

**Who cares about calling non-consensual sex "rape" in summaries of fictional narratives on Wikipedia? From a gender identity hypothesis to recurrent activist discursive practices**

Anne Grand d'Esnon

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# Who cares about calling non-consensual sex “rape” in summaries of fictional narratives on Wikipedia?

Anne Grand d’Esnon (PhD student, Université de Bourgogne)

This presentation is based on a larger research project about novel and film summaries on Wikipedia where recurrent dissension occurs as to which word summarizes best what happens in a fictional sex scene (typically consensual sex vs rape).

My main hypothesis is that we can observe interpretive disagreements about what happens in some fictional sex scenes and about whether or not the actions should be described as sexual violence / coerced sex, and particularly should be called « rape ». Thanks to scientific literature about sexual violence, we know that people, after reading a short fictional narrative for the experiment, often differ on deciding to call a series of actions « rape » and an experiment can control which variables predict rape attribution.

However, is it the same with longer fictional narratives, with complex aesthetic objects (films, novels), and it is the same with online discourse about these narratives?

The data I gathered from Wikipedia page histories show that indeed, such disagreement occurs: contributors keep changing the words that describe the fictional action, for example in the summary of Ang Lee’s *The Wedding Banquet*, although the word « rape » is not always necessary to express coercion: we can see the summary shift from « seduces » to « forces herself on », then to « rapes », later to « has sex with », back to « rapes », « having sex with », and finally « being taken advantage of ».

As you can see, the data gathered online (rather than experimentally controlled) lacks context about potential readers or viewers engaging in the summary. In front of such variation, there are at least two questions one would like to ask :

- Can we explain the data solely by subjective variation in interpretation? Is it only due to chance?
- If not, is gender a significant variable in construing a scene as rape rather than seduction? Are women, who are more likely to experience sexual violence in their lives, more prone to « call a rape a rape » online?

So I’d like to start here. Does gender matter and how? Talk pages linked to my sample of interpretive variation suggest that, at least, people tend to think that gender matters in the process of deciding whether a series of actions is rape.

For example, when Flyer 22 and Betty Logan, both women, try to decide whether there is a legitimate debate on what happens in the staircase scene in *Gone with the Wind*, female viewers are mentioned as having some

kind of epistemic privilege on the matter. If some women do not see the scene as rape, Flyer22 suggests, then there is a debate (whereas a random contributor disagreeing is not enough).

Such talks take place, however, on Wikipedia, where personal identity or expertise is not supposed to matter. When DrKay reproaches Mark 2000 with engaging in personal attack (against the rules of Wikipedia), they insist that he knows nothing about their gender among other things. They implicitly state that gender and experience (implicitly victimization) are at stake in the argument but too hastily assumed just because they do not see the *Blade Runner* scene as rape.

Indeed, cues to construe gender are scarce on Wikipedia, for contributors as well as for researchers. So what do we know for sure?

We know there is a gender gap on Wikipedia, with a majority of male contributors. The more a contributor contributes, the more likely they are to be a man. On Wikipedia, the interaction between users is not supposed to be about people and their expertise but only about the project and the content: people are not encouraged to state their gender, although they can write about it on their personal page if they want. The information therefore remains scarce. However, I noticed that it was very difficult, from the position of the analyst, not to construe gender, even when it consists in assigning a default male identity when I have to talk about a contributor.

You may have noticed that I have nonetheless referred to three contributors as « he » or « women ». So which cues might be robust enough to construe gender for the analyst?

Registered contributors (as opposed to contributors merely identified by their IP address) can display gender-specific user names (for example Mark 2000), with female or male first names in it (including mythological or fictional characters), gender-specific titles (such as « King »), terms like « boy », « guy » and « girl » (for example WoundedWolfgirl). Registered contributors can also add user boxes to their user page, although it requires advanced technical skills. In French, I can also rely on first-person agreements in comments or talk pages, but since Wikipedia is not about you, but about the project, they are quite rare. In one occasion in my data, a contributor, Flyer22, is referred to with third-person pronouns from other Wikipedians because she's deceased.

These cues have limitations anyway: a user name is only about one's gender online, how one wants to be perceived; gender can change: if the data I want to provide context to dates back to 2007, should I use information displayed in 2021? They are not frequent enough to provide basis for a quantitative analysis of recurrent disagreements: the only thing I allow myself to do therefore is to use gendered terms when presenting a fragment of my data if I think the cues are robust enough to express the contributor's gender, because I know it will not be indifferent to my personal perception and analysis, and to my reader.

If gender is inconclusive, is there another way to *know more* about what makes a contributor contribute and relate to sexual violence the way they do?

A new path I wanted to investigate relies on the idea that (gender) identity is not as important here as practices: rather than knowing who the contributors are, I should rather try and see what they do on Wikipedia, what they did just before or after, using the contributor's automatic list of contributions. Everyone can access this list very easily, therefore, it does not only matter to the analyst as raw information, but also as potential context to

analyze interactions between Wikipedians: Wikipedians do not interact with the same caution with everyone – if someone looks like they are not familiar with Wikipedia’s rules, that they engage in edit warring or push their political agenda, the interaction in commentaries and talk pages is likely to be different.

A strong limitation of these lists of contributions for IPs is that IPs can be shared: it requires caution, especially when the IP is located in a collective structure (a university for example).

I could only build « case studies » with this approach, with three types of behavior that I thought consistent with the initial data (a contributor introducing coercion or rape vocabulary in a film or novel summary):

1. some contributors make identical discursive shifts (renaming an action “rape”) in other fictional narratives;
2. some contributors specialize in articles about sexual violence, whether fictional or real, and feminism-related themes;
3. some contributors display recurrent verbal hygiene practices linked to consistent political beliefs (feminism but also anti-racism, transgender rights).

The first case happens when we can spot exactly the same type of modification for other fictional narratives, such as « Observe and Report », where two contributors make almost the same modification.

- For Sarah McIntosh from *The Wedding Banquet* page history, four years apart, we notice exactly the same type of shift, from « seduces » to « forces herself on » and from « have sex with her » to « rape her ».
- For the IP from the *Blade Runner* page history, « passion » disappears and « force » appears instead, while on the same day, they change « has sex with her » to « rapes her » on the *Observe and Report* page.

Some contributors specialize in sexual violence and feminism-related themes, shifting from real-life issues to fiction: Tinselbee from the *Lolita* page history contributes the hour before to another film, also about child rape, and contributes to the « Child abuse » page in-between, making the word « rape » appear each time and erasing words suggesting (at least to their eyes) voluntary action from the child.

- An IP from the « Gone with the Wind » page history specializes within four months in articles about rape and mental health, linking the two in their modifications.
- Their contribution to the « Gone with the Wind » summary is consistent with this perspective : Scarlett does not *enjoy* the rape but rather fails to recognize it as such – a description easily consistent with psychological reactions to rape.

The third type encompasses the first two: the lexical shifts we saw can be linked to what Deborah Cameron called « Verbal hygiene », in a politically consistent version that can go beyond sexual violence activism and feminism. Those contributors *care* about the political meaning of words and contribute to Wikipedia with specific linguistic norms.

- Glasslelia is a contributor who prefers to state an alternative between rape and consensual sex in *Gone with the Wind* to the romantic euphemism « passion envelops them ». Not only does she contribute to feminism-related pages such as « The Feminine Mystique » page, but her contribution applies non-sexist linguistic norms to the page, calling Betty Friedan by her last name the way men are usually called rather than « Betty ».

- The IP from « The three Musketeers » page history, with practices of edit warring, very obviously specializes on sexual violence subjects, but also display other political linguistic norms by repeatedly erasing the Wachowskis sisters' birth names from their page.
- Another IP, who changes “seduce” to “rape” in the « Dangerous Liaisons » summary also displays norms of non-sexist language by introducing neutral terms to an article about parenting (terms that don't assume the parent to be a mother).
- Sometimes there is consistency on the very same page: the same IP changes « Caucasian » (a term rooted in biological race classification) to « white » and « has sex with » to « rapes » on *The Wedding Banquet* page.

What do we make of this small panel of contributors who tend to see sexual violence in fictional narratives?

We see that the interpretation of sexual violence can link several fictional narratives: it is therefore unlikely that interpretation is due to chance, pure subjective individuality, or depends solely on the fictional work itself. In at least some cases, the modification takes place in a consistent context of interest and contribution to online and common knowledge about sexual violence. Although I can't know who they are, what strikes me most is that these people consistently contribute to Wikipedia by *caring* about calling (and not calling) things a certain way: saying « rape », not using the word « prostitution » to refer to child sex exploitation, calling a scene rape, not calling it passion or seduction. Not only do they construe rape in their reading and viewing of sex scenes, but they more precisely care about what we should and should not call these scenes; more broadly, they care about how we should use language, they care about the political and ethical implications of words.

A strong limitation of this inquiry is that it can not be generalized. But it enables me to build a new hypothesis to investigate: rather than focusing on gender and gender socialization of readers, viewers and online speakers talking about rape, I could rather explore the acculturation to feminist sexual and discursive norms.