

## The Fictional Sexual Abuse of a Male: Language and Gender in *The Book of Revelation*

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In Rupert Thomson's *The Book of Revelation*, a male dancer is kidnapped and sexually abused by three women. Drawing on Deleuze and Guattarian notions of sensation and haecceity, this paper questions the unsettling disjunct between language and the fictional acts of rape in this novel. Sharon Marcus in her article 'Fighting Bodies, Fighting Words: A Theory and Politics of Rape Prevention' argues that rape is a language. It is socially scripted and this script takes its form from a "gendered grammar of violence {italics in original text}" (Marcus 392). I examine the "gendered grammar" in the representational incidents of rape in *The Book of Revelation* and argue that the male/victim/passive and female/abuser/active model that Thomson sets up is one where borders and boundaries cannot and do not hold. Thomson exposes the inadequacies of language and communication in social and personal acknowledgement and treatment of trauma. Although the male dancer is feminised and the female powered with the traditional attributes of the male abuser, the novel highlights that there is no language of rape to deal with the sexual abuse of a male. With Thomson's keenness to explore what lies beneath the skin, *The Book of Revelation* traverses "far beyond the merely sensational" (Hynes, online) to question and provoke response to the healing of a fictional male.

### References

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In *TBOR* a male dancer is kidnapped, chained, repeatedly raped. Three cloaked and hooded women are his abusers. He is held captive for 18 days before being released with no idea who his captors are. During his time with them, in addition to being raped by the women individually and as a group, he performs for them. In one performance, open to dinner guests, he lies on a table, hooded but naked. Food of various textures and colours covers his body and guests help themselves. Dessert is his penis. Onlookers, those who ‘ooh’ and ‘aah’ over the setting of the dinner table, become abusers. They take turns to arouse and stimulate him. The party is a resounding success. Another production, which he choreographs, produces and anticipates keenly, is *Swan Lake in Chains*. Here he utilises the 10 foot chain which imprisons him as his prop, his partner. It is tethered to the foreskin of his penis, an infliction the women place on him. This performance too is open to an audience, chosen by the women. I provide these few details of the novel and invite you to consider your response. How horrific do you find this situation the 29 year-old unnamed character finds himself in? How brutal? How sensual? How arousing? How *50 Shades of Grey*? Does it make a difference that the abused is a male, that the penis is not ‘the weapon’ as it is often depicted to be in tales of abuse?

This paper has two sections and I’ll discuss these distinctly. First, a point about art and sensation. For this I consider Gilles Deleuze. In *Francis Bacon: The Logic of Sensation*, Deleuze expounds upon ‘sensation’ in relation to painting. For him, ‘sensation’ is distinct from ‘sensational’. Sensation has one face turned towards the subject – “the nervous system, vital movement, ‘instinct’, ‘temperament’” (Deleuze 2003: 25) and the other towards the object – “the ‘fact’, the place, the event” (Deleuze 2003: 25). But, Deleuze adds, “Or rather, it has no faces at all, it is both things indissolubly” (Deleuze 2003: 25). So, continuing the example of a painting, in Deleuze’s words:

... at one and the same time, I *become* in the sensation and something *happens* through the sensation, one through the other, one in the other. And at the limit, it is the same body which, being both subject and object, gives and receives the sensation. As a spectator, I experience the sensation only by entering the painting, by reaching the unity of the sensing and the sensed {italics in original}.

(Deleuze 2003: 25)

In other writings, *A Thousand Plateaus* and *What Is Philosophy?*, Deleuze and Guattari consider the various art forms, the novel among them. All art allows sensation. The above details of *TBOR* could be taken as sensational and as having much potential for sensation, the possibility of being able to enter the novel, through its representation of a male protagonist’s trauma. Perhaps now I should add more details from the performance of *Swan Lake in Chains*, widen the potential for both the sensational and sensation. These details also indicate a fluidity between gender roles, an interest in exploring what lies beneath the skin, as Thomson signals in the epigraph to this novel by Stefan Hertmans, a Flemish Belgian writer and poet, “Will there ever

be anything other than the exterior and speculation in store for us? The skin, the surface – it is man’s deepest secret.”

In choosing to perform *Swan Lake In Chains*, the dancer realises:

The solo that the Prince dances after meeting Odile, the black swan, is supposed to communicate his euphoria at having found the love of his life, but if the Prince dances the solo as a man in chains, then his euphoria is undermined, and he begins to look deluded, almost laughable. The real beauty of this new *Swan Lake*, then, was its sub-text: he would be using the ballet both to expose and to ridicule the whole idea of the women’s love for him, which was not a tribute or a celebration, whatever they might say, but an entirely destructive force.

(Thomson 95)

The dancer is determined to incorporate his nakedness and the chain that tethers him via the foreskin of his penis to the back wall in his exposé of the women’s destructive force. The chain is used “as a stand-in for Odile” (Thomson 98), and the Prince dances his solo in such a way that:

The chain became a symbol of the Prince’s wayward sexuality: it was clear for everyone to see that, in pursuing Odile, he was led by his most basic desires. At the same time, in hampering the Prince’s movements, the chain was trying to warn him, to enlighten him. *Open your eyes. This isn’t love.*

(Thomson 98)

So, the dancer is the Prince and he is the three women enacting their sexual desires on him. The chain is Odile and the dancer trying to stop them. If the chain represents Odile as well as the dancer, then the dancer is the unknowing tempter as well as restraint against the women. Male, female, roles, all are fluid in this parodic construct of the actual *Swan Lake* and what is inanimate, non-human, becomes human. As the performance ends:

... he slowly pirouetted towards the back wall, allowing the chain to wind itself around him, so that, by the time the music built to its crescendo, he was standing by the iron staple at the back of the room, his entire body imprisoned, paralysed.

(Thomson 99)

The dancer never knows if he manages to stop the women although it is immediately after this performance that they decide to release him. He never finds the three women although he is obsessed enough after his ordeal to search for them for 5 years, at one stage having sex with 162 women in 14 months (Thomson 191). There is no indication of what happens to them after they let the dancer go. If the dancer has swapped places with the women in his version as the Prince, he quickly returns to his own place as the immobile captive dancer. Irony lies in the fact that the dancer remains paralysed by the experience of his abuse, even though he himself evolves into an abuser.

Abusers haunt the text, palpable in the slow transformation of the dancer himself into an abuser. The three women who he comes to name Astrid, Gertrude and Maude, haunt the dancer too, through his memory and his body. Some markers of the territory that the assemblage of abusers occupies in this novel are the emphasis on the body, particularly the skin, the tropes and inversion of gender roles, and the tools and language of abuse. I would like to consider two scenes of rape between the dancer and the women in relation to these markers. In one pivotal scene the dancer is punished by the woman he later names Astrid (Thomson 42 – 46).

The dancer is chained in the white room. As the woman approaches him, he notices that she has a dildo strapped to the front of her leather shorts, “with every detail luridly recreated – the glans, the veins, the urethra...” (Thomson 44). She walks towards him with a swagger and smiles at him with cold eyes. He is scared: “A tiny ball of fear formed in his solar plexus” (Thomson 45). This fear becomes greater when she produces some Extra Virgin olive oil, saying, “It will make things a bit more comfortable for you... Of course, I’m assuming it’s your first time” (Thomson 45). This comment and the one when she tells him it is not so bad and he “may even get some pleasure from it” (Thomson 45) is an ironic echo of what is sometimes still said to mostly female rape victims or virgins. Traditional victim/abuser roles are conformed to in this rape; the only difference is that the conventional gender of the victim/abuser is inverted. The female takes on the trappings of a male with swagger and realistic penis substitute, and it is the scared male in chains.

The woman positions herself to penetrate him anally, and pushes her dildo deeper into him. She talks to him:

“You know what you are, don’t you,” she was saying. “You’re a cunt.”

After a few moments she kneeled upright, unfastened her bra and dropped it on the rubber mat beside her. Then she leaned over him again, her breath hot against his neck. Cigarettes and perfume. Alcohol.

Her nipples brushed his shoulder-blades as she moved in and out.

“Cunt,” she whispered in his ear.

And then, in time with the rhythmic motion of her body, “Cunt... cunt... cunt... cunt...”

(Thomson 46)

The impact of the label ‘cunt’ will differ from reader to reader. The word may be considered shocking, offensive, rude, or ordinary, acceptable. It is also hard to pinpoint the woman’s intention in labelling the dancer specifically as one. It may be intended to arouse the dancer. And it may be an insight into the abuser’s motivation, a sign of the damage done to her that she can apply a humiliating term usually directed towards her own sex to a victim of another sex, one who is purportedly an object of desire. The dancer speculates on this possibility after this incident:

Astrid's open hostility towards him, Maude's downtrodden, almost masochistic nature ... and Gertrude? – well, he didn't know, but might it not be true that the three women were all, in their different ways, damaged somehow, and that it was the damage they had suffered that had brought them together?

(Thomson 50)

Is this, too, the ultimate degradation, the supreme insult for the male, being labelled a female body part? Sharon Marcus in her article 'Fighting Bodies, Fighting Words: A Theory and Politics of Rape Prevention' argues that rape is a language. It is socially scripted and this script takes its form from a "*gendered grammar of violence* {italics in original text}" (Marcus 392). This language includes misogyny. For Marcus, who studies male as abuser and female as victim in the United States, "A rapist follows a social script and enacts conventional, gendered structures of feeling and action which seek to draw the rape target into a dialogue which is skewed against her" (Marcus 390). In the above situation, the language of hate is sharp and degrading. Misogyny and misandry are at work.

If the woman takes on what has been traditionally depicted as the male's role right down to the insults against him, how does the male react? When the rape is over, we are told that he plunges into 'apathy' at his 'humiliation' – it was

...not so much the feeling of being violated, but the orgasm that had occurred as a result, an orgasm in which he had played no part, an orgasm that had been involuntary, autonomous. It had been like a lesson in which he had been taught the true meaning of the word 'powerlessness'.

(Thomson 47)

We are also told:

*You might even get some pleasure from it.*

How cynical that woman was. How vicious. He would never have called it pleasure – though he had been aware of a definite physical response, like a series of pulses passing along the length of his penis, pulses which he visualised, oddly enough, as rings. It was the opposite of a normal orgasm since it had been triggered from the inside.

(Thomson 47)

This is the final identification with a female: to have an orgasm triggered from the inside. The woman uses her 'penis' to dominate, to subjugate; the man identifies with powerlessness and with the label that the woman rhythmically whispers in his ear.

Although in this instance the male is feminised and the female powered with the traditional attributes of the male abuser, the novel illustrates that it is not merely a matter of setting up a male/victim/passive versus female/abuser/active model. In my abstract I stated that the novel

highlights that there is no language of rape that deals with the sexual abuse of a male. I'm still thinking about that. Carine Mardorossian in her 2014 study, *Framing the Rape Victim* argues that to get out of the thinking that rape is women's problem, we need to "restore masculinity to gender in response to the dominant culture's reductive and debilitating approach to gender as primarily of and about women" (Mardorossian 2014: 3). So for her, "structural femininity is a position that may define and subordinate men, minorities, and other marginalised groups just as effectively as it does women" (Mardorossian 2014: 3). Notions of gender should not be about biological sexual difference, she says too. Yet, as I have indicated multiple times, the penis is pivotal, as a parodic construct on Astrid, the dancer being chained through it, the orgasm he feels from the inside, along the length of his penis. And most importantly, during his captivity, the dancer is constantly betrayed not just by his abusers but by his penis that responds to the women's actions (Thomson 22 – 23 and 57 – 58). This in itself is a significant disruption to the male/passive/victim and female/active/abuser model. When the women first kidnap him, they chain him up, undress him and explore his body adoringly. Then:

...he opened his eyes to see that one of the women had switched the main lights off and that another was bringing tall candles into the room. The atmosphere became intimate, but also oddly medieval. That flickering, unstable light, and his clothes laid open, peeled back, like the skin of an animal that was being dissected. His nakedness – three figures, hooded, crouching over it...

He shut his eyes again.

There was a moment, too, when he felt the beginning of an erection, that gradual tightening at the base of his penis, that slow, almost luxurious rush of blood. It was as if his body was taking sides against him. Betraying him. Though his eyes were still closed, he could hear the women's voices:

'Look.'

'He's ready.'

'Who's going first?'

(Thomson 22 – 23)

The setting and mood is sensual. The realisation that this is an act of rape is only brought home to the reader with the image of his clothes being peeled back like "the skin of an animal that was being dissected". The word 'skin' is used as it is in the epigraph by Hertmans, "Will there ever be anything other than the exterior and speculation in store for us? The skin, the surface – it is man's deepest secret." This time though it is connected to the skin of an animal being cut open, perhaps indicating the bestial and violent nature of the act. Otherwise, it could be a scene of possibly obsessive seduction, with intimate atmosphere and "adoration of [a] body" (Thomson 22). Even his abusers are polite in extending an invitation to each other: 'Who's going first?' James Hynes, in his article 'The Dreamlife of Rupert Thomson', classifies this novel as "...contemporary gothicism, several shades darker than noir" (Hynes 6) and this scene seems a perfect illustration of this.

This sensual, almost seductive scene is not a rape like that in *CBAN* where Chandin's penis is referred to as "the weapon" (Mootoo 222). None of the abusers' body parts play a role in the above description from *TBOR*. Instead, it depicts a male having sex without consent and his dilemma is seen in the fact that his penis responds. The description emphasises the slow, physical pleasure he feels, the 'luxurious' rush of blood, and this bodily response occurs in spite of his shame, his knowledge that he was kidnapped and is not in a consensual arrangement. It is in this scene that the fundamental difference between the sexes in situations of abuse as Thomson perceives it is depicted. In the sexual violence against women represented in *Fall On Your Knees* and *Cereus Blooms At Night*, there is no depiction or even hint of the abused women deriving sexual gratification from the abuse. In *TBOR*, the victim has to be aroused before the abusers' needs can be met. He flounders after his abuse, desperately trying to express what cannot be socially understood; that he was violated by women, that he did not have 'fun' although his body responded.