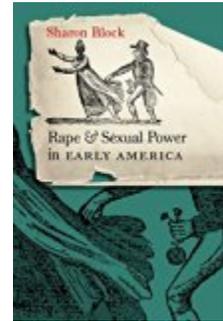


Sharon Block. *Rape and Sexual Power in Early America*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006. 296 pp. \$19.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8078-5761-8.

Reviewed by Loyce Miles

Published on H-SAWH (April, 2009)

Commissioned by Antoinette G. van Zelm



Rape in Early America: Perceptions and Realities

Sharon Block's *Rape and Sexual Power in Early America* provides a comprehensive look into the issue of rape and sexual violence during early American history. This monograph carefully explains that during the eighteenth century the crime of rape was seldom either identified or prosecuted by the courts. Block, however, uses individual experiences, community reaction, government mandates, courtroom activities, and contemporary ideology to identify more than nine hundred instances of sexual coercion throughout British North America between 1700 and 1820. Through these examples, she demonstrates that rape and sexual violence varied little by region and that the definition of "rape" did not change much over time. Block strengthens the argument of the existence of a patriarchal power structure that many historians have long established as the norm. She firmly demonstrates that patriarchal power included sexual violence. The author has done a wonderful job at using case studies to explain the overall cultural view of sexual behavior during the eighteenth century. Historians will clearly see two significant benefits to this work. Modern readers will gain a vivid understanding of not only rape and sexual relations during this period, but also the connection between rape and racism.

In early America, most individuals accepted the notion that normal sexual relations between a man and a woman involved force. On the one hand, the general mindset characterized men as naturally sexually aggressive and the dominant participants in any sexual act. Sex could involve violence without it being called rape.

Women, on the other hand, were supposed to be chaste and virtuous. They were expected to resist sexual relationships of any kind, even if attracted to a member of the opposite sex. Rape, according to Block, was normal sexual behavior taken to the extreme, and women's resistance to a sexual act did not mean a lack of willingness. (The immediate question that rose in my mind, then, was how were men to know the difference?) If women were supposed to resist all sexual advances, then when a woman claimed rape, the public immediately became suspicious. Based on society's definition of rape, any sexual act could be classified as rape if the female wanted to accuse the male. To make matters worse, the general belief held women to blame for male arousal, so rape must have been women's fault. To actually prosecute a male for rape required the female to put aside her training and her cultural beliefs. Few women did this.

To further complicate this situation, status was also at play in whether men were seen as having forced sex on women. Elite white men always "redefine[d] coercion into consent," while poor white men or black men rarely had that option (p. 12). In other words, white men of influence and power theoretically could not rape. Since women were economically dependent on men, they were often forced to accept sexual advances even when they involved force. Early Americans depended on this social hierarchy to determine what was permissible and what was criminal. As one might imagine, white upper-class men, who were fathers, husbands, and masters, supposedly never participated in unwanted sexual advances.

Block does a wonderful job in explaining how all patri-archs justified all sexual activity as consensual and cer-tainly as their prerogative. In addition, white males had the responsibility to protect their wives and daughters from unwanted sexual encounters and to control sexual access as well. This certainly included advances made by black men and white men who did not meet the family's economic or social standards.

In addition to elucidating the general conception of rape in early America, Block also addresses the difficult topic of the role of black men in sexual assaults. When determining whether a situation was rape or not, race was often the deciding factor. Block very clearly ex-plains that when a white woman accused a black man of rape, the general consensus was that he did it. A white woman would never consent to a black man's advances, the thinking went, so it had to be rape. Block points out that black-on-white rape was seen as a form of racial warfare. The common understanding was that black men were selecting white men's women as a means of assert-ing their manhood. To further control slaves and ensure racial boundaries, laws were enacted forbidding interracial relationships. The print media of the day portrayed blacks as rapists and presented white men as evil seduc-ers.

Interestingly, Block demonstrates that the definition of rape did not change over the century, but she does provide evidence that black men were accused more and more, while white men were accused less often, as the century progressed. She refers to this as the "racializa-tion of rape" (p. 4). Block further clarifies this point when she explores rape and black women. According to the common perception of the period, white women always resisted sexual advances, but black women were never allowed to resist; thus, white men could use black women as they desired. The early American definition of rape excluded black women. Block insists that this double standard was instrumental in creating racism in America.

This book has few, if any, weaknesses. Block uses both court records and the print media to explain ideas of rape in early America. She offers excellent examples to show the split between the actual event of rape and what was acknowledged as rape. She interprets this topic to further explain the creation of racism in America. It is easy to see how this book has quickly become the stan-dard work on early American sexual violence and rape as well as a great source to use when studying the early American power struggle between men and women and between whites and blacks.

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Citation: Loyce Miles. Review of Block, Sharon, *Rape and Sexual Power in Early America*. H-SAWH, H-Net Reviews. April, 2009.

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