaps for this reason, she withdraws the complaint. Using a woman's love for her child to manipulate her is not an exceptional example in society, but one of the tactics often employed by men to control women's lives. Nevertheless, above all, the factor that affects these two women even more than being raped by someone they know, fear of being violently assaulted, emotional vulnerability, and fear of losing the custody of a child, is the legal system. In bringing to light the shortcomings of the law, the playwright's purpose is to underscore the importance of reforming the legal system to better accommodate and protect rape victims, ensuring that they are not further victimised or marginalised in their pursuit of justice.

Consent appears to be a problematic issue, especially when it arises from situations regarding sexual intercourse as both parties must consent to the act; one party may be too involved while the other has hesitations; excitement and hormones (although this may sound like a defence for the occurrence of rape, it is nevertheless an excuse that is employed); giving or asking for verbal consent during what is considered to be an act of love may be deemed unnecessary by the parties involved, and such examples could go on. However, while reading the pages of this study, the question of whether the word 'rape' is applied too widely or too easily seems to arise. The protagonist of *An Immaculate Misconception*, Dr. Melanie Laidlaw fails to inform her lover that she inseminates herself with sperm collected from a condom after they had sexual intercourse. Without asking for Melanie's consent, a male colleague injects his sperm into one of her ovaries. In *Immaculate*, a contemporary version of the story of the Virgin Mary, Mia is impregnated with God's child. The child may also be Lucifer's since he took the body of a mortal with whom she had sex. Neither of these male supernatural figures, however, had asked for her consent beforehand. The protagonist of the play *Freak*, Georgie, willingly engages in group sex with five unknown men, but she is heavily intoxicated while doing so, therefore her consent is problematic at best.

Some other examples expand the spectrum of rape even further. The element of sexual infidelity is a common thread among the plays discussed here. In *Freak*, at least one of the five men attending the 'stag party', the one who is about to get married, cheats on his fiancé with Georgie. In *Consent*, both Edward and Kitty cheat on their partners. Even in *Immaculate*, God's messenger is angry with Mia because she 'polluted' the divine

offspring of God with the possibility of the child being Lucifer's, an act that from God's perspective (and Lucifer's) could be seen as a betrayal. According to the British playwright Zinnie Harris (2022), cheating should also be categorised as rape: "not telling your sexual partner you're sleeping with someone else denies them their sexual consent, and to sleep with them without informing them should be seen as rape" (n.p.). This is not just a moral issue, but a practical one as well, because it is not uncommon for one partner to transfer a sexually transmitted disease, from the person they are having an affair with to their partner or vice-versa if this person is unaware that they are married or already in a relationship.

The common thread of all the examples above is a lack of consent, and more importantly, a lack of informed consent. At least from a legal perspective, violence, physical resistance, witnesses, and sexual history are no longer determining factors in defining rape; consent is. Perhaps the most crucial question that arises then is: If consent is so central to what counts as rape and what counts as consent is open to interpretation and subject to changes in time, then where are the limits of rape? For instance, a recent legal development in 2020 is the prosecution of 'stealthing', i.e., removing the condom during sex without the other person knowing it or lying about using one, as rape in England and Wales (Rape Crisis England & Wales, *What is Stealthing?*). A few decades ago, the criminalisation of this act was beyond imagination and what the future will bring in this respect cannot be foreseen at the moment.

Furthermore, are there 'degrees' or 'forms' of rape or does the existence of a wide spectrum of actions defined as rape 'bankrupt' the term, as Rachel from *Consent* argues when Kitty accuses her husband of marital rape (Act 2, Scene 4)? Is a brutal gang rape, that leaves its victim nearly dead, rape in the same way as having sexual intercourse with your husband without wanting it simply because refusing might result in an unpleasant interaction the next day? Although any discussion of rape is intertwined with the law, the purpose of this study is not to pass a verdict on whether what happens to the female characters is rape or not but to show that, although these plays do not provide answers to questions about consent and rape, they can, however, encompass contradictions and show the complexity of the two concepts, both from a legal and a social perspective.

The plays *Immaculate* by Oliver Lansley, *Freak* by Anna Jordan, and *Consent* by Nina Raine challenge what counts as consent and the conditions under which it is given, to different degrees. What the examples of rape portrayed in these plays share is that they confound the audience. On a personal account, it was a revelation and a shock to read the play *Immaculate*. Born and raised as a Christian, I have always felt a kind of closeness to the Virgin Mary (regardless of whether I consider her a real person or a symbolic figure), perhaps since she is a woman in a predominantly male landscape. Although I have considered myself a feminist for the biggest part of my life and I have been interested in the subject of rape for a long time, it was not until I read this play that I realised the implications of a young virgin woman being impregnated with God's child. My belatedness has nothing to do with a fear of blasphemy or eternal damnation, but I simply did not acknowledge the lack of consent before reading the play.

This change of viewpoint took place as a result of the fact that the playwright switched the narrator. For more than two millennia, the story of the Virgin Mary has been told by others (primarily male writers) and carrying God's child has been interpreted as an honour, as being the chosen one. Oliver Lansley, on the other hand, allows her, i.e., her contemporary equivalent, the opportunity to narrate her own experience of discovering that someone planted their seed inside her. Similarly, the other plays also give priority to women's experience. In Anna Jordan's play, no space is allocated to men as Georgie and her niece Leah are the ones to present their sexual journey (although their experiences and expectations are shaped by a familiarity with pornography which again is a male perspective). Finally, the play *Consent* emphasises the significance of giving women a voice through an inverted strategy; it reveals the consequences when the legal system does *not* allow women who report rape to tell their stories and, moreover, manipulates their narrative to put the blame on them or portray them as unreliable. As male-dominated spheres, the legal system, society, and even literary representations, have long denied women a say in matters that concern them and only them, such as their body being raped by a man. However, contemporary British theatre has shown a keen interest in redressing this paradox even before the beginning of the #MeToo movement, as the three plays discussed here, first performed in 2005, 2014, and 2017 respectively, demonstrate.

CHAPTER THREE

WHERE THERE IS WAR, THERE IS ALSO RAPE

Rape permeates every aspect of women's lives; they are at risk of being raped in their homes, at the workplace, in public spaces, at music festivals, in prison, in medical facilities, at school, and as a result of technological innovations, even in the virtual space⁴⁶ (Sales, 2024). There is, however, a particular context that heightens the vulnerability of women furthermore, that is war. Due to its very nature, war has always been characterised by violence. Acts deemed immoral and/or illegal during peacetime, such as murder and the destruction of private property and historical monuments, are justified during war in various ways. The justifications include the claims that war is a necessary evil to change a totalitarian regime with a democratic one or to bring stability to a geographic area as well as being a matter of self-defence against an enemy or danger. It would appear that the suspension of social norms and the limitation of legal prohibitions during times of conflict⁴⁷ provides soldiers with a licence not only to kill and destroy but also to rape, which is both an immoral and illegal act.

Rape has accompanied wars from the beginning of recorded history. For instance, the Hebrews, Ancient Greeks, and Romans considered female captives as “legitimate booty” of war (Brownmiller, 1975, p. 33). Yet, even in the distant past, attempts have been made to prevent soldiers from raping. One of the earliest examples took place in 546 when an Ostrogoth king named Totila forbade his men to rape the Roman women after they captured Rome (Brownmiller, p. 34). However, it was not until the aftermath of World War II – fourteen centuries after Totila's prohibition – that it was conceivable to legally recognise rape as a war crime. Wars are endowed with an international quality due to the fact that they usually involve, in direct and indirect ways, two or more countries. It is by virtue of this quality that international humanitarian laws can be formulated and

⁴⁶ A sixteen-year-old girl in the UK reported to the police that while wearing a virtual reality headset and playing an immersive game in the metaverse, her avatar was raped by a gang of players. This incident raises the question of whether virtual rape is ‘real rape’. Sales (2024) informs that this is not a recent concern, but dates back at least to 1993 and an article by Julian Dibbell about rape in cyberspace.

⁴⁷ Although for political studies or international law, differentiating between terms like ‘war’, ‘conflict’, ‘combat’, ‘violent struggle’, ‘civil war’, ‘armed conflict’, etc. is deemed significant, in this study, the preferred terms are ‘war’ and ‘conflict’ and they are used interchangeably throughout. They are employed to refer to any kind of armed conflict between different countries or between different groups within the same country.

when these laws are transgressed, international tribunals can be established for this specific purpose. An overview of the four most significant tribunals in history is necessary for an understanding of how rape came to be included among war crimes, this recognition being a crucial step towards the prosecution, punishment, and ultimately, prevention of wartime rape.

The first attempt to assign responsibility for the atrocities of World War II was the Nuremberg Trial, which was held by the Allies against the members of the defeated Nazi Germany between 1945 and 1946. Reports concerning countless rapes committed by German soldiers against Jewish women were included in the legal proceedings. However, despite being supported by evidence, the accusations could not be prosecuted because they were not in the jurisdiction of the court (Buis, 2004, p. 268). Davis (2000) reports that the disregard of rape during the trial has also been attributed to not being considered a deed as serious as the mass killings of Jewish people or to the fear that an initiative of this kind would prepare the way for the investigation of similar acts committed by the Allied troops (p. 1233). This strategy proved to be wise since long after the war, it was discovered that when the Soviets occupied Berlin in 1945, the Russian soldiers raped nearly one million German women (Lilly, 2004, p. 269). What is noteworthy is that *they* were the Allies who kept the most detailed records of rapes perpetrated by German soldiers, which then turned into reports that they presented to the court (Brownmiller, pp. 54-55). This paradoxical situation points out the hypocrisy of men who feel indignation when other men hurt or offend ‘their women’, when in fact it is acceptable for them to do it, and moreover, display comparable behaviour towards the ‘enemy’s women’ if given the chance.

The next important trial regarding the war crimes committed during World War II was the International Military Tribunal for the Far East, held in Tokyo between 1946 and 1948; this time, Japanese troops were called to account for the abuse of the Chinese people. The city of Nanking – at the time of the war, the capital of the Republic of China – was devastated by the Japanese troops, in an event that came to be known as the ‘Rape of Nanking’⁴⁸, not in reference to the rapes committed, but to the massacre of civilians. However, the event could have been called the ‘Rape of Nanking’ just as well for the

⁴⁸ Rape metaphors in narratives about the invasion of places is a noteworthy phenomenon and it will be addressed later in this study.

horrendous rapes committed. The main witnesses testifying about these acts were foreign missionaries. An American missionary reports that “We estimate at least 1,000 cases a night, and many by day” (as cited in Brownmiller, p. 58). Taking into consideration that the attack lasted for approximately six weeks, the resulting number of rapes is at least 42,000. This is, however, just an estimation, as the world will probably never know what exactly the people of Nanking, women, men, and children, experienced during that time, an event that has been characterised as one of the most gruesome wartime atrocities. The favourable aspect of the trial in relation to rape is that “unlike Nuremberg, the Tokyo Trial did establish a precedent for prosecuting rape”, though it still remained a crime of a secondary character to the killing of civilians (Davis, p. 1234). Even if rape did not receive the attention it deserved, these two international tribunals opened the way for its inclusion among war crimes.

Half a century and two more international tribunals for conflicts that shocked the world were the necessary impetus to “specifically enumerate rape as a war crime” (Davis, p. 1224). The conflicts in question are the Bosnian War and the Rwandan Civil War, both belonging to the first half of the 1990s. Davis informs that they “have galvanized international attention and put the issue of rape in war at the forefront of the public’s consciousness” (p. 1228). The war in Bosnia has been described as “a genocidal campaign (...) against the country’s Muslim residents”. Unlike other wars, “the degradation of Muslim women was one of the primary aims of the conflict” (Skinner, 2004, p. 28). Some sources claim that up to 60,000 women have been raped (Thomas & Ralph, 1994, p. 93). The merit of the International Tribunal for Crimes in the Former Yugoslavia (1993) is that, for the first time in history, rape was declared a war crime, but it was also criticised for not addressing “the horrors involved in things such as rape camps and routine and systematic rapings of women”, focusing instead on isolated incidents (Davis, p. 1242). The civil war in Rwanda reveals a similar image; the mass rapes committed against Tutsi women by Hutu radical groups are estimated to have reached numbers as high as 250,000 (Haddad, 2011, p. 110). The International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda (1994) is special in the sense that it was the first time that a defendant, Jean-Paul Akayesu, was tried and convicted for the crime of genocide. Furthermore, “sexual violence was included as an integral part” of the crime of genocide (Davis, p. 1244). The history of the humankind abounds in wars and conflicts to such an extent that it can be characterised as the fossil

print of our species. It also abounds in acts of rape, but what is striking in the above examples is that rape was employed on an incomprehensible scale and in unimaginable violent ways, so much so that it explains why it is called a weapon of war. Though very late, by the end of the 1990s, the international community recognised that rape is a recurrent phenomenon with devastating implications for individuals as well as communities and that it should be tried with as great seriousness as the other war crimes.

Development as substantial as the recognition of rape as a war crime cannot be accomplished only through legal efforts. Other factors, social and political, play a significant role. In the case of rape, the most salient influence can be attributed to the Women's movement of the 1960s and 1970s. As Wood (2018) highlights, "The global recognition of rape and other forms of sexual violence as crimes of war rather than unavoidable by-products of war is a remarkable achievement of the international women's movement" (p. 514). The most prominent feminist activist in the fight to show how pervasive rape is, both in times of peace and wartime, is Susan Brownmiller. Her seminal work *Against Our Will: Men, Women and Rape* (1975) is the first study to provide a critical analysis and also a timeline of wartime rape, starting from speculations about prehistoric humans to the Vietnam War, which effectively ended in 1975, the same year when Brownmiller's book was published. At this point, it has to be underlined that, despite the fact that rape is among the numerous crimes committed by US troops in the Vietnam War (Wood, p. 514), the anti-war movement, which was prompted by the same conflict, did not concern itself with the issue of rape. At the end of her chapter on wartime rape, Brownmiller adds a personal note about this state of affairs:

I am sorry that the peace movement did not consider the abuse of women in Vietnam an issue important and distinctive enough to stand on its own merits, and I am sorry that we in the women's movement, struggling to find our independent voices, could not call attention to this women's side of the war by ourselves. The time was not right. (p. 113)

The time was not right indeed, as the international community – just like the anti-war movement – was reluctant to take wartime rape seriously or as stated before as seriously as the killing of civilians, which explains why nearly two more decades after this book's publication were necessary to recognise rape as a war crime.

Prior to Brownmiller's extensive research, the function of rape in war and conflict was largely unknown, seen as 'a by-product' of war, or as an unfortunate but inevitable

result of sending men to war. *Against Our Will: Men, Women and Rape* made it very clear that rape in war happens because rape in peacetime happens and it cannot be eradicated without a significant change in men's attitudes towards women. The essence of Brownmiller's argument is that "Rape is more than a symptom of war or evidence of its violent excess. (...) War provides men with the perfect psychological backdrop to give vent to their contempt for women" (p. 32). Thomas and Ralph (1994) support Brownmiller's reasoning: "the fact that it is predominantly *men* raping *women* reveals that rape in war, like all rape, reflects a gender-based motivation, namely, the assertion by men of their power over women" (p. 88, emphasis in original). Similarly, Cockburn (1998) describes wartime rape as "a continuum of violence from the bedroom to the battlefield" (p. 8). Nevertheless, even if this is the core of the problem, there seem to be other factors as well that add to the occurrence of wartime rape, as Brownmiller's reference to 'psychological backdrop' also implies.

Baaz and Stern (2009), are among those who shed a light on this psychological aspect by conducting research into the rapes committed by the armed forces during the Congo War (1998-2003). They published their findings based on interviews with soldiers who actively participated in the war, revealing how these men employ two discourses of rape: "one in which rape is essentially sexual, driven by the male libido; and a different discourse according to which rape is not about sexual desires but is instead an expression of anger and rage", the 'anger and rage' resulting from "their inabilities (...) to inhabit certain idealized notions of heterosexual manhood" (p. 497). In some cases, these aspects can be complemented by tolerance from commanders and "unit social dynamics that generate participation through pressure to conform or coercion" (Wood, p. 523). Even if the 'anger and rage' are the result of imposed notions of masculinity, the target of these men's frustration is not their superiors, the causes why they find themselves actively engaged in war, or the people who coerce them into rape (if they are coerced) but the women who cross their path. Although it is important to comprehend why men rape in general and whether there are certain conditions related to war that enhance the occurrence of these acts, the fact of the matter remains that rape is inflicted preponderantly against women. Therefore, how rape during wartime affects the women themselves should be an integral part of any theory of wartime rape. Furthermore, women

have been hidden from history for centuries and it is important to give them a voice through any possible means.

One channel to bring forward individual stories of women who were raped during times of war and conflict is art, including literary works in different genres as well as non-fiction or screenwriting. In fact, throughout history, art has been a close companion of wars, but it traditionally focused on the male experience, offering only a supporting role to female figures. A case in point is Homer's *Iliad*, an epic poem that narrates the events of the Trojan War, which some scholars perceive as a real event (Lord, 1971). The poem is about "the anger of Achilles, as provoked by a quarrel between him and the leader of the expedition, Agamemnon, who offended his pride by depriving him of his concubine and valued war-prize, BRISEIS" (Hard, 2004, p. 463, emphasis in original). Briseis' fate is shared by many other Trojan women, such as Cassandra who is raped by Aias, given as a concubine to Agamemnon, and murdered by his wife Klytaimnestra (Hard, p. 479). Yet, these female characters' connection to the 'real heroes' of the Ancient Greeks, including Achilles and Agamemnon, is the only reason why we know more about them than about other women in similar situations. More contemporary works, however, tend to give privilege to women's experience, occasionally by retelling classical accounts of wartime rape from a female perspective, such as *Welcome to Thebes* (2010) by Moira Buffini, in which Thebes is a city in the twenty-first century and its president is a woman. This contemporary adaptation of the tragic fate of the kingdom of Thebes brings to the fore the theme of wartime rape and the women's response to it. It also introduces elements that portray familiar characters in a different light, like the representation of Polynices, the brother for whom Antigone lost her life in Sophocles' tragedy *Antigone*, as a rapist.

Although new interpretations of classical stories continue to be written and produced, there is also a significant interest in providing fictionalised accounts of more recent events that speak directly to contemporary audiences. *The Body of a Woman as a Battlefield in the Bosnian War* (1987/1997), a play by Matei Vişniec, tells the story of a refugee woman who is pregnant as a result of being raped during the Bosnian War. The play *Threshold* (1992) by the group Derry Frontline also deals with the issue of pregnancy as a result of rape, this time during the 'Troubles', a significant moment in Northern Ireland's history. *As a War Heroine, I Speak* (1994) by Nilima Ibrahim is another play about wartime rape which shows the impact of the Liberation War of Bangladesh on

women. The Bosnian War has been the subject of other plays as well. A significant example of the so-called ‘in-yer-face theatre’, Sarah Kane’s *Blasted* (1995) draws a parallel between the atrocities taking place in Bosnia and a rape in a hotel room in Leeds, UK. Offering a more personal account, one of the monologues in the play *The Vagina Monologues* (1998) by Eve Ensler, namely *My Vagina was My Village*, is based on the playwright’s interview with a Bosnian woman refugee who was a victim of rape in former Yugoslavia. The cinema also reacted to the events taking place in former Yugoslavia. Jasmila Žbanić’s movie *Esma’s Secret: Grbavica* (2006) is a story about a single mother’s life following the mass rapings of the Bosnian War. Other war atrocities did not come to the light as fast as those in former Yugoslavia. As previously mentioned, the criminal acts committed by the Allies during and after the World War II have been obscured by those committed by the Nazi. In an attempt to shed light over experiences that have been kept secret for decades, the film *Silenced Shame* (2013), directed by Fruzsina Skrabski illustrates the rape of the Hungarian women by Russian soldiers in the aftermath of World War II. In relation to the same war, the graphic novel *Grass* (2019) by Keum Suk Gendry-Kim gives a visual account of the life of a Korean girl as a ‘comfort woman’⁴⁹ for the Japanese troops during World War II. Even this brief glimpse into literary and cinematic representations of wartime rape shows that conflicts from all over the world have drawn the attention of writers from different countries, some of these works having been originally published or produced in languages other than English.

In this study, two plays were selected to discuss the representation of wartime rape, one which deals with the Roman occupation of Britain and one that touches upon the Somali Civil War. These moments in history were fictionalised for the stage, in *Boudica* (2017) by Tristan Bernays and *Credible Witness* (2001) by Timberlake Wertenbaker, respectively. The first play is set in 61 AD and tells the story of Boudica, Queen of the Iceni, and her two daughters. Unlike her husband who becomes a client king⁵⁰ in the service of Rome, they abandon Britannia upon its occupation. Upon the king’s death, they

⁴⁹ During World War II, thousands of women were captured by the Japanese army and imprisoned in ‘comfort stations’ where they were systematically raped. The Japanese soldiers referred to these women captives as ‘public toilets’, which “suggests how brutally they must have treated them” (Linehan, 2004, p. 47).

⁵⁰ The *Oxford Classical Dictionary* defines ‘client kings’ as “monarchs who were bound to Rome in an asymmetrical relationship and/or alliance and whose rule depended on Rome’s continual approval” (Wilker, 2022, n.p.).

return and attempt to claim back their kingdom. Their request results in Boudica being beaten and her daughters being raped by Roman soldiers, abuse followed by war between the Romans and the tribes she gathers to fight under her leadership. *Credible Witness*, on the other hand, is set in modern times and follows a mother's journey to England to find her son who immigrated for political reasons. In her quest, she is held in a detention centre with people from other countries. Among them is Ameena from Somalia, who escaped her country after a brutal rape, thus the issue of rape emerges as a cause for migration from a space of conflict. The reason why the play *Boudica* is selected in this study is because it provides a rather unique opportunity to observe what happens when a woman is not a secondary character in war, but the leading figure. *Credible Witness*, on the other hand, is included in this chapter because it brings to the fore a significant feature of war, i.e., migration, but also because Ameena's rape remains neglected by scholars, despite the fact that there are several studies that engage with the play from various perspectives. This study tackles the two pieces of theatre mainly through Brownmiller's commentary on wartime rape but the discussion will also be complemented with insights from political and sociological studies when the content of the plays requires it.

3.1. BOUDICA: A REMARKABLE EXAMPLE OF A FEMALE WARRIOR AND LEADER IN BRITISH HISTORY

Man shall be trained for war, and woman for the recreation of the warrior: all else is folly.

– Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spake Zarathustra*

War has traditionally been seen as a practice dominated by men, from the decision to enter a war up to the signing of peace treaties. War has also been seen as a practice that requires courage and strength, qualities traditionally associated with masculinity. Women's role in war, on the other hand, has been obscured from history. Yet, they have been an integral part of war efforts in different roles, ranging "from nurses, clerical workers, sex workers, faithful wives, and patriotic mothers to pilots and trainers of pilots, drivers, teachers and workers in war industries" (Cohn, 2013, p. 23). Furthermore, "armed groups depend on women and girls as combatants, porters, messengers, spies, weapons

smugglers, cooks, sex slaves, and ‘bush wives’⁵¹ (Cohn, p. 23). While playing some of these parts in war may classify as a voluntary act, being exploited as sex slaves or ‘bush wives’ is undoubtedly not something that women would choose for themselves. Traditional beliefs about war and gender roles are reinforced even by one of the most influential modern thinkers, Friedrich Nietzsche, as the above quotation from his book *Thus Spake Zarathustra* (1883/1998) shows. However, when he writes that ‘woman should be trained for the recreation of the warrior’, he presumably does not imply the sexual slavery of women at the ‘rape camps’ in former Yugoslavia (Skinner, 2004, p. 29), the ‘comfort stations’ in China during World War II (Linehan, 2004, p. 46), nor the U. S. military brothels in Vietnam (Brownmiller, p. 95). What Nietzsche probably means is that women’s contribution to war should be limited to peripheral roles and to improving men’s lives by providing comfort, warmth, and moral support. What his words also imply is that women are not suitable, physically and mentally, to fight in war, which is a widely held belief even in today’s world.

In the past decades, there has been a sustained effort to train women for military service as well as to provide more opportunities for them to access areas they were previously unable to, including direct ground combat. In the British context, the decision to grant women the right to perform combat roles was announced in 2016 by David Cameron, at the time the Prime Minister of the UK. The *Independent* (Hall, 2018) reports that this news was met with reproach by high-rank (male) individuals. Their concern was about the biological ‘weakness’ of female soldiers (para. 6), which would inevitably mean a lowering of standards, put lives in danger, and jeopardise the national defence (para. 7). The same piece also mentions other reasons for men’s reluctance to having women fight beside them, i.e., men’s “inner need to protect women, or simply because of sexual attraction” (para. 8). It would seem that male soldiers’ comfort is prioritised at the expense of women’s professional development. This kind of stereotypes associated with women seem to be reinforced during the recruiting phase as well. In relation to the inclusion of women in the army, the British Army’s official website (n.d.) provides a list of FAQs labelled as ‘Be yourself’ with the questions being along the lines of: ‘Can I wear earrings?’, ‘Are extensions & fillers allowed?’, or ‘Am I allowed to paint my nails?’

⁵¹ The term ‘bush wives’ refers to women and girls who are taken “as sexual slaves and placed in forced marriages with the high-ranking men in the rebel forces” (Cullen, 2020, p. 115).

(n.p.). These questions reproduce in a new context, a context previously unavailable to women, stereotypes about their main interests and what it means for a woman to ‘be herself’. Moreover, it is doubtful that the first thing a woman who considers joining the frontline wants to be informed about is whether she can paint her nails or not. A more pertinent question would be ‘Where do I address if I experience sexual violence in the army?’ since from a very bleak perspective, it could be argued that one of the unfortunate results of women entering the military milieu simply signifies the addition of one more item to the already long list of spaces where women can be raped and sexually harassed, such incidents having already been reported in the British Army (University of York, 2023).

The implications of having women actively fighting in war and the diversity of women’s experiences of war are explored in this study through the play *Boudica* (2017) by Tristan Bernays. Although the story is set in 61 AD, it resonates with modern conflicts throughout the world as well as past wars. The play premiered at Shakespeare’s Globe on 8 September 2017 and it tells the story of Boudica, Queen of the Iceni, a British Celtic tribe, and her two daughters, Blodwynn and Alonna. The playwright explains in the introduction to the play that the motivation for writing “this ridiculous epic” has sprung from a conversation he had with a female friend and actor about the lack of ‘fun’ roles for women:

Seven years later (...) I remembered this conversation and realised I wanted to write something for women. Something where they got to play complex and difficult characters (...). I wanted to write a show for women where they got to have the fun. Where they got to wield swords and lead armies. Fight and destroy. Kill and be killed. Something where they got to be warriors. (Bernays, 2017, *Introduction*)

Before delving into how Bernays’ intention to write about women as warriors translates into a discussion of wartime rape, a summary should be provided, particularly since the many ancient names of places and characters make the escalating series of events difficult to follow⁵².

⁵² In the general introduction of this study, it has been explained that the play *Boudica* will not be discussed as an adaptation because the interest of this study in relation to the play is on women’s experience of war, particularly when they are actively engaged in war. However, it has to be mentioned that the names and the events presented in the play are historically accurate and that Boudica’s story has captured the imagination of many authors throughout the centuries, a film adaptation having been produced as recently as 2023 with the title *Boudica: Queen of War*.

The play is divided into two parts and five acts, which are preceded by a prologue delivered by the Goddess of Victory Andraste. The story begins with Boudica and her daughters' return to the city of Camulodunum after a self-imposed exile of eighteen years. The reason for their return is the death of King Prasutagus, Boudica's husband. Upon their arrival, they inform Catus Decimus, the Roman Procurator of Britannia, that they have come to claim half of the king's wealth and kingdom, as the Icenian law provides. When he replies that Icenian law has no authority in Roman territory, Boudica strikes him. As a result of her insolence, Catus orders his men to take them away: Boudica is to be flogged in the central square and her daughters to be raped. Following their ordeal, the women leave to find refuge with Cunobeline, the King of Trinovantes. Boudica urges him to fight against the Romans and suggests asking the help of Badvoc, the King of the Belgics, a tribe known for their brutality. The king reluctantly accepts this addition to their army and under the leadership of Boudica, they start a military campaign. After they occupy Camulodunum, the Belgic warriors celebrate their victory through singing, drinking, and raping. At some point, Alonna realises that two soldiers are about to rape Silvia, a Roman captive, and saves her, which infuriates Badvoc and his men. The next city occupied by Boudica's army is Londinium. Alonna is deeply affected by the violence perpetrated during the occupation of these cities and decides to speak in secret with the Roman General, Gaius Suetonius, in the hope that they will consider making peace with the Britons. Feeling wronged by Alonna, her sister betrays her and informs the leaders of the tribes that she is not in the camp. Boudica refuses to declare Alonna a traitor and this decision angers the others. Since the Romans refuse to surrender, one final battle takes place at Watling Road (a previous battle in Verulamium is only mentioned), this time in favour of the Romans with considerable casualties to the Britons. Boudica and Blodwynn hide in the forest, where despite the latter's resistance, the queen requests a group of soldiers to take her daughter to a safe place and commits suicide to avoid being captured. The play ends with an epilogue related to the aftermath of the war. Seven months later, Alonna finds her sister in a rebel camp in the woods. Blodwynn attacks her but cannot go as far as killing her and leaves instead. The play ends with Alonna and Silvia starting their journey towards a place that they can call home.

Acts of rape are a prevalent aspect of the conflict between Romans and Britons. Furthermore, Brownmiller's argument that "a simple rule of thumb in war is that the

winning side is the side that does the raping” (p. 35) is validated by the events narrated in the play. The Romans rape the Icenian women when they are in a position of power and, conversely, the Britons rape the Roman women when they regain control over their land. Although only two instances of rape – the rape of Boudica’s daughters and Silvia’s attempted rape – receive considerable attention in the play, there is no reason to regard them as isolated events in the long conflict for the domination of the isle of Britain. A parallel event takes place after Boudica’s army destroys the city of Londinium and murders its inhabitants. What is noteworthy about this moment in the narrative is that the Roman troops had already abandoned the city. Having received troubling news about the greatness of Boudica’s army, Suetonius orders his men to move north-west to wait for reinforcements and urges the civilians to do the same. However, a soldier tells him that “the citizens will never leave their home” (Part Two: The Flood, Act 4, Scene 5), something he predicts correctly. This dialogue is followed by a Roman woman’s appearance, “clothes torn and stained with ash” looking for her son. She describes to the audience what she witnessed during the initial attack, but her speech breaks once she comes to the part when the Britons “grabbed the girls, / Little girls, they threw them on the ground and they – they –” (Part Two: The Flood, Act 4, Scene 6). What the soldiers did to the little girls seems to be beyond her power of expression. Yet, the audience can infer from the shock and silence interrupting her speech that what happened to the little girls was rape.

In the play, it appears that the characters condone the abusive behaviour of the soldiers due to the fact that the army is *the* indispensable tool to protect, conquer, or take back a certain territory. Boudica herself justifies the acceptance of the Belgic warrior’s brutality in the following manner: “We needs must have these men, or else we can / No longer hope to bring down mighty Rome” (Part Two: The Flood, Act 4, Scene 1). The exception to this rule is Boudica’s daughter Alonna. She is the only person who sees the danger in allowing such behaviour to go on and actually does something to put an end to it. Furthermore, a victim of rape herself, she does not hesitate to defend an ‘enemy’ woman from being raped by the men she fights along. After Boudica’s army takes back her throne, she asks Badvoc to “inform the troops that they may take what gold / And prisoners they can find” (Part One: The Coming Storm, Act 3, Scene 5), the so-called ‘spoils of war’. This order is immediately followed by a scene where two Belgic Warriors

chase Silvia with the clear intention to rape her, a scene framed by the army singing a victory song. This juxtaposition of frames stresses that ‘taking prisoners’ as part of the celebration of victory also stands for the raping of captive women and more importantly, that Boudica herself, as the general of the army, gives the men permission to do so. Alonna witnesses the incident and demands that they release Silvia, however, they draw their weapons and attack her. In response, she wounds one of the warriors. Boudica and Badvoc interrupt them and a quarrel begins among them. The queen tries to defend her daughter but does nothing for the captive woman. Both Badvoc and Alonna appeal to her sense of justice in addressing this dispute:

Badvoc: But she did claim their property
Which you yourself decreed was free to loot.
What: may she now tell my men what to do
With these their goods?

Alonna: Is this the world, Mother,
You’d have us fight for? Where girls are naught but meat
To sate the hunger of such savage beasts? (Part Two: The Flood, Act 4, Scene 1)

Boudica’s initial decision is to let the men take Silvia, but after her daughter’s insistence, she offers the alternative of buying her, something that they reluctantly accept.

This moment in the play becomes the cause of discord between the tribes similar to Agamemnon’s robbing Achilles of his concubine in the *Iliad* nearly leading to the defeat of the Greeks. The implications might not have been as serious as Achilles’ refusal to fight in the Trojan War, but withholding Silvia from the Belgics does seem to have played an important role in the defeat of Boudica’s army. After the incident, Badvoc refuses to speak with Boudica and Cunobeline has to act as an intermediary, just like Phoinix, Odysseus, and Aias act in the *Iliad* when they are sent to placate Achilles (Hard, 2004, p. 463). Cunobeline tells Boudica that “the king is proud and demands you go to him” (Part Two: The Flood, Act 4, Scene 4), something that she apparently does not. Badvoc refuses to follow Boudica’s orders from that moment on and the consequences are felt by the Britons at the Battle of Watling Road. Lack of coordination leads to Boudica’s army getting trapped in a narrow pass between the Romans ahead and the Belgics behind and, inevitably, being defeated. The attempted rape of Silvia sets in motion a series of events that result in Boudica’s army losing the war, in contrast with the first rape in the play, the

rape of Blodwynn and Alonna, which is the incentive for Boudica's decision to fight the Romans in the first place.

While Alonna refuses to let the same acts of violence to which she and her people have been subjected throughout the years be perpetuated, her sister Blodwynn displays a very different image. This can be better understood by comparing her reaction to the same event, i.e., the attempted rape of Silvia, with Alonna's. Initially, Blodwynn does not interfere in the quarrel. However, when her mother offers to buy Silvia and pay the men a large amount of gold from their reserves, she objects: "You're not / About to waste our gold on this one girl?". Disregarding Alonna's and Boudica's efforts to silence her, she adds: "'Tis madness! Badvoc, keep you the girl – (...) – she is your men's. We shall not waste / A single coin of ours upon –" (Part Two: The Flood, Act 4, Scene 1). Unlike Alonna, Blodwynn is portrayed as a cruel character, as a woman who forgets that, not long ago, she was in exactly the same situation as Silvia. She too was given to Catus' men as a 'recompense' for their military service. How can then a woman who has experienced rape, encourage other men to go on with the rape of another woman? The final meeting between the sisters sheds light on the reason why Blodwynn acts in such fierce ways towards the Romans, even towards civilians like Silvia. She asks her sister:

Blodwynn: Does it not haunt you every day? The stink
Of them; their rough and callused hands
Tearing your clothes, pinning you to the ground?
My flesh is filthy with it, my heart is soiled,
I fear that I shall ne'er be clean of it. (Epilogue)

It would seem that Blodwynn is blinded by her hate of Romans. However, her hate does not spring so much from the fact that they occupied her land, but because they raped her. The Roman woman is not a woman in her distorted perception, but a Roman and a reminder of what the men did to her and as such, deserves to suffer. Seeing her, or any other Roman who crosses her path, suffer appears to provide some temporary relief to her anger and alleviate the physical and emotional pain she must have felt when she was 'pinned to the ground' by a whole garrison of men, a moment of extreme powerlessness.

Taking revenge for an act of rape and punishing a rapist understandably enables the victim to feel a sense of empowerment. Even Alonna does not seem to be disturbed by the idea of killing the men who raped her. Together with her mother and sister, they take revenge on the men – at least some of the men – who abused them. Three of the Roman

soldiers receive a name in the play: Cato, Lucius, and Sestus. It is evident that they are among the men who rape Alonna and Blodwynn since they inform the mother that her daughters have been raped by the whole garrison, therefore they are included. Furthermore, although it is not clearly mentioned in relation to the beating of Boudica in the public square, any of them could have been among those who “rip the clothes from her back and tie her face first to a stake”, and then “flog her until the blood runs to the floor and mixes with the mud and the dirt” (Part One: The Coming Storm, Act 1, Scene 5). During the Battle of Camulodunum, the three women are no longer vulnerable targets, but have a whole army to assist them in case of need; on the battlefield, Boudica kills Sestus and the sisters kill Cato and Lucius. These acts of revenge, however, are mentioned only in passing. There is no ceremonial aspect to them and no cathartic closure as is the case, for instance, with another play discussed in this study, April de Angelis’ *The Village*. There, the village women come together to punish the man who raped many of them and terrorised their village and they do so in a ceremonial act of disembowelling the rapist. There can be certain possible interpretations of why no narrative space is provided for the killing of the rapists of Alonna and Blodwynn. One explanation may be that the playwright aims to emphasise that these men are not worthy of further consideration from the women whom they abused, nor from the audience. As it has been mentioned already, the focus of the play is on women’s experience of war, with rape being a significant aspect of it. More probably, however, the intention behind this dramaturgical choice is to suggest that no amount of violence can ever compensate for the horrible ordeal that these women had to go through; Alonna alone comprehends this (arguably after she kills some of the men who raped her).

The act of taking revenge for the rape of women has traditionally been seen as the prerogative and even duty of the male relatives of the victims. Women have been denied this form of agency not only in historical incidents, but also in literary context. The reason why this happens is related to the understanding that women are the property of men, either their husbands or fathers, and therefore raping them is an offence to this sense of possession. In the play, after Catus orders his men to punish Boudica and her daughters for their insolence in attacking him (and also asking for their share of the kingdom), he explains to Boudica the reasoning behind his decision:

Catus: Queen Boudica – since Roman law decrees

That daughters, when unwedded virgin things,
 Are to their father property, we do
 Lay claim upon your girls as rightful ours
 And as a gift unto our hard worked men
 Bestow these girls as playthings which they may
 Take sport in as they please (...). (Part One: The Coming Storm, Act 1, Scene 4)

In the context of war, regardless if it happened two millennia ago or in the twenty-first century, women are raped not only for being women and therefore seen as inferior and weaker when compared to men who are supposedly superior due to their physical strength and cultural privilege but also as a way of humiliating the enemy men (Brownmiller, p. 38). The violence inflicted on women is meant to hurt their male relatives or, more extensively, the male members of their community. In the play, since the father is dead and there appears to be no other male relative to replace him, the rape of the daughters is portrayed as an injury done to the mother. The Roman law may not recognise Boudica's right to rule the kingdom after the death of her husband, but Catus needs to direct the humiliation of raping one's daughters towards someone. In the absence of a more 'suitable' alternative, he can only choose Boudica. This may also account for why she is 'only' flogged and not raped like her daughters, which is a puzzling aspect of the story. Not ordering his men to rape her definitely has nothing to do with a kind of respect for her age or status, since he does not acknowledge her as queen.

So far, the discussion of *Boudica* has been limited to women's experience of wartime rape since this is the main goal of this study. However, why the women in the play are raped deserves some consideration and this cannot be achieved without also speaking about men's motivations/excuses for rape. Before Boudica and her daughters appear at Camulodunum, the three Roman soldiers already named, Cato, Lucius, and Sestus, are depicted on watch outside the feasting hall. The soldiers complain about the cold weather and make vulgar remarks about the native women:

Lucius: (...) It's not just the cold that's making his cock shrivel. Have you seen the natives?

Sestus: I try not to look.

Lucius: It'd put a man off his food, let alone fornication. I haven't got my end away in so long, my balls are as blue as berries. (Part One: The Coming Storm, Act 1, Scene 2)

Their words stand in stark contrast with their actions; it appears that they take no issue with raping two native women, Alonna and Blodwynn when the opportunity presents itself. Moreover, they inform their mother that “they did their womanly duties with great aplomb” (Part One: The Coming Storm, Act 2, Scene 2). Alonna and Blodwynn are no longer the undesirable “flea-ridden savage” (Part One: The Coming Storm, Act 1, Scene 2) creatures that they speak of at the beginning of the play, but women who no longer make their ‘cocks shrivel’. As previously argued, the myth that only certain women are raped is shattered in Bernays’ play. Furthermore, the same is the case with the myth that rape is a matter of sexual attraction. Though it is obvious that these men are eager to have sexual intercourse, their perception of the attractiveness of the victim has nothing to do with the act of forcing themselves on them. What it has to do is these soldiers’ sense of entitlement to overpower women by means of sheer force.

Another excuse for the rape of women during wartime is revealed when Catus addresses Boudica saying that he gives her daughters as a gift to his ‘hard worked men’. Actually, Brownmiller stresses that “in medieval times, opportunities to loot and rape were among the few advantages open to common foot soldiers, who were paid with irregularity by their leaders” (p. 35). Her observation may have been made in relation to medieval times, but this practice seems to have existed since ancient times and continues to play a role even in modern conflicts (Wood, 2018). Yet, this explanation is refuted in the play. When Boudica offers to generously compensate the Belgic warriors for taking Silvia from them, they are not satisfied with the offer; they prefer to do what they please with the captive woman instead of gaining a significant amount of gold. Thus, rape in the play can be better understood as an act of humiliation, not only of the men who have failed their duty to defend ‘their’ women but also the humiliation of the women themselves. The soldiers seem to rape when an opportunity presents itself because they are in a position to do so, not because of sexual needs or to compensate for lack of payment.

A common feature of the rape instances described in the play is that they are perpetrated by a group of men, not an individual; the daughters of Boudica are raped by the whole garrison and two men attempt to rape Silvia. Gang rape is defined as “sexualized violence involving two or more assailants” and it functions as “a method of punishment, social control, bonding, and as a rite of passage” (Lambert, 2004, p. 86). In

relation to prehistoric times, Brownmiller estimates that “one of the earliest forms of male bonding must have been the gang rape of one woman by a band of marauding men” (p. 14). Although there are only a few clues why the men in the play rape as a group, it is plausible to consider that, at least in the case of the Roman soldiers who come from different parts of the Roman Empire and know each other very little, gang rape is a way of bonding. The Belgic warriors, on the other hand, seem to be driven by a crueller desire. After she rescues her, Alonna tells Silvia that she is lucky to have escaped because “‘Tis said / The Belgics sport in torture” (Part Two: The Flood, Act 4, Scene 3). In war, torture is usually associated with extracting information, but in this case, torture seems to have no other purpose than providing a sadistic kind of pleasure to these men and perhaps, humiliating their victims in new and painful ways.

What is interesting is that, according to Cohen (2013), “gang rape is far more common in wartime than in peacetime” (p. 463). This aspect of rape is justified by Gayatri Spivak in her seminal essay ‘Can the Subaltern Speak?’ (1988) in the following way: “The group rape perpetrated by the conquerors is a metonymic celebration of territorial acquisition” (p. 99). The prerequisite for gang rape taking place during war – and in fact for any wartime rape – is the occupation of a certain territory. The act of acquiring a territory provides the invaders access to the women who live in that territory. In the play, the Roman soldiers have access to Boudica’s daughters’ bodies due to the fact that they had already occupied their kingdom and the Belgics have access to Silvia’s body only after they invade and seize her city. Women’s bodies in general are connected to the invasion of their land and access to them means that the land has been (or is about to be) conquered as well. This argument is vividly exposed by Brownmiller when she writes,

The body of a raped woman becomes a ceremonial battlefield, a parade ground for the victor’s trooping of the colors. The act that is played upon her is a message passed between men—vivid proof of victory for one and loss and defeat for the other. (p. 38)

Theatre does not fail to acknowledge that a woman’s body becomes a ‘ceremonial battlefield’ during war. As was mentioned in the introduction of this study, the Bosnian War in particular drew the attention of playwrights from different parts of the world. A personal account is given in one of the monologues included in Eve Ensler’s play *The Vagina Monologues* (1998) by a woman who experienced rape during the Bosnian War.

The female narrator of the monologue *My Vagina was my Village* paints a powerful contrast between her vagina/village before and after the war and shares with the audience the horrible acts of rape she experiences at the hands of six men for several days. “My vagina my hometown” no longer exists. “They invaded it. Butchered it and burned it down” (pp. 62-63). The gang rape leaves the female narrator without a home as well as rendering her incapable of connecting to her body, without a sense of belonging to a place or herself.

In the play *Boudica*, the sexual assault of the women is related to the occupation of the territory in a subtler way, that is through references to actual soil. These references appear in different contexts throughout the play. When Blodwynn asks Alonna if she remembers the moment of rape she mentions being pinned to the ground. The rape of her daughters is used by Boudica to convince the other tribal kings to join her against the Romans. She tells them how her daughters were “dragged into the fields / By these his [Catus’] men who did defile them –” (Part One: The Coming Storm, Act 2, Scene 3). After Boudica’s army manages to take back the city that rightfully belonged to Boudica – the same city where her daughters have been raped – the Belgic warriors (and Boudica’s allies) catch Silvia, “they hold her down and prepare to rape her” (Part Two: The Flood, Act 4, Scene 1). The Britons are not satisfied with taking back Camulodunum, but invade the unprotected city of Londinium as well. Here, they grab little girls, and before raping them, “they threw them on the ground” (Part Two: The Flood, Act 4, Scene 6). The image of a woman being raped while forcibly being held down is not something atypical, but in the context of war, a woman is not held on a bed or a car seat, for instance, but on the bare ground. By repeatedly bringing forward this element, the rape of the women in the play is firmly linked to the territory that has been invaded or conquered, by the Romans and the army lead by Boudica alternatively, in a perpetual cycle of violence.

The link between the rape of women and the invasion of a territory is so strong that rape has also been employed as a metaphor for violent moments in wars. The Japanese troops’ destruction of the Chinese city of Nanking during War World II, which came to be known as The ‘Rape of Nanking’, has already been the subject of inquiry in this study as one of the most horrible war-related events, but the metaphor also appears in relation to other conflicts. For instance, the atrocities committed by the German troops when they entered Belgium in August 1914 passed into history as the ‘Rape of Belgium’ (Realfonzo,

2023). This metaphor continues to be employed in contemporary contexts as well, as a recent article written for *The Spectator* by the Slovene philosopher and cultural theorist Slavoj Žižek (2022) demonstrates. ‘Was Russia’s ‘rape’ of Ukraine inevitable?’ asks Žižek in the title of this piece. Although he refers to Vladimir Putin’s use of violent sexual language in relation to the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the way the words ‘rape’ and ‘inevitable’ are brought together is problematic. Since rape is *always* evitable, it would have been more proper to place the word ‘inevitable’ in inverted commas instead of ‘rape’. This enduring comparison of a country or city with a woman’s body should not come as a surprise since in many languages and cultures, the gender of such nouns is feminine. Furthermore, in literary representations, they are typically personified as female entities. According to Rank, the “symbolic conception of the conquered city as a maiden originally derived from the fact that the conquering men actually possessed by force the women of the captured city” (as cited in Winter & Rank, 2010, p. 14). What this means is that the fact that when a territory is conquered, the local women are raped is the reason why cities – and this can be extended to larger spaces as well, including the planet Earth – came to be portrayed as female bodies in literature.

The language of the play reflects the association of a certain territory with a woman’s body. Moreover, it does so by appropriating words and phrases associated with either romantic relations or violent sexual interactions. From the beginning of the play, the Romans complain about the living conditions in Britannia. They have trouble adapting to its weather and geographical landscape, lack of certain fruits and foods, as well as the uninviting appearance of the locals. Upon their first meeting, Catus asks the newly appointed general Suetonius, “What need compels you leave Rome’s *warm embrace* / To this *sad frigid island*” (Part One: The Coming Storm, Act 1, Scene 3, emphasis added). As it can be observed, Britannia and Rome are portrayed as female bodies and contrasted with each other. Unlike Britannia, Rome is depicted as a desirable woman who is courted by foreigners and missed by those who are forced to abandon it. During their only direct interaction, Catus again points to Boudica that she and her daughters inherit nothing after the death of the king because he “was far from frugal in his royal ways, / And time and time again he *courted* Rome / For loans he did not pay” (Part One: The Coming Storm, Act 1, Scene 4, emphasis added). However, this is the Romans’ outlook; ‘Rome’ is seen through a totally different perspective by the Britons. When Alonna tries to convince her

sister that killing innocent civilians is not fair, Blodwynn replies that it will not be fair, “Till we have stole each coin they stole from us; / *Defiled* each inch of land that they *defiled*; / And finally and ‘fairly’ paid them back / Each single scar that they have given us” (Part Two: The Flood, Act 4, Scene 6, emphasis added). For the locals, ‘Rome’ is the embodiment of a violent entity who abuses their land in a similar way as the Roman soldiers abused Boudica and her daughters’ bodies. Regardless of which side utters the words, Romans or Britons, this kind of metaphoric language belongs to a patriarchal discourse. This is conspicuous because just like men view women as their property, male leaders make ruthless decisions to protect or expand ‘their’ land. Yet, men are not the only ones who display these attitudes. As numerous examples in this study reveal, women often adopt a male perspective as well and act according to well-established patterns of behaviour.

The title character Queen Boudica could fittingly be described as a patriarchal figure. Although she is a multifaceted character and a strong woman with a mind of her own, qualities desirable in a female character, it is disappointing to see that she takes no issue with the rape of Silvia. On the other hand, her behaviour towards her daughters after they are raped is not as cruel as a male leader’s usually is in similar contexts. Shakespeare’s play *Titus Andronicus* has already been mentioned in this study, but it is noteworthy to contrast the eponymous character’s reaction to the rape of his daughter with Boudica’s. After Lavinia is raped and mutilated by her father’s enemies, Andronicus kills her to avoid being reminded of the shame brought on his name. When her daughters are presented to Boudica by the Roman soldiers, Alonna and Blodwynn are overwhelmed by shame and cannot face their mother. Boudica’s reaction, however, is one of empathy and recognition that there is no reason for them to be ashamed:

Boudica: Don’t
 turn away,
 My loves –
 (...)
 Don’t look so ashamed.
 (...)
 Though they have bruised and blemished you, you are
 My daughters still, my blood, my dearest fruit
 As dear to me as my own self. (Part One: The Coming Storm, Act 2, Scene 2)

Boudica's worldview stands in between the worldviews of her two daughters. Although they have similar life experiences and together endure the rape at the hands of the Roman soldiers, their responses to the injustices of life are diametrically opposed; Alonna chooses to protect those who find themselves in similar situations, while Blodwynn continues living by virtue of the anger that the moment of rape made her feel. She is devoted to taking revenge on whoever is associated with Rome, including her sister for speaking of peace with the Romans.

The merit of the play rests in the plethora of female characters that it portrays. Furthermore, seeing women in leading positions in war is a rare occurrence due to the societal prejudice that a woman cannot perform as well as a man from a military point of view nor can a woman lead an army into battle like Boudica does. These attitudes are mirrored in the beginning of the play when the Roman soldiers mock the rumours that after the death of King Prasutagus, his wife is to rule the Icenian people. One of them comments: "They are led by a woman? No wonder this backward island fell" (Part One: The Coming Storm, Act 1, Scene 2). However, after she reveals how powerful the Britons' army is under her command, their perception of Boudica changes. When a soldier reports to Catus that Boudica's army took Camulodunum, their dialogue expresses the confusion caused by the news of her success:

Catus: You're telling me this – woman came and killed

All of our men, crushed Camulodunum

And slaughtered all its citizens?

Soldier: Oh no,

She is no woman, sir, but something worse.

Report is Hell itself, fearing her wrath

Had spat her out again upon the earth –

She did appear belike a Fury, eyes

Full-brim with venom, hair wild serpentine

And bearing bloody vengeance in both hands. (Part Two: The Flood, Act 4, Scene 2)

Later in the play, the general Suetonius also learns about Boudica's achievements from a Roman official. The answer he receives to the question if "a woman leads the rebellion" is "If you can call her a woman, sir – she is / A dark avenging succubus (...)" (Part Two: The Flood, Act 4, Scene 5). The only way these male characters can make sense of Boudica's role in the war against Rome is to perceive her as 'unwomanly', as a mythological monster. Many women before her have been depicted as monsters due to

their power or beauty; the ‘hair wild serpentine’ in fact bringing to mind the image of Medusa, who, in later depictions of the Ancient Greek mythical tale (such as Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*), was initially a beautiful girl transformed into a monster (with an incredible power) by Athena who was jealous of her beauty (Hard, 2004, p. 61). Ironically, Boudica is demonised for acting in the same way as men do in wars, since society does not expect nor accept women to be determined, full of rage, and powerful. This manifestation of double standards can be observed in other spheres of life as well, as is the case with sexuality; when men have many sexual partners they are praised while women are derogated; when men fearfully lead armies into battles they are called ‘heroes’ while women are called ‘monsters’.

Many dramatic representations discussed in this study reveal in various contexts, including war, that women are in fact as capable of inflicting violence as men. *Boudica* is no exception. Arguing otherwise would risk reinforcing essentialist views. The United Nations Secretary-General António Guterres (2024) strongly asserts that “if we had gender parity at the decision-making level, around the world, at all levels, we would not have the number of wars that we have today” (n.p.). However, until gender parity is achieved and we are able to determine the impact of having as many women as men ‘at the decision-making levels, around the world, at all levels’, we still live in a patriarchal society and the few women, who get the opportunity to make crucial decisions, are still confined by the system of which both men and women are a product. Equality should be the priority in the fight against patriarchy not because women would necessarily make different and better decisions, but because aspects like wars and conflict affect them as well and they should also have a say in such important matters. A society which recognises that women have the same rights as men and are not inferior citizens of the world would inevitably be a society in which girls and women are not persistently raped (during peacetime and wartime alike); this, in turn, would inevitably result in a world less interested in domination, oppression, violence, and wars.

3.2. WARTIME RAPE AND MIGRATION: TIMBERLAKE WERTENBAKER’S *CREDIBLE WITNESS*

One of the main by-products of war and conflict is the large-scale displacement of people. The dangerous journey towards a better life and the uncertainty of what the

country of destination will bring about are serious risks that people are prepared to face in order to escape from desperate situations. Forced to make such a difficult life decision, women come to experience new levels of vulnerability and gender-based violence including rape, which add up to the horrible incidents they have encountered in the conflict zones from which they have fled. Male refugees also face challenges and prejudices that often take the form of rape accusations, particularly rape of local women. All over the world, news about rape committed by refugees or immigrants incessantly fuels anti-foreigner sentiment, with social media playing a crucial role in the dissemination of such news.

A telling example is a very recent article in *The Daily Mail*. The title of this piece speaks about “the criminal asylum seekers who’ve made a mockery of British hospitality by carrying out appalling crimes including paedophilia, rape and murder” (Reid, 2024). The article reports on seventy-five men and women (mostly men) and the crimes that each committed while at the same time providing their names and pictures pinned on a map of England to show how they “have spread around the country” (Reid, 2024). Many of the crimes reported are sexual crimes like rape, attempted rape, and harassment. Without implying that the news may not be accurate or should not be made public, the fact that there is a strong emphasis on the foreigner status of a rapist should be a point that must be approached with a sense of caution and alertness. The issue with this emphasis is that it is undeniably characterised by double standards; when a man who is not an asylum seeker rapes a woman, and in the slight eventuality that this news becomes public, the nationality of the rapist is not mentioned, and thus, the false impression that the men who rape are mainly foreigners is embedded in the public mind.

This state of affairs is reminiscent of the so-called ‘Southern Rape Complex’, which refers to “the American South’s near-hysterical fear of black men as rapists of white women” (Miller Sommerville, 2004, p. 237). The resemblance with today’s situation lies mainly in the explanation for this phenomenon, that is, “slaveholding white men constructed an imaginary black rape threat to assuage their own guilt about sexually exploiting slave women” (Miller Sommerville, p. 237). Today, many refugee girls and women are sexually abused and exploited by local men in the country they migrate to for a better life. For instance, a study conducted in Belgium and the Netherlands (countries seen as democratic and developed even when compared with other European countries)

found that refugees, asylum seekers, and undocumented migrants are at more considerable risk of sexual and gender-based violence than Belgian and Dutch nationals (Keygnaert et al., 2012, p. 515). A further component of the reality of rape is that many young girls and women are sexually exploited and abused in their own country by men of the same nationality as themselves, a much broader phenomenon than the rape danger posed by foreign men. Thus, it would seem that the strong interest our male-dominated societies have to finger-point the rape committed by ‘others’ is an attempt to obscure similar acts perpetrated by their male members, either toward foreign women or their female compatriots.

Being such an intense point of public and political debate in the UK, it is not surprising to observe a strong interest in contemporary British theatre about the issue of migration. An abundance of plays has been written and performed in the past decades. A few noteworthy examples include the following: *The Container* (2007) by Clare Bayley, which shows a group of people confined in a container lorry on their way to England; *Stowaway* (2016) written by Analogue, Hannah Barker, and Lewis Hetherington, which tells the unbelievable story of a man who leaves India, finds himself in a Dubai labour camp without any documents or money, and in a desperate act hides in the wheel well of a Boeing 777 heading for Heathrow airport, UK; *The Boy with Two Hearts* (2021) is a play adapted by Phil Porter from Hamed Amiri’s novel with the same title. The play is based on a true story about a family who is forced to flee from Afghanistan after the mother publicly speaks against the Taliban. Their son Hussein – ‘the boy with two hearts’ – suffers from a life-threatening heart condition that can be treated only in the UK or the United States. After a long and dangerous journey, they arrive in England, and the boy gets the desperately needed treatment. These plays provide a space where people on the move are given the centre of the stage; the stories being depicted from their perspective and not from that of the inhabitants or the government of the receiving country.

Moreover, some plays can be accessed online through the platforms Digital Theatre (*The Container*) and National Theatre at Home (*The Boy with Two Hearts*). Providing a visual account of displacement is important because this way audiences from all around the world get a glimpse of what people go through to escape persecution. In contrast with most content delivered through television, newspapers, and social media, theatre offers a more humane perspective to the numbers to which these people are usually reduced.

Moreover, being more aware of the distressing reality of people who find themselves in need of asylum may help change the public opinion about refugees as being ‘bogos’, ‘a burden’, or ‘criminals’ and, more importantly, alleviate the climate of fear and hate surrounding the issue of migration.

Another significant aspect of migration and conflict that is more directly related to the focus of this study is wartime rape as a cause for girls and women to leave their country. Although there seem to be no recent theatrical productions on the matter, plays performed on the British stage at various moments in time do not fail to address this outcome of war and conflict. A notable example is *The Body of a Woman as a Battlefield in the Bosnian War* (1987/1997) by Matei Vişniec. The play is centred around the interaction between Kate, an American Harvard-trained psychologist, and Dorra, a victim of gang rape during the Bosnian War who is pregnant as a result of the rape. According to Kate’s notes, Dorra was raped two weeks before being institutionalised in a German hospital. At the beginning of the play, she refuses to communicate in any form, something that Kate interprets as a sign that “for her, the rape continues” (Scene 9). Once she finally speaks, she tells Kate, “You make it seem as if you’re not interrogating me, but what you’re actually doing is torturing me with all your clever techniques, your clever therapy” (Scene 17). The relentless questions and interest of Kate make her feel as if she is being tortured, a kind of psychological violation that enhances her trauma and prevents her from feeling that she is now safe and no longer a victim of violence.

Unlike Dorra, who does not seem to experience any further sexual violence in the receiving country, Kay Adshead’s play *The Bogus Woman* (2001) reveals a more distressing picture. Inspired by many stories she read about refugees seeking asylum in England, Adshead builds a narrative told by the Young Woman, who also impersonated more than fifty other characters throughout the play. A journalist devoted to fighting for human rights, the Young Woman has to leave her country (an unspecified African country) after her parents, husband, and newborn child are murdered in front of her eyes and she is raped by the same soldiers responsible for the death of her family. Reaching England with the assurance that her human rights will be protected there, she experiences only disappointment and, in the end, is sent back to her country, where she is murdered. According to Gömceli (2017), “the playwright gives the message that the brutality of the British immigration system is no less than the cruel practices of the African government,

which in return invites a discussion on the violation of human rights in England” (p. 111). Not only is the Young Woman’s story not believed – hence ‘the bogus woman’ – but she is further abused by the system, even sexually harassed, and ends up on the streets selling her body to survive.

Akin to Adshead’s play *The Bogus Woman*, the *Credible Witness* (2001) by Timberlake Wertenbaker, also draws the attention of audiences to the realities of forced migration from the perspective of people seeking asylum in the UK. These two dramatic interpretations of a widespread phenomenon led the theatre critic Michael Billington (2001b) to proclaim at the beginning of the twenty-first century that “Political theatre has started popping up everywhere” (para. 1). Political theatre closely follows people and events of public concern. Thus, it is no coincidence that the development in the British theatre landscape to which Billington refers comes “at a time when asylum-seekers to Britain were increasing dramatically” (Aston, 2003, p. 6). According to Aston, this state of affairs in British society fuelled, in turn, “the increased dramatization” (p. 5) of the issue of asylum, which led her to employ the term “asylum theatre” (p. 5) to describe such productions. Similarly, in another article for *The Guardian*, Billington (2001a) calls attention to “the growing canon of asylum dramas” (para. 5). Surprisingly, perhaps, the terms have not been clearly defined or further developed yet, nor has a theory of asylum theatre/drama been formulated. The explanation for this absence can be attributed to the fact that the issue of asylum is intimately linked to other phenomena, such as war, migration, violence, trauma, and identity, and thus, it is usually researched under a broader theoretical framework.

Despite the lack of a specific conceptual perspective, stories of asylum have retained the interest of playwrights, critics, and scholars alike. *The Bogus Woman* and *Credible Witness* are two particularly illustrative examples of theatre devoted to asylum-seekers’ experience in the UK. The plays have been the subject of inquiry from various interpretative angles, the positioning of the asylum narratives at the intersection of gender, race, and nation (Aston, 2003), the investigation of the characters’ traumatic memories (Klein, 2012), and the thorny aspect of testimony in a culture of disbelief (Gibson, 2013). Such studies, however, have followed the lead of Billington and tackled the plays as ‘companion pieces’ (Gömceli, 2017). The similarities between the two works have resulted in a rather peculiar phenomenon, in the sense that they are seldom discussed

individually. Furthermore, the focus of inquiry on these two plays remains on the aspect of asylum. The equally significant presence of the issue of rape receives negligible attention, however, particularly in the case of *Credible Witness*. This lack of engagement is surprising as the play lends itself to a discussion of rape as a cause for women to seek asylum. More significantly, as this study will argue, Ameena, a girl from Somalia who flees to England after being the victim of gang rape in her country, is, in fact, the ‘credible witness’ in the title.

The play *Credible Witness* premiered at the Jerwood Theatre Upstairs of the Royal Court, London, in 2001 and is the outcome of “interviews that actors and directors undertook in refugee and detention centres”⁵³ (Gibson, 2013, p. 10). The ‘main’ storyline does not centre around Ameena, but revolves around a mother-son relationship. Petra, a Macedonian woman, comes to England to find her son who has left his country to avoid political persecution. In the detention centre where she is held are other refugees from different parts of the world: Ameena from Somalia, Leon from the Ivory Coast, Aziz from Algeria, and Shivan, a Tamil doctor from Sri Lanka. Petra’s son Alexander finds out that Petra is in England thanks to her decision to go on a hunger strike. Just after he comes to persuade her to terminate the protest – whose aim was to locate him in the maze-like British bureaucracy – it becomes evident that their once-shared appreciation of national identity and history is now incompatible. In a fit of anger and bitter disappointment, Petra curses Alexander and asks him to never come back. After losing her son, she gets closer to the other refugees, particularly Ameena. The play’s end shyly predicts a hopeful future for the people in the detention centre, apart from Petra, who ends up dying.

Ameena is introduced in the third scene⁵⁴ of the play, after we see Petra’s arrival at Heathrow Airport and her son speaking with a group of refugee teens in a community centre. From the stage directions, which enumerate Petra, Aziz, Ameena, Leon, and Shivan as the occupants⁵⁵ of the detention centre, it can be inferred that prior to Petra’s

⁵³ According to both Aston (2003) and Gibson (2013), detailed information about the research conducted by the creative team of *Credible Witness* appears in a resource pack compiled by the Royal Court Theatre. However, it seems that this document has been removed from the theatre’s website and, for this reason, it can no longer be accessed online.

⁵⁴ The play comprises eleven scenes, framed just like *Boudica*, by a prologue and an epilogue. This dramatic choice seems to suggest that war as well as its outcomes, in this case, migration, need special framing between glimpses into the past and the future.

⁵⁵ The word ‘occupants’ to refer to people who find themselves in detention centres in England as asylum-seekers has intentionally been chosen since it also connotes the political and public view (not shared in this

arrival, Ameena was confined in that small place with three other men whom she did not know. This bit of information does not seem particularly significant at this moment in the narrative, although it does give rise to a feeling of discomfort. Nevertheless, when, in the last scene of the play, it is revealed that she was raped by a gang of men, it becomes apparent how this arrangement must have been triggering for her. Being forced to share a confined space with unknown men after the experience of gang rape seems like a setting which can generate unpleasant associations between her traumatic memories and the current living arrangement, irrespectively of the way in which the male occupants of the detention centre behave towards her.

The revelation of Ameena's rape experience is prompted by an immigration officer's outburst of anger towards Petra. Throughout his interaction with Petra, Simon develops a kind of affection towards her, in the sense that he trusts and likes her. After the disheartening meeting with her son Alexander, whom she no longer recognises as such, Petra refuses Simon's offer to help her look for her son and 'confesses' that she came, in fact, to England for "a better life", with the hope to "open a shop, own a little English land" (Scene 11). In retaliation, he decides there and then the fate of all the other refugees: Aziz is to be sent to Algiers after two days, Leon is to be moved to a children's hostel, and Shivan has to return to his country where the violence is "negligible now" (Scene 11). It is at this moment that Simon utters the words 'credible witness'. They are directed towards Shivan and are used in the sense of him not being a credible witness, though, as the following discussion will reveal, Ameena will prove to be a credible witness and, in a way, this revelation will lead Simon to question his beliefs and professional ethics.

Immediately after Shivan's unsuccessful attempt to convince the British official that his life will be threatened if he returns to Sri Lanka, Ameena learns she must be on the first available plane to Somalia. In order to placate him, Petra calls the terrified Ameena next to her and asks for Shivan's assistance to keep her from escaping. While Ameena starts taking off her blouse (this guidance being presumably what Petra whispers in her ear, although the audience has no knowledge of the exact content), the immigration officer's response is characteristic of a culture of misogyny: "Good try, Mrs Karagy, but

study) of such people as 'occupying, taking up space', scarce space on an island whose perimeter is more discernible than on a continental territory.

entrapment doesn't work with a man like me. Goodbye" (Scene 11). The older woman admits that her ultimate aim is to entrap him. However, the means to achieve this are not "a pair of beautiful breasts" but something more horrible, "Thirty-four cigarette burns on her front. Twenty-five on her back" (Scene 11). Unfortunately, since no research or review has focused on Ameena and access to the performance could not be obtained, there is no available information about the manner in which the creative team dealt with the visual representation of the young woman's traumatised body.

Regardless of the technique used to illustrate these marks of torture, Simon does not appear shocked or moved by the sight. He has an excuse for every accusation brought against him by Shivan and Petra. The Tamil doctor informs him that, in the eight months she has been there, "the doctor has given her the strongest tranquilisers he could find, but he hasn't once examined her" (Scene 11). According to Simon, the reason why the doctor did not examine her is because she screamed at him. Once more, it is natural for a scared woman who is about to be touched by a man she does not know – not only, but especially if she has been abused in the past – to avoid unwanted contact at any cost. Prepared for Home Office⁵⁶ staff like Simon, the guideline *Gender issues in the asylum claim* clearly state that:

It is important to ensure that the asylum process is gender sensitive throughout. All those who seek asylum must be treated with dignity and respect, including those who may have been affected by gender-based harm. A failure to do so may make it even more difficult for claimants to disclose sensitive information relevant to their claim. (Home Office, 2018, *Introduction*)

Choosing a male doctor to examine a female victim of rape and incarcerating her with three foreign men in a detention centre guarded by another man are definitely not 'gender sensitive' decisions on the part of the immigration officer, who is yet one more male figure.

The immigration officer's apparent insensitive approach towards Ameena's precarious situation may spring from indifference but it may also result from a lack of knowledge. According to the UK Government's official website, *Gender issues in the asylum claim* was first published in 2010, although an early *Asylum Gender Guidelines* –

⁵⁶ The Home Office is a component of the UK Government responsible for security and protection, which also includes the issue of immigration, a phenomenon generally seen as a threat to a country's 'security and protection'.

the content of which can no longer be accessed – existed prior to this relatively recent publication (The Advocates for Human Rights). *Asylum Gender Guidelines* was published in 2000, a year before *Credible Witness* premiered on the British stage. Thus, it is plausible to assume that people like the fictional character Simon, who worked with asylum-seekers at the beginning of the twenty-first century, had yet to be familiarised with this document and its content. However, the passing of time did not really result in considerable improvement on this front. A study from 2014 by Baillot et al. shows that “very few UKBA⁵⁷ [the UK Border Agency] personnel were aware of any guidance relating to gender, or if they did know about it, they were not sure of its contents or status” (p. 119). By 2014, people holding a power position to make decisions about asylum-seekers had enough time to be familiar with guidelines about gender and lack of knowledge could no longer stand as an excuse for treating gender-based asylum claims on the same basis as regular conflict-related asylum requests.

Together with a lack of sensitivity towards the issue of gender in Ameena’s asylum claim, Simon fails to assess the political and cultural background of Ameena’s country of origin, even though the government also provides ‘Country policy and information notes’ for every country where conflict may lead to people claiming asylum in the UK. Attempting to make Simon realise the wrong decisions he had made in handling Ameena’s case, Petra asks him: “Where was the interpreter from?”, the *male* interpreter who “eventually got her to admit she’d been a prostitute” (Scene 11, emphasis added). When he answers, “From Somalia, like her”, Petra insightfully comments that “Somalia hasn’t had a government for the last eight years. There are twelve warring factions along tribal lines⁵⁸” (Scene 11). Expectedly, Simon does not have knowledge of the faction to which the interpreter belongs and is ignorant of the way in which this information might have affected the account Ameena unwillingly provides. Unlike him, Petra has the capacity to sense the implications of this careless choice:

Petra: You put a young girl in front of two men, one an enemy, the other one an official, and you asked her to tell you her life?

⁵⁷ The UK Border Agency was replaced in 2013 by UK Visas and Immigration and is now a part of the Home Office.

⁵⁸ The Somali Civil War is an ongoing internal conflict caused by the removal of Mohamed Siad Barre in 1991. This event led to a “war between rival clan warlords and the disintegration of central authority” (BBC News). Thomas and Ralph (1994) mention that “almost 300,000 refugees, most of them women and children, have fled the violence of war-torn Somalia since 1991 (...). For many of these women, rape played a role in inducing them to flee” (p. 83).

Simon: If she was raped, all she had to do was say so, it would have putted her in a different category.

Petra: Three words. Do you know what it means to speak those words? (Scene 11)

Following their dialogue, Ameena gives an account of her gang rape experience, which is interrupted by Petra's clarifications as she aims to paint a more vivid picture for Simon, who appears unconvinced of the rape allegations up to this moment in the play.

From all the incidents of rape discussed in this study, Ameena seems to have been the victim of the most brutal one. While reading about the horrible experience that led her to request asylum in the UK, it should not be forgotten that the play is based on interviews conducted by the creative team in detention centres. Although there may be some degree of creative intervention from Wertenbaker's part, such a testimony reflects a crude reality of an anonymous girl, who like Ameena, was unwillingly caught in a conflict zone:

Ameena: (struggling) I – was – (inaudible) They sur-round me in the street. Take me inside – dark – at first I don't see. Eight. Eight men. I thought: for a beating – for names. I was prepared – for beating. She laughs. They don't want – names. For an hour, they shout – not at me – at each other – who gets me first.

Petra: She was a virgin, Mr Le Britten.

Ameena: They even hit the other. I try to run then. Wrong. She stops. Then. Many hours. Turned – turned over. Turned. Pause. Turned. Turned. They stop to smoke and crush cigarettes – on –

Petra: She was seventeen. Go on, Ameena. Mr Le Britten wants credible testimony. Let's give him testimony.

Ameena: Crush cigarettes. On. Some. Others – start again. They – on my knees. Together now – they – everywhere. (She gags slightly). Then. They throw me – on the street. (Scene 11)

Petra's previous remark about the enormity of uttering the three words 'I was raped' is reflected in Ameena's speech since she is incapable of finishing the first sentence. She can only whisper the word 'raped', so softly that the others and the audience are prevented from hearing and can only deduce what the silence stands for. Her entire narrative is fragmented by the fact that there are words she might be ashamed to say, but more essentially, there are words too painful to be materialised in speech. As Fitzpatrick (2018) attests, "female playwrights repeatedly examine the breaking down of language and the struggle to express the experience of rape" (p. 100). Wertenbaker allows for the language to break down in Ameena's delayed account of rape, but the pieces are glued together through the older woman's interference. With Petra's encouragement, Ameena finally

manages to say what the interviewer, the immigration officer, and the doctor did not allow her to disclose at the beginning.

Even though Petra is the person who helps Ameena's voice be heard, their interaction does not start on pleasant grounds. After she is placed in the detention centre, Petra shows the other occupants some photographs hoping they recognise her son. When she approaches Ameena, the young girl starts shaking and rocking herself, saying, "Sorry. Sorry. Sorry" (Scene 3). The body's rhythmic movement results in her clothes falling loose from her shoulders. The exposure of Ameena's skin makes Petra cover and admonish her, "You should not behave like that in front of men. It is not seemly" (Scene 3). Still apologising, Ameena starts crying and unsuccessfully tries to take Petra's hand. From the beginning of Ameena's storyline, it becomes plain that she is emotionally and mentally unwell. Moreover, she craves contact with another woman but ends up being rejected by the first woman she encounters in an extended period. This act is significant as it relates to the rejection she anticipated from her mother for being the victim of rape. As the rapists throw her on the street, Ameena's first thought is her mother and the prospect of facing her leads her to decide that going home is no longer an option. In Thomas and Ralph's (1994) account, "Somali women (...) who have been raped (...) must cope with not only the physical and psychological trauma of rape but also the likelihood of rejection by their families" (p. 89). Whether Ameena was ashamed or afraid to let her mother see what happened to her, it must have been painful to be rejected by Petra, a woman whom even Simon wishes to have as a mother. More crucially, hearing Petra criticise her behaviour around men must have been a painful reminder of what her family might have said upon learning the news of the gang rape; that is, they might have blamed her for what happened. Nevertheless, at the end of the play, this woman's moral support, encouragement, as well as her admiration initiate a healing process. Having a motherly figure who validates her experience and does not see any fault in her behaviour ends up having more power than the tranquilisers used by the British doctor to calm her down and suppress her trauma.

In direct correlation to her experience of extreme violence, which could fittingly be called torture, Ameena is a female character profoundly traumatised by her experience. Similar to Gayle from Nina Raine's play *Consent* (2017a), Ameena appears to be brought to such a mental state that she cannot properly live her life after the rape experience. It is

no coincidence that the two female characters' trauma and mental state are greatly enhanced by the same system; in Gayle's case, the legal system – not the experience of rape – makes her commit suicide, whereas in Ameena's case, the immigration system, closely related to the law, nearly crushes her. Thanks to Petra, her story is heard as it should be, without attempting to turn it into a 'bogus' narrative. Petra, again, is the person who points to Simon not only how difficult it is for a woman to put it into words that she was raped but also how much courage it took Ameena to leave her country for England. Although there is no indication that she experiences rape herself, the older woman is acquainted with rape and remarks that "I've seen women crawl into the gutter and die after one man". Conversely, Ameena "had the strength to keep walking, get on a lorry, keep going. She didn't lose that strength until she got here and two men called her a whore" (Scene 11). She has the courage to embark on a journey that lasted many weeks and must have been very challenging, only to find herself locked in a room, being manipulated into admitting that she is a prostitute, and threatened with the likelihood of having to return to war-torn Somalia.

The language barrier often presents a significant challenge for asylum-seekers when they need to explain how their experiences in their home country have led them to seek asylum in a foreign land. Given that Ameena required an interpreter upon arriving in England, it is reasonable to assume that she did not have sufficient English proficiency at that time to articulate the traumas she had endured in Somalia. However, after eight months in the detention centre and despite the profound emotional distress she experienced after the assault, she is able to give a coherent and detailed report of the incident, as demonstrated by the quotation above. Exhausted by the pain of divulging to strangers the manner in which she was raped, Ameena is comforted by Petra who tells her that "Words are like medicine, they taste bad, but they help after. With every English word, you will tell your story more" (Scene 11). In her discussion of the 'companion plays' *The Bogus Woman* and *Credible Witness*, Gibson (2013) remarks how challenging it is for asylum-seekers to convincingly present their case in front of British authorities. Following Jacques Derrida's insights into the notion of hospitality, she stresses that "as language is the first act of violence of hospitability, language is also crucial to the experience of bearing witness" (p. 9). Gibson's words are based on the French philosopher's argument that "if, at least, I want to make myself understood, it is necessary

that I speak your language, I must” (Derrida, 1990, p. 4). When an asylum-seeker does not speak the official language of the receiving country, the sole option available to convey information is through the use of an interpreter. In this case, however, as exemplified by Ameena’s encounter, such an interaction may be marred by political and cultural tensions and, instead of aiding the process, it may often complicate the asylum application.

Nevertheless, despite the cathartic effect of finally being able to express the actual reason why she had to leave Somalia seems to have on Ameena, what convinces Simon of the truth behind her testimony is not the coherent speech in *his* mother tongue but the physical proofs of torture on her body. Just like rape victims, asylum-seekers’ words are met with disbelief. To be convincing, both rape victims and asylum-seekers have to prove that they have been abused and the most convincing evidence is inscribed on the body. Therefore, Ameena’s body is used as a document proving that asylum-seekers and refugees are not bogus people; their stories are real. Moreover, the war in Somalia is an internal conflict little known to the world but her body serves as a document attesting to the ferocity of this ongoing conflict. From this perspective, the phrase ‘credible witness’ gains a new dimension; it seems to be addressed to Shivan, but Ameena is, in fact, the credible witness because her body attests to the violence she endured in her own country. The emotive force of names has a special place in the play and it is no coincidence that Wertenbaker chooses the name Ameena, which in Arabic means ‘trustworthy’, for this female character.

A sporadic review of the news on wartime rape reveals its continuous expansion, fuelled by the ongoing emergence of new conflicts, often reigniting unresolved disputes from the past. Since I began studying wartime rape in the early 2020s, two major conflicts have rocked the global order, drawing in multiple nations. The wars in question are the Russo-Ukrainian War and the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict. Recent reports on these ongoing violent struggles for power or national defence have shown that they have not been immune to one of the oldest aspects of war, that is rape.

Official reports on rape in war mainly focus on numbers, but “this emphasis on rape’s scale as what makes it an abuse demanding redress distorts the nature of rape in war by failing to reflect both the experience of the individual women and the various

functions of wartime rape” (Thomas & Ralph, 1994, p. 86). Moreover, the enormity of these numbers has often been understood as exaggeration and propaganda, despite the widely-held belief that, just like in peacetime, rape is “severely underreported during wartime” (Nordås & Cohen, 2021, p. 203). Their obvious limitations aside, quantitative measures are effective tools to show the gravity of a phenomenon and they are also employed to report on the deaths of soldiers and civilians. The victims of rape in wartime are rarely named as they appear simply as numbers in most cases, therefore the stories told on stage are significant, whether they pertain to real figures, as is the case with the first play discussed in this study, *Boudica*, or to fictional ones, as is the case with *Credible Witness*.

In the previous chapter of this study, which is related to what counts as consent, it was argued that the majority of contemporary British plays dealing with rape try to destabilise the myth that rape is usually perpetrated by a stranger to the victim or that it entails a great amount of violence. However, the exception to this conscious approach is represented by plays illustrating wartime rape. As the two plays on which this chapter focuses – as well as other instances mentioned – reveal, wartime rape is characterised by extreme violence, which often takes the form of torture, it is nearly always perpetrated by a stranger or a group of strangers and that is why rape during wars and conflict usually belongs to the category of gang rape. Brownmiller suggest that rape is a universal wartime experience for women (p. 69). It is evident that the concept of universality has sparked debate among subsequent generations of feminists, primarily due to its perceived disregard for the aspect of race. While this critique may have validity in the context of everyday occurrences of rape, it is essential to recognise that during periods of conflict, both historical and contemporary, all women are susceptible to the threat of rape (in *Boudica* both Roman and British women are raped; in *Credible Witness* both European and African women are raped). Furthermore, wartime rape *universally* shares some characteristics that discern it from peacetime rape. If in everyday life, rape is mostly perpetrated by an acquaintance to the victim without brute force being present, during war, rape is perpetrated by unknown men and it is mostly done by more than one perpetrator. Each woman’s experience of rape and its consequences is unique, as evidenced by the cases of Alonna and Blodwynn. Nevertheless, the risk of being raped transcends borders because women are being raped worldwide primarily and simply for

being women. Brownmiller's assertion that "a female victim of rape in war is chosen not because she is a representative of the enemy, but precisely because she is a woman, and *therefore* an enemy" (p. 64, emphasis in original) is supported by the discussion of the incidents of wartime rape in this study. In *Credible Witness*, for instance, Ameena expected that the men who assaulted her are looking for information, presumably since they belong to an enemy faction. Instead, their sole aim is to rape and torture her; what makes her the target of their attack is not her political or religious appartenance but her gender. The widespread social upheaval in Somalia offers an ideal setting for them to act upon their contempt for women.

Although they relate to conflicts from different parts of the world and moments in history, *Boudica* and *Credible Witness* share numerous similarities, but in their essence, both plays bring to the fore a sense of displacement, of losing one's home, and of feeling disconnected. These changes take place in the female characters' lives after the event of rape, which is framed within war or conflict. Finally, the two plays provide a meaningful symmetry, in the sense that in *Boudica*, the descendants of today's British people have to leave their land and look for hospitability elsewhere, whereas in the second play, the British people are, this time, in a position to offer asylum. Taken together, the plays serve as a poignant reminder of the cyclical movement of history and the changing nature of power dynamics. Regrettably, the prevalence of rape during tumultuous historical periods persists as a distressing reality, seemingly perpetuated by the entrenched inequalities, power abuses, and oppression inherent in our patriarchal society.

CONCLUSION

The first quarter of the twenty-first century has unequivocally established itself as a period characterised by crises. To mention just a few aspects, these decades brought with them a pandemic echoing historical times, irreversible climate change, the reawakening of unresolved conflicts manifested as the Russo-Ukrainian War and the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict, extensive migration, hunger and poverty, and the resurgence of far-right extremism. The cumulative effect of these factors has detrimentally impacted the entire population; nevertheless, in times of crisis, the vulnerability of women is heightened. The COVID-19 pandemic, for instance, which affected every curve of the globe, has created a ‘shadow pandemic’ of violence against women. A campaign organised by the UN (n.d.) reveals that violence against women and girls has intensified during this period (para. 2). This vulnerability, however, is not merely a characteristic of heavily marked contexts; on the contrary, such moments in time highlight a culture in which everyday violence against women is normalised.

Although the wide-spread occurrence of violence against women was not a hidden phenomenon, the internet, primarily through social media platforms, played a vital role in exposing its extensive scale. In this context, perhaps the most memorable event took place on October 15, 2017, when the Hollywood actress Alyssa Milano asked her followers to reply #MeToo to her post if they had ever experienced a form of sexual violence. Milano’s call will remain in the history of feminism as a moment equal in significance to the 1971 speak-out against rape organised by the New York Radical Feminists group. Though there have been significant advancements on the matter, such as the acknowledgement of rape as a violation of human rights and the legal prosecution of marital rape, these changes seem to have improved women’s lives only to a negligible degree. Throughout the world, the rates of rape and other forms of sexual violence remain alarming, calling attention to its ongoing prevalence in everyday life.

Along other social sciences and arts, theatre has responded to the growth of interest in this catastrophic issue which has caused either the loss or devastation of many women’s lives. However, this study has shown that theatre has been an alert observer of the ubiquity of rape even before the beginning of the #MeToo movement in 2017. This comprehensive study delved deeply into the depiction of rape in twenty-first-century British theatre,

encompassing an array of plays produced between 2001 and 2018. The earliest play examined in this study is Timberlake Wertenbaker's *Credible Witness*, while the most recent one is *It's True, It's True, It's True* by the Breach Theatre. A critical exploration of the plays under discussion has revealed a rich and promising ground for the portrayal of rape in twenty-first-century British theatre. The nuanced representation of rape in plays like Lansley's *Immaculate* and Jordan's *Freak* contrasts with the more forthright portrayal found in de Angelis' *The Village* and Wertenbaker's *Credible Witness*, for instance. These dynamic theatrical expressions prompted a comprehensive exploration of the multifaceted dimensions of rape and precipitated an extensive discussion grounded in diverse theoretical perspectives.

The examination of the plays has been conducted on several interconnected layers. One layer of inquiry has been directed at the plays' approach to rape myths and individual and societal attitudes towards rape victims. This study revealed that the playwrights make a conscious effort to challenge deeply-embedded rape myths associated with both rape itself and also rape victims and perpetrators. Perhaps the myth most persistently contested in this collection of plays is that which relates to 'stranger rape'. Preponderantly, rape is committed by a man known to the victim; this is the case both in the examples included in this study as well as those in society. The only instances of rape being perpetrated by a stranger appear in the plays *Boudica* and *Credible Witness*, when Alonna, Blodwynn, and Ameena, respectively, have the horrible experience of being gang raped by random men. Nevertheless, in these instances, rape is framed within an atmosphere of war and conflict. In such extraordinary contexts, rape does take place predominantly when the victim and the rapist are not acquainted with each other; thus, theatre's aim to mirror reality is revealed once more.

As the study unfolded, an unexpected revelation came to the surface concerning the overall lack of solidarity between women when it comes to rape. Although it may be a naïve standpoint, I started this research with the conviction that women believe other women when they report rape. Nevertheless, in some cases, men are not the only ones – sometimes, they are not even *the* ones – who express doubt in a woman's statement that she was raped. The play *Consent* is an illustrative example. It is Jack, not Rachel, who believes Kitty when she accuses Edward of marital rape. In *The Village*, Jyoti expresses disbelief about the Inspector's rape victims, but this changes when she becomes the victim

of the same act of violation. Unlike Jyoti, in *Boudica*, despite being brutally raped herself, Blodwynn encourages her fellow warriors to rape a captive Roman woman in an act of retaliation for the Roman soldiers' actions. What the playwrights presumably try to emphasise by exposing this aspect of our society is how easy it is to reinforce the status quo. Women themselves, although they personally know what it means to be abused by patriarchy (regardless of whether they have been victims of sexual abuse or not), often operate on the same level as those who oppress them. By revealing this glimpse of reality, theatre articulates that the abuse of women is indicative of deeper power relations and warns that, without a fundamental societal change, an improvement in men's attitudes and behaviour alone does not suffice (though it would represent a major step forward).

Women also contribute to the perpetuation of rape myths. During the rape trial, Tuzia tells the judge that young women like Artemisia are flattered by men's attention, implying that they are 'asking for it' and, therefore, responsibility lies with them if the situation escalates beyond control. Likewise, before being raped herself, Jyoti contends that the Inspector's victims find themselves in the present predicament due to their failure to resist. The Women's movement, particularly Susan Brownmiller's seminal book *Against our Will: Women, Men and Rape*, has been charged with the creation of new myths in its efforts to debunk older systems of belief. The conviction that, unlike men, "women believe the word of other women" (Brownmiller, 1975, p. 387) also appears to be a myth, which has been shattered by the plays examined in this study. Through dramatic choices such as this, theatre provokes readers and audiences towards introspection and an evaluation of perhaps unconscious biases and attitudes regarding the subject of rape.

In this study, another layer of inquiry has been the social and political contexts in which rape takes place. Even though feminist research and personal testimonies have made it plain that rape occurs in every single imaginable environment, from the marital bed to the virtual space, there are specific settings in which rape takes place more commonly than others in the examined plays. Half of the plays, more precisely *Dea*, *The Village*, *Boudica*, and *Credible Witness*, portray rape as occurring in a context of conflict and violence, where particular groups oppress and dominate others through brute force and unquestioned authority. More intriguing, however, is the fact that, in the corpus of play, the victims of rape generally lack a support system; many of them are motherless

(Jyoti, Artemisia, and Georgie) or disconnected from their families (Dea, Mia, and Ameena). The experience of living within the constraints and regulations enforced by patriarchy is enhanced by setting the narratives of these female characters and their encounters with rape within distinctly male-dominated environments.

In the realm of warfare, men undeniably hold sway, and even in the case of *Boudica*, when women assume pivotal roles, they remain constrained through the prevailing male attitudes and conduct. The same observation applies to the legal system, which has been discussed concerning the play *Consent*. Other choices for the context of the narratives are linked in more nuanced manners with this contention. The case of Georgie cannot be confidently called rape; however, her sexual experiences are framed within a male-oriented industry which includes pornographic videos, gentlemen's clubs, and stag parties, all providing unhealthy images upon which women's objectification and self-objectification are built. Another subtle dramatic backdrop is adopted in *It's True, It's True, It's True*. Historically, the domain of the arts has been predominantly male. As such, there is no surprise that the judge presiding over Artemisia's rape case opts for torturing her, and jeopardising her hands, instead of her rapist since Tassi is a *male* painter and, therefore, presumably more valuable. This attitude is mirrored in the legal argument made by one of the lawyers in *Consent* that "better a guilty man goes free than an innocent go to jail" (*Consent*, Act 1, Scene 9); there being less concern for innocent women raped by men who remain unpunished by the law. Furthermore, religion has been and continues to be the pillar of the patriarchal order. In *Immaculate*, neither God nor Lucifer is interested in obtaining Mia's consent before impregnating her with their divine offspring. Thus, the societal and political contexts portrayed in the plays impact women's lives negatively by exacerbating power imbalances and perpetuating systems of oppression and violence.

A final layer of inquiry is related to the representation of rape and rape victims through the formal constructs of the plays under discussion as well as the staging techniques. Regardless of gender, the playwrights whose works have been discussed in this study reflect a feminist sensibility, privileging women's voice. In most of the plays, we hear the victims' perspective through the use of first-person narration. However, their narratives are often manipulated, interrupted, or partially silenced by various figures and institutions. As an illustration, in *Credible Witness*, the Home Office's poor choices in dealing with a female asylum-seeker's testimony designate a victim of a brutal gang rape

as a prostitute. Putting the rape experience into words is a difficult step for many victims. Nevertheless, as Petra remarks in the same play, ‘words are like medicine’ and even if they are unpleasant, they heal in the end. Despite being tortured and physically and emotionally exhausted, Artemisia in *It’s True, It’s True, It’s True* insistently repeats that her words are valid, something emphasised even in the title of the play. She does not refrain from uttering these words in front of her rapist, similar to Gayle in the play *Consent*. These two theatrical works also shed light on how the legal system and its discourse are closely intertwined with the issue of rape. The law’s attitude towards women who report rape is as significant as the society’s, and so far, both have failed rape victims. Through skilful manipulation of language, questions that confuse or shock the victim, and a cold technical language that does not correspond to the intense experience of rape, the legal system acts to the detriment of rape victims, subjecting them to trial instead of holding accountable the men responsible for the rape.

It’s True, It’s True, It’s True and *Consent* also represent the only plays for which access to a recording of the performance was obtained. Consequently, this study had to limit itself to textual analysis and performance reviews. Having access to the performances, however, would not have necessarily enriched this study’s discussion about the portrayal of rape since rape mostly takes place out of sight and/or is reported afterwards. In *Boudica*, for example, the Roman soldiers take the queen’s daughters into the fields to rape them; likewise, we learn about Jyoti’s ordeal only afterwards, when she appears in front of the villagers to accuse them of cowardice. Women’s experience of rape being preponderantly narrated afterwards seems to reflect the playwrights’ deliberate avoidance of bringing in front of the audience such traumatic experiences. In fact, it is difficult to imagine how many of the examined rapes could have been portrayed on stage without entrapping women in a narrative of victimhood. No rape is (or should be) easy to watch, but there are certain scenes so awful that staging them as they are, seems inconceivable.

Among the plays included in this study, Ameena’s rape in *Credible Witness* could be characterised as the most brutal. Her rape is set in a context of civil war, where a gang of men belonging to a different faction, grapple her from the street, rape her for hours, and put out cigarettes on her skin. Even the verbal account of the event is painful for Ameena and those listening. How could such a scene be staged? “Theatre permits and

enables us to contemplate violence” (Nevitt, 2013, p. 6), but it can achieve this even without visual enactment of the brutality of rape. At times, graphic narration reinforced by other elements, such as fragmented language, can be as effective as staging the act of rape (Timberlake Wertenbaker’s *Credible Witness*). Just hinting at what transpires off-stage and the absence of the female body can be even more effective (Harold Pinter’s *One for the Road*). Other times, watching the female character freeze during rape can impact the audience to a greater extent than fierce resistance on her part (Edward Bond’s *Dea*). Focusing on the female performer to see how this violent act influences her bodily posture or face expression is also an effective staging technique (Franca Rame’s *The Rape*). An even more creative technique, which removes the victim and the rapist altogether, is through the use of puppets (Timberlake Wertenbaker’s *The Love of the Nightingale*). These examples highlight the myriad of ways to represent rape and attest to theatre’s creativity in dealing with a sensitive subject.

The portrayal of violence in theatre has long captivated the attention of scholars and theatre makers. However, more recently, a new dimension has emerged, which relates to the use of trigger warnings before performances (Khomami, 2024). This issue is closely linked to a more extensive debate on the so-called ‘snowflake’ culture. People are becoming more and more sensitive to violence, and although this is not necessarily a bad thing, the occurrence of violent acts will not come to an end simply because we are overwhelmed by watching them. Furthermore, Cusack (2013) remarks on people’s hypocrisy in accepting the representation of violence “in the paper [and on the news] in salacious detail”, but being distressed when it is brought “right in front of them onstage” (p. xi). Theatre has, in fact, proved a high degree of creativity and sensitivity when dealing with such scenes.

A case in point is *Nirbhaya* (2013) by Yäel Farber, a play based on an actual event that took place in Delhi, India. On 16 December 2012, a young girl and her male friend were attacked on the bus by a group of men. They were both beaten and left to die on the roadside. The young woman was viciously raped and penetrated with a metal rod, all this happening with the complicity of the bus driver. *Nirbhaya*, meaning ‘fearless’ is the name

given to the victim before her identity⁵⁹ became public. Faber's awareness of "the toll it takes on her cast [the performers themselves have personally experienced sexual violence]⁶⁰, and the sensitivity of the issue" (Dickson, 2013, para. 12) did not prevent her from going forward with the production of the play, because breaking the silence is paramount and not doing so results in complicity. As the playwright puts it, "I want to *trigger* things. I want people having fierce conversations in the bar afterwards" (para. 13, emphasis added). However, she instigates discussion and raises awareness not through shock techniques, because as previously argued, it is inconceivable that such horrendous rape scenes could actually be brought to the stage. Furthermore, as she beautifully remarks in the documentary *Theatre of the Abused*, "Let's be humble and understand that we will never know the hell that was unleashed on the bus that night" (Tresilian, 2014, 07:00). In order to avoid the erotification of the act of rape and the invasion of Jyoti's privacy, during the rape, she steps aside, as if her spirit is safe from the hate inflicted on her body, and, in so doing, the performance helps "preserve her dignity" (07:22). What *Nirbhaya*'s example illustrates is that there are ways in which even the most horrendous acts can find embodiment on stage without disempowering women and that the prevention of bringing to the stage such moments is not the only way to deal with this concern.

One of the consequences of avoiding on-stage representations of rape is that, being so interconnected to the sexual act, the other remaining visual representation available to people is pornography. There, the actress/victim of rape, more often than not, ends up enjoying the experience, which is a false and dangerous image to propagate. The fact that many young people, like Leah in *Freak*, try to make sense of the sexual act by accessing pornographic content, should not be underestimated. When considering this aspect, the significance of alternative representation models becomes evident. Cinematic and literary works are better equipped to grapple with the subject of rape without perpetrating false images about its nature. In cinema, recent productions, such as the 2019 Netflix drama

⁵⁹ Her real name is Jyoti Singh, and there is most probably no coincidence that April de Angelis, who speaks about the play in her documentary *Theatre of the Abused*, chooses for the female character of her play *The Village* this name and, moreover, sets the story in contemporary India.

⁶⁰ Although it was not the focus of this study, it has to be acknowledged that, on stage, rape is performed through the body of the performers. Just like the cast of *Nirbhaya*, the performers may have experienced rape on a personal level, therefore, performing rape on stage may affect them differently. In such cases, it is important to inquire into the level of care provided through intimacy coaching for these performers' mental and emotional well-being during the whole process.

series *Unbelievable* and the film *Promising Young Woman* (2020), dedicate themselves to challenging rape myths, by focusing on the impact rape has on women's lives. Furthermore, these productions show that rape is an act born of violence, not merely sex, aligning closely with what the plays examined in this study evince.

By employing diverse dramatic techniques, playwrights strive to minimise the victimisation of women within their works. Despite the severe abuse suffered by the female characters, the playwrights consistently provide avenues for empowerment, ensuring that these plays illustrate both the resilience of women and the detrimental impact of such experiences. When everyone expects Mia to end her life or have an abortion, she bravely declares that being impregnated without her consent will not lead her to such extreme measures. In *Consent*, however, Gayle is abused by the legal system to such an extent that she ends her own life. The playwright then brings her body back to life as a different character, one who is a representative of the law and lacks empathy towards victims of rape, which reveals the thin line between being in a victim position and reinforcing the system. After being gang raped, Ameena does not 'crawl into the gutter and die' but finds the courage to embark on a journey to a different part of the world. The desire to give agency to women occasionally leads to a divergent path, as being raped may prompt them to seek retribution without resorting to legal means, this point being illustrated in *The Village* where the women kill the Inspector with their bare hands. In other cases, victims of rape become perpetrators themselves, directly or not, such as Dea who rapes her own son and Blodwynn who encourages a group of men to rape another woman. It may be the case that "we have been cautious and ambivalent about telling the stories of women who do fight back" (Gavey, 1999, p. 73), but the plays examined here show a clear proneness to allow for the representation of women as more than just victims, even if, at times, this may entail portraying them as both oppressed and oppressors.

The design of this study aimed to meticulously identify contemporary playwrights' key areas of interest regarding narratives about rape, one of the many forms sexual violence takes. The research into theatrical works produced during the first two decades of this century revealed that theatre makers are particularly interested in certain aspects of rape narratives. Firstly, playwrights are invested in adapting older stories for contemporary audiences (Chapter One). This investment reflects a desire to provide

counter-narratives to traditional models of recounting women's stories in which they are powerless victims. In older narratives, if the violated women do get justice for the harm done to them, this is mostly facilitated by their male relatives and does not take place through their own agency. Depicting women as acting agents relates closely to the second point of interest in representations of rape in contemporary theatre, which is consent (Chapter Two). Agency is required for a person to be able to provide consent. This is centrally important issue to any discussion of rape as men who rape women circumvent women's bodily self-determination and disregard their right to consent. A final point of interest for playwrights who write about the subject, is the occurrence of rape within a context of war and conflict (Chapter Three). During such moments, men as a group spew their contempt for women in manners far more violent than peacetime allows them to do. In the twenty-first century, theatre makers have ensured that this side of rape, that is, wartime rape, which presents fewer nuances than everyday rape, also finds space for dramatic representation.

Despite closely following the intricacies of rape and tackling the subject from miscellaneous perspectives, twenty-first-century British theatre has so far refrained from addressing one notable issue, which is the link between rape and racism. Indeed, several theatrical works place the occurrence of rape within specific racial settings, for, as the theatre critic Aleks Sierz (2015) remarks, "race is one of the hottest issues in theatre" (para. 1). Two indicative examples are *Behzti (Dishonour, 2004)* by Gurpreet Kaur Bhatti and *The Westbridge* (2011) by Rachel De-Lahay. *Behzti* touches on a sensitive and even threatening⁶¹ subject, that is rape perpetrated within religious spheres. For instance, horrendous revelations have become public in relation to sexual abuse committed by the Catholic Church's clergy (Graham, 2023). However, *Behzti* concerns itself with Sikhism. In the play, Mr Sandhu rapes Min in a Sikh temple when her mother requires his help to find a husband for her daughter. Moving on a different continent, *The Westbridge* is set in England and deals with the rape of a British Asian girl by a Black British boy, a rape which divides the community. The story uncovers that the so-called 'rape' accusation is the girl's father's attempt to protect his family's honour and camouflage the fact that the two were, in fact, in a consensual relationship.

⁶¹ The playwright reports that the performance of her play led to heated protests from the Sikh community and that the police informed her about a threat to abduct and murder her (Bhatti, 2014).

However, when we speak of race, we implicitly refer to racism as well. Though the above examples signal the ways in which race and rape are brought together, contemporary British theatre does not seem to mirror the interconnectedness between rape and racism. Racist ideologies are not merely a feature of the contemporary world; they have existed since ancient times, just like the practice of rape. The connection between the two becomes more prominent under specific circumstances, such as during the forced slavery of African American people. In this context, “antebellum American culture projected the image of a black female nymphomaniac, which was used to legitimate the institutionalized rape of African American women”, while at the same time, “the criminal nature of the black male supposedly culminated in an irrepressible lust for white women” (Sielke, 2004b, p. 165). A similar remark is made by Angela Davis (1981), when she states that “If black men are [considered to be] ravishers of white women, black women must welcome the attentions of white men” (p. 42). Today, stereotypes and myths about people who are not white or privileged still persist. Such tensions are dramatized in the play *Muscovado* (2014) by Matilda Ibini. Their play is “a grim reminder of the sheer violence and injustice of the British rule” (Sierz, 2015, para. 8) in the West Indies, another place where colonialism has shown its utter force. In the play, “when relations between white men and black women get tense, the whites use rape as a form of punishment”, an act meant to mask the desire to forcefully impregnate enslaved women to assure an increase in the labour force (Sierz, para. 5). This kind of theatre does mirror the dynamics between rape and racism, however, it appears to be an exceptional case in British theatre⁶². Moreover, all attempts to obtain access to the playtext⁶³ or the performance have been in vain.

Although this may appear as a limitation of this study, dedicating a chapter on rape, race, and racism, without having the possibility to include a play about the ways in which overt white racism applies itself to rape and, thus, counterbalance the narrative, seemed like an incomplete, one-sided, and biased approach. Exploring racism or the incidence of

⁶² I do not claim to have knowledge of all British theatre produced in the twenty-first century. However, the extensive research I underwent for the past four years has shown that, unlike the issues dealt in the three chapters of this study, that is adaptation, consent, and wartime rape, for which we have a plethora of plays to choose from, the relation between rape and racism does not feature as a central point of interest for British playwrights. The notable lack I am referring to is related to stories in which rape is either the direct result of racism or the attitudes towards rape victims and rapists are informed by racist ideologies.

⁶³ It appears that the text of the play has yet to be published.

rape within minority communities or specific groups can inadvertently reinforce stereotypes. Even if recognising the existence of such attitudes and behaviours within all humans beyond race is a valid point and tackling this aspect represents an achievement on the part of the playwrights, the conclusions of this inquiry will inevitably provide only a limited insight into the world. Particularly when a white person conducts the research, it also runs the risk of being criticised for ‘othering’ ‘the other’.

Virtually any extensive research related to theatre and a specific social phenomenon, as is the case with rape, at certain point, comments on theatre’s capacity to bring awareness and lead to change. At an individual level, I can attest to how reading these plays provoked me to question my beliefs about women’s agency, solidarity between women, and interaction between genders; also, I was forced to face my own biases. On a larger scale, however, it is nearly impossible to correlate what is being revealed on stage and the social changes it brings about. Fitzpatrick (2018) observes that “social and cultural change is a slow and complex process”; however, exploring and dramatising narratives of rape, puts them “in the public sphere, as an important issue for legislators and law enforcement” (p. 246). Even if the theatre’s input is, more often than not, difficult to measure, visible signs do exist. The play *Prima Facie* (2022), which deals with the law’s attitude towards victims of rape has already been mentioned in this study. What was not underlined is the fact that the play is now being employed in Northern Ireland to train judges. Developments such as this justify the playwright’s belief – a belief I also share – that “theatre could change society” (as cited in Rosato, 2024). While change may seem slow and is often too subtle, the plays examined in this study convey to audiences and readers powerful messages that hold the potential to catalyse societal transformations aimed at fostering a safer world for girls and women.

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