

Wolfthal, Diane, *Images of Rape: The Heroic Tradition and its Alternatives*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1999; cloth; pp. xv, 286; 118 b/w illustrations; RRP AUS\$125; ISBN 052158311X.

This important scholarly and thoughtfully analytical book, a genuine contribution to knowledge and understanding, is one of the very best which I have reviewed, or indeed read, during the 40 years or so that I have been attached to universities. Wolfthal's exploration into the history of attitudes to rape is based primarily on an examination of images, but her book deserves to be read, and can easily be understood, by all who are interested in the culture of medieval and Renaissance Europe. I add that at its price it represents excellent value; libraries, and indeed many private individuals, will have no excuse for not buying it. (There is, incidentally, a paperback version as well.)

This study is correctly offered by the publisher as 'the first in-depth exploration of rape as it has been portrayed in Western art from the twelfth through seventeenth centuries'. While the author is modest enough to see it as by no means an exhaustive study, her work is sufficiently comprehensive to provide a serious challenge to many simplistic assertions to which we have had to become accustomed during the last 20 years or so, especially those articulated by scholars who believe that the views of the victim were never represented, and that rape was generally condoned. A good example of this kind of position, to which Wolfthal refers, is an essay by Ellen Rooney, 'Criticism and the Subject of Sexual Violence', in *Modern Language Notes* 98 (1983), pp. 1269-78, who argues that 'resistance [to rape] ... goes unread'. Wolfthal retorts:

... illuminations in the Oldenburg manuscript, the Egerton Genesis, the Spencer codex, and the *Bibles Moralisées* disprove this hypothesis. They make clear that there was a time, centuries ago, when images cast light on rape and gave voice to its victims; when artists understood that rape was a savage crime involving violent sexual intercourse; and when women were portrayed energetically resisting rape and avenging their violation. Tragically, modern society has forgotten the existence of these visualizations. (p. 198)

Just possibly this is a little too extreme in its praise of that time 'centuries ago' and in its generalisation about 'modern society', but Wolfthal provides excellent and formidable evidence to show that Western societies frequently did disapprove of rape in times past, and she thus offers a much needed corrective to views like Rooney's.

Broadly, Wolfthal distinguishes between the so-called 'heroic' tradition – which in various ways endorsed or at least insufficiently condemned rape – and its alternatives. The 'heroic' tradition is often inspired by classicism, and a typical 'Renaissance' phenomenon. As one of several examples of its expression in the visual arts, Wolfthal discusses Nicolas Poussin's *Rape of the Sabine Women* (c. 1636-37). Like a good, informed critic of Renaissance drama, Wolfthal is well aware that an artistic work of merit can – indeed often should – be seen as offering us a range of interpretative possibilities. Nevertheless, and equally rightly, she does not allow that to inhibit her to the extent of concluding that we cannot discover any clear meanings at all. Thus, in the case of this painting, the most immediate effect to strike this viewer is that of small children in the foreground who are obviously shown to be secondary victims of the would-be rapists. However, as Wolfthal explains, one of the couples does not show the relationship of an aggressor and his victim, but that of happy partners, indicating Poussin's view (derived from Plutarch) that the Sabines 'soon accepted their husbands' (p. 9).

In contrast with this powerful but repugnant 'heroic' tradition celebrating male violence, there were also others which were more civilised. One of Wolfthal's best points is that we cannot see the development of any of the various traditions, whether opposed to rape or not, as moving in a straight line, or as decisively victorious over others. Thus in the area of the law, for example, depictions of rape became 'less sympathetic to the rape victim in the late fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, but the reverse is true for war prints' (p. 181).

What is more, some of the pictures are so multi-layered that they leave one baffled as to what may have been intended, or indeed felt. One of the most curious and arresting paintings is shown on p. 189, a *Rape scene* by Christiaan van Couwenbergh, painted in 1632, and featured also in Bob Haak's masterly compendium *The Golden Age: Dutch Painters of the Seventeenth Century* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1984), p. 326. I can only agree with Haak and Wolfthal that the painting does, indeed, represent a rape. But what attitude does the artist imply? At one level – and I prefer to think it is the dominant one – he no doubt conveys disapproval. We see a black woman, firmly held by a naked young man sitting on a bed. The woman unequivocally expresses terror and resistance. Another (almost) naked young man is standing. He points at the 'couple' on the bed as though – perhaps – to indicate criticism of his naked colleague even though he himself is presumably a participant in a form of gang rape. A third, fully dressed man more obviously expresses consternation by holding up his hands as though he would prefer matters to stop. However, since the black woman is presented as

though despite her suffering she is almost bestial, and since the scantily clad standing man may point at something he finds amusing, it is not inconceivable that the artist with one part of *his* mind is amused also. This painting, eminently analysed by Wolfthal, reveals to us perhaps better than any other picture in her book just how cautious we must be in attributing to the past, and in particular its artists, any such uncomplicated attitudes as we may hold ourselves.

Joost Daalder
Department of English
Flinders University

Zagorin, Perez, *The English Revolution: Politics, Events, Ideas* (Variorum Collected Studies Series CS632), Aldershot, Ashgate, 1998; cloth; pp. x, 330; RRP £52.50.

This book is a collection of reprinted articles from the long career of Perez Zagorin. It provides a collected look into the development of Zagorin's thought, and of the historiography of the English Revolution in general. However, for those familiar with Zagorin's arguments, there is nothing new to be gained from this book, which has been published with little thought, care or effort.

The articles in *The English Revolution* have been selected from almost 50 years (1950-1996) of Zagorin's career and, as he notes in the introduction, some 'no longer express the author's thoughts' (p. ix). The articles are arranged in themes rather than a strict chronological order, which gives the book a good structure, allowing the reader to follow the evolution of each topic. Indeed, it is as an exploration of the development of Zagorin's thought in an area of study, as well as the movement within the field of English Revolutionary scholarship in general, that this book is useful.

Included in the book are several articles on the social history of the English Revolution, the political allegiance of Strafford, an article on John Pym's politics and another on the identity of the author of *Mans Mortallitie*. There are also four articles on Hobbes, and two that deal with Zagorin's later interest in lying and dissimulation.

Zagorin's writing is a joy to read, containing concise yet detailed background descriptions of key events, historical actors presented with care and depth, and a consistency of style despite the span of years covered. The major