

‘Towards a more Inclusive Classics’ Online Workshop
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“Pharos: Doing Justice to the Classics” – Documenting the Misuse of *De raptu Proserpinae*

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Intro: This presentation derives from my experience in an undergraduate course taught at Vassar College in 2019/20 and inspired by *Pharos*, an online journal started in 2017 by Vassar’s Prof. Curtis Dozier with the goal of documenting appropriations of the Greco-Roman world by hate groups online. In the context of this course, my classmates and I documented, researched, and responded to recent appropriations of the classics online, such as the right-wing journal *American Renaissance*’s attribution of the Chinese Terracotta Warriors to ancient Greek sculptors, and the circulation of classicizing ‘memes’ depicting President Trump as the savior of Western civilization. What follows is my own research on the appropriation of *De raptu Proserpinae* by misogynistic blogger and pseudo-academic Douglas Galbi. I have also included some reflections inspired by the many thought-provoking responses I received during the workshop. I am deeply grateful to Barbara and Alexia and to all of the participants for their creative and sensitive efforts towards decolonizing the discipline.

Further Reading

Pharos: Doing Justice to the Classics

- <http://pharosclassics.vassar.edu/>
- Twitter @pharosclassics

Elliott, Andrew B. R. 2017. *Medievalism, Politics and Mass Media: Appropriating the Middle Ages in the Twenty-first Century*. Cambridge: D. S. Brewer.

Parkes, Ruth. 2015. “Love or war?: erotic and martial poetics in Claudian’s ‘De raptu Proserpinae.’” *The Classical Journal*. 110, no. 4: 471-492.

Tsai, S-C Kevin. 2007. “Hellish Love: Genre in Claudian’s De raptu Proserpinae.” *Helios*. 34 (1): 37-68.

Wheeler, Stephen M. 1995. “The Underworld Opening of Claudian’s *De Raptu Proserpinae*.” *Transactions of the American Philological Association*. 125: 113-134.

Zuckerberg, Donna. 2018. *Not All Dead White Men: Classics and Misogyny in the Digital Age*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

The personal blog *Purple Motes*, run by a contributor to the men's rights' website *A Voice for Men*, posts a wide range of misogynistic commentaries justified through lengthy discussions of the Middle Ages and Greco-Roman antiquity. At first glance, the author Douglas Galbi's arguments frequently appear well-reasoned, diligently researched, and persuasively grounded in close readings of primary texts. If one turns a blind eye to the content, *Purple Motes* in some ways resembles the personal blog of a professional academic – and it is this ability to camouflage his ideological agenda that makes Galbi's rhetoric particularly dangerous.

In April 2018, Galbi published a post entitled “in celibate Hell: resentful Dis threatens civil war & abducts girl,” in which he appropriates Claudian's 4th-century epic *De raptu Proserpinae* in order to argue that “societies that fail to provide ordinary men with adequate sexual welfare are heading toward horrible violence.” In his interpretation of the poem, Galbi portrays Dis as an “incel” – the term used by men on internet forums who, resentful of rejection, describe themselves as “involuntarily celibate.” Galbi's argument revolves around the complaint that most modern scholarship on the poem “reflects dominant gynocentric ideology” by focusing on Proserpina's abduction and separation from her mother, rather than “Dis in celibate Hell.” As such, Galbi's take minimizes the trauma of Proserpina's captivity, contending that through her marriage to Dis she became extraordinarily powerful, and moreover – contrary to the poem's traditional English title, “The Rape of Proserpina” – the two gods may in fact have had a “sexless marriage”, as no ancient sources directly report the birth of children. Indeed, Galbi takes issue with the rendering of *raptu* as ‘rape’: “the translation of the title [as *The Rape of Proserpina*] lacks both philological necessity and literary-critical merit. Moreover, ‘rape’ is now mendaciously applied to criminalize a large share of men. In this context, the best translation of *De raptu Proserpinae* is *The Abduction of Proserpina*.” Galbi repeats this defensive definition of *raptus* in his commentary on the Rape of the Sabine Women, in which he claims that not only were the women captured “without violating their chastity” (setting aside his own definition of *raptus* as “the capture of the Sabine women *to be wives*” [my emphasis]), but the abducted women also “received considerable benefits” and ultimately “generated gynocentric society”.

Antiquity is a tool for Galbi. His intention clearly is to distinguish himself from the majority of ‘Red Pill’ online commentators, who are often easily dismissed for their illiteracy and obvious misunderstandings of the past, and in this, he succeeds. Galbi's commentaries are carefully proofread, divided into cogent paragraphs, and pursue clearly stated theses. His appropriation of Claudian's little-known 4th-century epic is couched in an appropriation of the conventions of

academic writing. In fact, Galbi's use of obscure texts and figures from antiquity to the Renaissance can be read two ways: he may draw from little-known sources in order to demonstrate (to whom?) his own historical mastery; or, the obscurity of his chosen canon may reveal the necessity of searching out particular texts that can be shaped to support his misogynistic agenda. Either way, Galbi's calculated imitation of academic discourse balances a formal, 'authoritative' style with an accessible, personable tone and popular appeal. One must wonder, again, for whom such work is intended. Most likely, readers would be directed to his blog from his more widely-read contributions to *A Voice For Men*, and be drawn primarily to the misogynistic message, with only a secondary appreciation for the historical 'authority' lent by his reference to a celebrated Western heritage.

In a response to Galbi's claims, then, it is not enough simply to identify his interpretive errors, or to refute his hateful ideology on the grounds that it is hateful; rather, it is necessary to treat Galbi's work as serious scholarship (at least for the purpose of deconstructing it) and subject it to the same careful, critical analysis that all professional scholarship must undergo. In considering Galbi's academic sources, we as Classicists must ask two questions of ourselves: What is the mainstream academic discourse on the Hades and Persephone myth, and in particular Claudian's rendering of it? And is Galbi's reading of the epic justified by the scholarship he cites?

Galbi's equation of sex and war does, in fact, have a strong precedent in mainstream scholarship on Claudian's epic. Indeed, three of the poem's most significant commentators have made the amalgamation of epic and elegiac generic conventions in *De raptu* the central focus of their work. The title of Galbi's post, "in celibate hell", echoes S-C Kevin Tsai's article "Hellish Love", and Ruth Parkes's titular question in "Love or War? Erotic and Martial Poetics in Claudian's *De Raptu Proserpinae*" can be discerned in Galbi's thesis: "societies that fail to provide ordinary men with adequate sexual welfare are heading toward horrible violence." As Tsai, Parkes, and Stephen Wheeler have all observed, *De raptu* is distinctive for its union of erotic and martial signifiers – suggesting that Claudian's poem is, distressingly, not an inappropriate choice for Galbi's association of sex and violence. Such generic intermixing, as Parkes argues, follows the precedent of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* – a particularly significant resonance, as Donna Zuckerberg has documented the circulation of Ovid's erotic works in online "pick-up artist" communities, the insidious flipside of "incel" culture.

However, Galbi undermines his use of academic source material by frequently disagreeing with the scholars he cites, thereby demonstrating the incompatibility of much of his argument with mainstream discourse. For instance, while Wheeler in “The Underworld Opening of Claudian’s *De Raptu Proserpinae*” does recognize that in the epic, “the marriage of Proserpina is a necessary sacrifice to prevent a war between brothers and a return to chaos”, he also notes that “Claudian problematizes the efficacy of Proserpina’s sacrifice, since it leads to the violent reprisal of Ceres – a repetition of the chaos with which the poem opens.” Galbi ignores this important reservation, and reduces the relationship between sex and war in Claudian to one of simple cause and effect: the only viable alternative to civil war is the provision of sex to frustrated men. And yet, some of Galbi’s assertions do, in fact, accurately conform to his academic sources: Tsai’s association of Dis’ blush with *pudor*, or shame, is indeed presented as evidence of “men’s lack of sexual power [arising] in part from lack of good education in seduction skills”. Tsai, of course, never draws the conclusion that “structural gender inequality [...] contributes considerably to ordinary men’s sexual disadvantage”; still, **the potential for such scholarship to be used to further such ideological agendas must not be ignored, and its connotations carefully examined.**

While Galbi overstates the equation of sex and violence in his scholarly sources, he also *understates* the physical violation of the assault on Proserpina. Such internal contradictions ultimately undermine the coherence of Galbi’s argument, but they are often hard to detect, and his frequent digressions and convoluted logic make his argument difficult to follow, and thus harder to refute. For instance, there is little opportunity to examine Galbi’s key claim that “the Latin word *raptus* most centrally means abduction. Proserpina clearly was abducted”, as in the next sentence he moves on to the case of the Sabine women, and his recurrent argument that “in traditional societies bridal capture is commonly a highly ritualized action socially imposed on men”. Still, Galbi returns to the subject to argue that “the translation of the title [as *The Rape of Proserpine*] lacks both philological necessity and literary-critical merit. Moreover, ‘rape’ is now mendaciously applied to criminalize a large share of men. In this context, the best translation of *De raptu Proserpinae* is *The Abduction of Proserpina*.” Here, Galbi deliberately glosses over the historical use of *raptus* (“seized”) as referring to the seizure of property, which under Roman law included women, and its nominalization *raptio*, which throughout history has referred to bride kidnapping – literally, a forced abduction, but with inevitable sexual connotations. His immediate half-defense, half-condemnation of bride kidnapping as “socially imposed on men” also suggests that he is aware of the connotations he obscures by insisting on such a literal meaning of the term.

Parkes undermines Galbi's denial of the rape by pointing out Claudian's use of "the traditional epithalamic association of flower-plucking and loss of virginity" that is central to Ovid's treatment of the myth. Claudian also "infuses the description of vegetation withered by Dis' arrival with diction reminiscent of the abducted Proserpina's state ... to hint at the effects of force against her", thus discrediting Galbi's improbable claim that, due to the absence of any known children, "Proserpina and Dis may have had a sexless marriage" – in Galbi's opinion, one of the greatest crimes perpetrated against men. Galbi's denial of the rape, which is the actual focus of Parkes' scholarship on "the union of desire and violence" that "turns a woman's body into a locus of conflict", displaces this conflict onto the body of Dis. Rejecting "modern scholarly study [which] has emphasized, not Dis in celibate Hell, but Proserpina's separation from her mother Ceres", Galbi makes *Dis* the victim of a sexual crime – that of "involuntary celibacy".

For balance, it should be recognized that some of the concerns Galbi raises, both in his discussion of *De raptu* and elsewhere on the blog, are, in fact, valid in isolation. It is hard, for instance, to refute his claim that "All men are entitled to satisfying, intimate love" (although one might wish he would extend that right to "all people"), and anyone genuinely committed to social reform must also be committed to addressing those issues which do, indeed, disproportionately affect men, such as high incarceration rates, lower life expectancies, and suicide rates more than triple those of women. At times, Galbi's social grievances are genuine; his responses to those grievances, however, invoke antiquity in order to argue that "compared to women's sexuality, men's sexuality has been much less socially supported in societies from ancient Greece through to present-day, high-income democracies." He predicts that sexually frustrated men will follow the example of Dis, and bride-kidnapping and rape will become the new norm.

For the author of *Purple Motes*, modern male sexuality is under attack – and has been for millennia: "Compared to women's sexuality, men's sexuality has been much less socially supported in societies from ancient Greece through to present-day, high-income democracies." This perceived suppression of male sexuality comes in several forms, including false allegations of rape, rejection in person and on dating websites, and physical attacks on men's genitals – in his terms, "castration culture." Galbi blames "smartphone-based intimate solicitation" – i.e. the prevalence of dating apps such as Tinder – for the rise of 'gynocentrist' societies, in which men are rarely pursued and their sexual advances frequently rejected. In such a world, he ominously predicts, rejected men will not be content with substitutes such as pornography, and "will engage in despicable acts of violence." This portend rings especially and horrifically true in the aftermath of the 2014 attack committed by self-

proclaimed “incel” Elliot Rodger at the University of California, Santa Barbara that left 6 people dead and 14 injured. His misogynistic manifesto was circulated online, and many hailed him as a hero of the incel community.

In a conclusion that reads like a manifesto, Galbi’s appropriation of the abduction myth serves to deliver a dire warning to “societies that fail to provide ordinary men with adequate sexual welfare” – that is, those that do not require forced marriage, legalize rape, or provide sexual services for men who fail to secure partners by their own means. For ‘incels’ such as Galbi, who believe their fundamental entitlement to sex has been curtailed by the freedom of choice exercised by modern women, the solution is to deny women the right of sexual freedom. Should his demands for such a world not be met, Galbi, following the example supposedly set by Dis in Claudian’s epic, threatens to bring the world to destruction: “The resulting violence, chaos, and misery will be far greater than from any prior world war among men.” It is statements such as these that seem to provide a conclusive answer to *The Verge*’s recent article, which asks “Should we Treat Incels as Terrorists?” We must not allow Galbi’s academic gloss to conceal the real-world dangers of such misogynistic interpretations of antiquity.

The continuity that Galbi attempts to draw from antiquity to the present is undermined by his 21st-century-specific concern with “the rise of smartphone-based intimate solicitation”, i.e. dating apps, which he credits with “dramatically increasing sexual inequality”, in which “the biggest losers are ordinary men” (such as Hades, the ancient God of the Underworld). Despite his deep entrenchment in a romanticized, regressive past, however, Galbi’s view is to the future, in which he predicts an “all-out gender war ... between the haves and the have-nots — between those who have all the vagina and those who have none. The resulting violence, chaos, and misery will be far greater than from any prior world war among men.” It is the somewhat ironic, but necessary duty of social justice-minded classicists and medievalists, who have thus far pursued this goal through the creation of the progressive platforms *Eidolon*, *Pharos*, *Lupercal*, *Confabulations*, and *The Sportula*, to make certain that Galbi’s regressive histories are never realized, in the present or in the future. Direct engagement and refutation of such distorted representations of the Classics are unlikely to change the mind of posters such as Galbi, for whom history functions a convenient smoke screen for an entrenched ideological agenda. **But we can ensure that anyone who encounters the Classics online has access to a multitude of diverse and progressive voices, promoting a critical and inclusive alternative to such regressive visions of antiquity.**