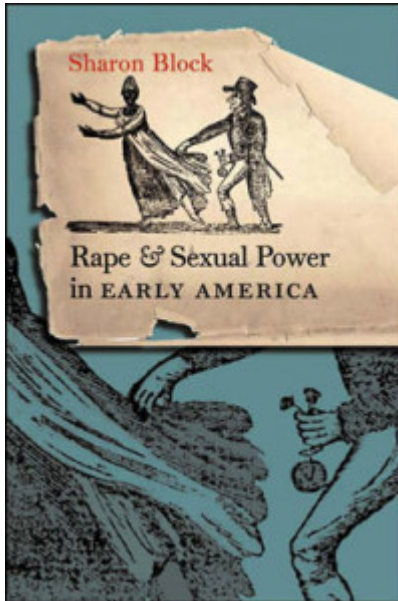


“He said I must”: Rape, Race, and Social Class in Early America



Sharon Block, *Rape & Sexual Power in Early America*. Chapel Hill: Omohundro Institute of Early American History and Culture imprint of the University of North Carolina Press, 2006. 276 pp., cloth, \$45; paper, \$19.95.

Feminist scholars in the 1970s made rape a legitimate topic of research by arguing that it was the most elemental expression of patriarchal power. Sharon Block's *Rape & Sexual Power in Early America* unravels the power dynamics of rape by merging the microhistories of individual women with the macrohistories of institutional and cultural views of sexual behavior. By combining many strands of interpretation—individual women's experiences, community reaction, institutional mandates, courtroom practices, print culture, and mainstream ideology—Block reveals the varied interpretations of an act that was “both pervasive and invisible” (1).

Extensive research into court records, newspaper accounts, private letters and diaries, published documents, and contemporary fiction has provided Block with 920 incidents of “sexual coercion.” She uses these incidents to explore the gap between the actual experience of rape and what was publicly acknowledged as rape in the villages and courtrooms of early America. Block differentiates between rape as a “legal judgment of forced heterosexual intercourse” and sexual coercion, in which force was an act of social, racial, or cultural power. By using this two-tiered classification, Block demonstrates that the “identities and relationships of participants, not the quality of sexual interaction . . . most easily defined rape” (3).

In a society built around marriage, regulation of sexual conduct was crucial to

the creation of social order. In early America, husbands and fathers controlled sexual access to wives and daughters and protected women from unwanted sexual encounters. But men were also expected to be sexually aggressive toward women; sex could involve violence without being considered rape. Given such assumptions, it is not surprising that women's claims of rape were often suspect. Adding to victims' burdens was the widespread presumption that male arousal was generally the woman's responsibility, or fault, as it were. Men could thus cast a woman's "no" as a pro forma expression of resistance.

Legal and community responses to claims of rape establish that sexual coercion was a gendered act of power always linked to considerations of race and status. Both the opportunity for rape and the likelihood of its classification as rape depended on the social identities of both parties. Status was integral to a man's ability to force sex. Elite white men could use their status to "redefine coercion into consent," while poor and black men "had" to use "brute force" (12). Not only could elite whites avoid court prosecution, they could also cast their actions (to themselves) as acceptable. Elite white women supposedly had the protection of patriarchy, and their claims of forced rape carried greater believability. Both white and black women who were economic dependents could be subject to coercive sexual assaults that did not necessarily involve force.

In prosecuting a claim of rape, the female victim had to overcome cultural beliefs that held her responsible for all sexual activity. Again, the path to legal remedy followed a victim's social position. Community beliefs about who was or was not considered capable of rape meant that the community ultimately shaped the character of the sexual act. The privilege allotted elite males in a patriarchal system meant that powerful men could not "rape"—their sexual pressure was not rape.

If the meaning of force depended on who used the force, then race was the ultimate dividing line for believability. White women were always assumed to have resisted a black rapist, and black women were never allowed to resist. Block argues that the exclusion of women of color from the category of rape victim was an essential part of creating a consciousness of race in early America.

Although Block does not find much change in the definition of rape over the 120 years of her study or across its geographic span of the Atlantic seaboard, she does identify two developments in the treatment of rape claims between the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries: the "racialization of rape" (4) and the treatment of race as public discourse. Black men remained the targets of prosecutions, convictions, and executions for rape throughout the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, but the culpability of white men diminished. Popular seduction novels portrayed white men as seducers, not rapists. During the Revolution, allegations of rape by British soldiers in newspapers and pamphlets were construed as attacks on American rights, rather than as the violation of an individual.

Block's analysis of how early America's definition of rape "created and reflected [its] technologies of power" (4) also illustrates the trans-historical continuity of ideas about rape. By blurring boundaries of coercion and consent, expressing social power through sexual power, and exploiting the sexual vulnerability of the socially vulnerable, white males of early America used the idea of rape to create and sustain their roles in the political, social, and racial hierarchies of the new nation. And their actions are, in Block's concluding words, "startlingly reminiscent of sexual coercion in other times and places" (241).

This article originally appeared in issue 7.4 (July, 2007).

Elizabeth Urban Alexander is associate professor of history at Texas Wesleyan University and author of *Notorious Woman: The Celebrated Case of Myra Clark Gaines*.