

Ancient Greek sexual violence in evolutionary perspective

Or

Why does Zeus rape? An evolutionary psychological perspective

This is the text that formed the basis of a paper I delivered at the conference *Violence in the Ancient and Medieval World* in Lisbon in February 2014. I'm currently reworking my arguments for the conference proceedings and would welcome feedback on these initial applications of sexual conflict theory to an aspect of Greek mythology.

The alternative title for this paper was inspired by one of the studies that has inspired it: **McKibbin et al 2008 (McKribbin, W.F., Shackelford, T.K., Goetz, A.T. and Starratt, V 2008. Why do men rape? An evolutionary psychological perspective, *Review of General Psychology* 12.86-97)**, which is seeking a more nuanced evolutionary view of what causes men to rape women than previous studies have tended to propose – not least because of a tendency to treat all rapists as a group, as though there might be a unitary cause of much rape behaviour. This study (ie McKibbin et al) instead hypothesises several rapist types, based on the circumstances where they might commit rape. In this paper I shall map these onto Zeus, focusing especially on his boast to Hera in (*Iliad* 14.315-28) concerning many of his sexual liaisons:

“...never yet did desire for goddess or mortal woman so shed itself about me and overmaster the heart within my breast—nay, not when I was seized with love of the wife of Ixion, who bare Peirithous, the peer of the gods in counsel; nor of Danaë of the fair ankles, daughter of Acmsius, [320] who bare Perseus, pre-eminent above all warriors; nor of the daughter of far-famed Phoenix, that bare me Minos and godlike Rhadamanthys; nor of Semele, nor of Alcmena in Thebes, and she brought forth Heracles, her son stout of heart, [325] and Semele bare Dionysus, the joy of mortals; nor of Demeter, the fair-tressed queen; nor of glorious Leto; nay, nor yet of thine own self, as now I love thee, and sweet desire layeth hold of me.” (tr. Murray).



But first, to illustrate the challenges I'm facing, and because the evolutionary psychology literature recurrently returns to it (e.g. **Thornhill, R. and Palmer, C.T. 2000. *A natural history of rape: Biological bases of sexual coercion*. Cambridge, MA.; McKibbin et al 2008; Li, N.P, Sng, O and Jonason, P.K. 2012, 'Sexual conflict in mating strategies in Shackelford, T.K. and Goetz, A.T. 2012. *The Oxford handbook of sexual conflict***

in humans. Oxford.) here's the male scorpion fly – which has an anatomical clamp whose only purpose is to hold the wings of the female fly in place in forced copulation. Here, it seems, is an instance of where a particular anatomical trait has evolved to help the male have forced sex – thus what we have here is an easily observable evolved mechanism for rape.

However, in the case of other species, humans included, the situation is very different – without anatomical mechanisms for rape, we need to look for mechanisms for rape in *psychological* terms.

My paper this morning seeks a way through the various challenges of using evolutionary psychology to explain behaviour as complex as rape – when what ev psych is doing is generating hypotheses which can be tested and falsified – hence studies are typically provisional and open to challenge. And evolutionary psychologists are looking for new context for their theories to be tested.



Today I shall consider one such context – the ancient world, and specifically ancient Greek mythology.

It's an approach that has been welcomed by evolutionary psychologists – as I'll outline from personal experience. UK academics present might be aware of the pressures to meet the REF (Research Excellence Framework) deadline over the past couple of years. My Roehampton colleague Fiona McHardy and I found ourselves in need of an additional publication, so wrote up one we had delivered at a conference and submitted it to several classical journals. It was looking at how a study of ancient Greek uxoricide might be framed by evolutionary psychology, and had already been given a suitably good 'excellence' rating by the University's external REF reader. The paper went through the ms review process of more than one journal and while we got good feedback this was offset with so much hostility – on the grounds of our methodology – that it was rejected.

We were therefore seeing, applied to our own work some of the criticisms levelled at myths of ev psych – that it justifies and/or legitimises violence against women, and that it involves victim blaming. I'd already read evolutionary psychologists stressing that this is an application of the is/ought fallacy – assuming that it's possible to establish what ought to be the case from what *is* the case – when the goal of evolutionary psychology is to understand what motivates human behaviour, not to justify it. And indeed, this understanding can contribute to moves to prevent certain behaviours including sexually coercive behaviour. Evolutionary psychologists don't claim that behaviour is hardwired, but that, from natural selection, mechanisms have developed that can be stimulated by certain environmental conditions.

So we had a problem of a paper rated REF-able that we couldn't find a publisher for. We therefore submitted the paper to an evolutionary psychological journal, which sent the paper through its peer review process and accepted it, indeed to paraphrase the acceptance letter, the editors saw an opportunity to 'break new ground' with our contribution. **Article details: Deacy, S. and McHardy, F 2013. Uxoricide in pregnancy: ancient Greek domestic violence in evolutionary perspective, *Evolutionary Psychology* 11.5: 994-1010.**

I'll now sketch how evolutionary psychology can frame a study of sexually coercive behaviour in myth. In very broad terms, this study is part of a growing body of work using evolutionary approaches to explain aspects of the ancient world (e.g. **Gottschall, J. 2008. *The Rape of Troy: Evolution, Violence and the World of Homer*. Cambridge; McHardy, F. 2008. *Revenge in Athenian Culture*. London) – including to show how male-perpetuated violence is motivated by intense competition over female reproductive resources.**

More specifically, my paper is building on an emerging subfield in evolutionary psychology – variously known including as evolutionary literary theory, biopoetics and literary Darwinism - which uses ev psych to interpret such creations as literature, art, film and folktale (e.g. **Carroll, J. et al. 2012. *Graphing Jane Austen: The evolutionary basis of literary meaning*. Basingstoke**). As Carroll puts it for one of the categories, “the adapted mind produces literature” and thus “literature reflects the structure and character of the human mind” (**Carroll, J. 2005 ed.. *Literature and evolutionary psychology* in Buss, D.M. 2005. *The handbook of evolutionary psychology*. Wiley 931**).

My research operates on the premise that there is fertile ground to apply the approach to myth too – and here I build on the view of George Steiner (which, tellingly, I first saw quoted by Stephen Pinker) on how myths “encode certain biological and social confrontations and self-perceptions” and thus can “endure as an animate legacy” (**Steiner (via Pinker) on how myths ‘encode certain biological and social confrontations and self-perceptions in the history of man’ and thus ‘endure as an animate legacy’** (in **Slingerland, E. and M. Collard. 2012. *Creating Consilience: Integrating the Sciences and the Humanities*. New York, 52**). Thus myths persist because they reflect and refract fundamental human impulses.

And this includes myths concerning gods – not least Zeus – the subject of this paper. who serves as a vehicle to explore such issues as power, violence, and forms of behaviour, both prosocial and antisocial (cf. **Schaps 2006 - Schaps, D. M. (2006). *Zeus the wife-beater. Scripta Classica Israelica*, 25, 1–24.**). This is thanks to the interplay between gods as figures that exhibit human feelings and behaviours and as fantasy figures who cannot be confined to the human condition (**Vernant 1991 - Vernant, J-P. (1991). *Mortals and immortals: Collected essays*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.**).

Now I shall examine how in particular I will apply evolutionary principles to myth. I'll do this by looking at sexual conflict theory, and by applying this to Zeus.

A key premise – at the foundation of this theory – is that males and females have evolved different mating strategies – coming out of differences in the minimum parental investment required for each sex. Low-cost for men, high-cost for females. For males there need only be a minimal investment, up to ejaculation, whereas women bear responsibility for carrying then nurturing any resulting offspring. (E.g. Li, Sng and Jonason 2012 – details above). To ensure a male's reproductive success, he needs as to seek as many mating opportunities as possible – in contrast, what women need to increase their fitness is to acquire high-quality mates who will be most likely to provide resources for offspring to thrive. Hence there is characteristically choosiness motivating female mating strategies. Rape might be an extreme manifestation of sexual conflict in mating strategies – where males facilitate their reproductive success by getting round women's mating strategies.

There has been deep debate over whether rape is an evolved mating strategy to deal with differing mating strategies of males and females or a by-product of other evolved mating mechanisms (for instance the desire on the part of males for low-cost sex) (e.g. Thornhill and Palmer 2000 – details above could not decide which – the debate appraised by Pinker, S. 2002 *The blank slate: The modern denial of human nature* 359-71 who argues that the binary has set subsequent agendas for discussion in a regrettably reductive way). The 2008 study I mentioned at the start, itself drawing on Thornhill and Palmer and work since then not least studies authored by Lalumière, (including Lalumière, M.L., Harris, J.T., Quinsey, V.L. and Rice, M.E. 2005. *The causes of rape*. Washington, DC) has sought a more nuanced approach by hypothesising five kinds of rapists or kinds of situations where rape can be triggered:

1. Disadvantaged men – who resort to rape; such men are often low-status and characterised by lower facial symmetry.
2. Specialised rapists – men aroused by violence coercive stimulation.
3. Opportunistic rapists – men who turn to rape when women are not receptive to sex.
4. High-mating-effort rapists – men who exhibit dominance behaviour, and who are often psychopathic.
5. Partner rapists.

I'm going to examine Zeus in relation to category 4, while aware that others apply – for instance number 5 offers potential for a fresh reading of Zeus' marriages with Hera, Metis et al. I'll start with characteristics of the hypothesised high-mating-effort rapist:

A tendency for this kind of rapist to be particularly sexually experienced – in contrast to other rapist types.
A tendency to exhibit aggressive and dominant behaviour, and high self-esteem.

A tendency towards psychopathy
A tendency to pursue a high-mating strategy, going after a large number of partners, without much investment
A tendency not necessarily to coerce a partner but to use rape when other strategies fail.
A tendency to have high levels of facial symmetry.

Now I shall sketch how to map these categories onto Zeus – including to test Keuls’ description of him as the “master rapist” (Keuls, E. C. 1985. *The reign of the phallus: Sexual politics in ancient Athens*. Berkeley: 51).

High-mating-effort rapist	Zeus
A tendency for this kind of rapist to be particularly sexually experienced – in contrast to other rapist types.	Strong history of mating success including numerous one-off sexual relations and longer-term relationships (e.g. Hera, Semele).
A tendency to exhibit aggressive and dominant behaviour, and high self-esteem	Disposition towards such behaviour key trait as personalised deity.
A tendency towards psychopathy	All gods potentially can be read as psychopaths, although NB Zeus’ guilt over Troy/Sarpendon/Hektor.
A tendency to pursue a high-mating strategy, going after a large number of partners, without much investment	The <i>Iliad</i> 14 example boasting of his exploits, although note that he makes this as victim of Hera’s deceptive mating strategy; self-centred and non-nurturant behaviour. Cf. Winkler on male deities: “Male deities come down and consummate their desire on the spot, then leave the maiden behind”. Winkler, J. J. 1990. <i>The constraints of desire: The anthropology of sex and gender in ancient Greece</i> . New York 203)
A tendency not necessarily to coerce a partner but to use rape when other strategies fail.	This category a route into fresh consideration of the debate over whether Zeus invariably deploys rape. See e.g. Lefkowitz, M. R. 1993. “Seduction and rape in Greek myth,” in A. E. Laiou, ed., <i>Consent and coercion to sex and marriage in ancient and medieval societies</i> . Washington, D.C. 17–37; Deacy, S. 'From "flowery tales" to "heroic rapes": virginal subjectivity in the mythological meadow', <i>Arethusa</i> 46.3: 395-413.
A tendency to have high levels of facial symmetry.	Strong facial symmetry typical of humanised deities.



In conclusion, to return to my initial question: “why does Zeus rape?”, a broad answer would be this – the kind of characteristics constructed in myth are consistent with the profile of the high-mating-effort rapist. His mating strategy is directed towards minimal parental investment and non-nurturant behaviour and towards sex with a large number of partners. He is highly sexually experienced and tends towards aggressive and dominant behaviour. He displays high self-esteem, and is sufficiently self-centred potentially to be characterised as psychopathic.

Susan Deacy, 14/02/14