

# Rape Poem an Unfair Glamorization of Serious Issue

Natasha Colburn  
Guest Writer

Between Henry Hood's letter calling affirmative action "racist," and John Toivonen calling the issue of concern over his poem "definitely a case of censorship," *The Guilfordian* last published left me thoroughly disgusted. Because I am better versed in feminism than in issues surrounding racism such as affirmative action, I will respond to the latter and pray someone else will answer Henry Hood's ravings. Please keep in mind that the two articles are not unrelated. "Reverse racism" and "reverse sexism" ("If a woman's name had been on the poem, it would probably have been OK," said Toivonen) are both conceptually inconsistent terms often used by those afraid of losing power (i.e. white people, men, etc.) in order to twist and distort the idea of "working for equality" to work for them. I think both Hood and Toivonen are—in different ways—exploiting and distorting the ideas they claim to be supporting.

After seeing Toivonen triumphantly waving his "banned books" signs and buttons the day after the Publications Board meeting in which his poem was discussed, I assume him to be identifying himself with those artists whose work has been banned or censored by the government. He seems to think his to be a struggle for

artists' rights. But censorship, the process by which a government keeps information or ideas from the people, is not equitable with the informal process of selection by which a community like Guilford decides what it wants to publish for itself.

Censorship is a tool used by those in power to keep a minority or dissenting group silenced: to keep the oppressed oppressed. Toivonen, who is white, male, and co-editor of the *Piper*, has chosen to ignore the fervent requests to leave his poem in or out of the magazine—even though he implies that his is a sort of feminist poem. Then he shouts censorship, as if his constitutional rights were in jeopardy.

The concept of censorship is out of place in this situation. The three women involved are not the government, nor are they in socially dominant positions of power; besides, there was no intention of forcing Toivonen to withdraw his poem. It was made very clear that their goal was to talk to Toivonen and explain that it offended them and why; hopefully, he, being a self-proclaimed feminist, would listen to women and be respectful to them when writing about a women's problem—rape. He did not listen, instead he became defensive and stubborn. This is not about the First Amendment; this is about pride and hypocrisy.

In order to justify his closed ears,

Toivonen explained that those who objected to his poem just didn't understand it, they misinterpreted it, they're just "a small group of people who don't know what you (as an artist) are doing." I find this attitude insulting, patronizing and absolutely without reason. The poem itself is not so complex: neither are the objectors so simple. These are three intelligent women who are well-read and highly aware of sexual imagery and all its implications, who have thoroughly contemplated this issue, and who have discussed matters with Toivonen, the entire Pub Board, and a number of others. How can anyone dismiss their objections as "a misinterpretation of the poem?"

The women involved understand that Toivonen's poem was supposed to be "anti-rape," but they also understand, as he does not, that it ended up glamorizing (and therefore trivializing) rape—something he surely did not mean to do. In other words, it isn't the three women who've misinterpreted the poem, rather it is Toivonen who has apparently misinterpreted—or at least misrepresented—the meaning of rape.

It was also suggested by Toivonen that the imagery of his poem was simply too strong and powerful for some to handle; this claim simply doesn't hold up. The people concerned about this poem are thoroughly aware of the violence and power of rape. Some have studied it, some have

experienced it, and all (women) live with the probability of at some time encountering a rapist. The images we hold in our heads and the memories we hold in our bodies are far more powerful than Toivonen's puny mosquito motif. The complaint is that the imagery is too romantic or sentimental, not that it's too strong.

After all is said and done, the real outrage is not toward John Toivonen's poem, nor is it towards those in charge of the *Piper*. The problem I see is that in this conflict there has been no recognition of a basis responsibility which should be held in the forefront of our decision-making. It is the responsibility of a community to listen to those who have been genuinely offended within the community. This responsibility is doubled when those hurt are of an oppressed and socially-degraded class; it is tripled when the offense is made in the name of empowering or helping these very people.

John Toivonen claims his offense is unintentional but does nothing to amend it. Women students have reasoned; over and over they have explained their insight and concern; and finally, in order to dissociate their names and energies from an endorsement of the poem, they have resigned their positions on the *Piper* staff. Why are their testimonies not trusted? Why are they not treated as the valid and valuable communication that they are?

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

### Tritsch Letter Justified

To the Editor:

In her eagerness to point out an "inaccurate portrait," Carol Crane makes misleading assumptions about Dana Tritsch and her letter from Guadalajara. I have laid in the sun on the beach at Puerto Vallarta and I see poverty on the streets of Guadalajara every day—these things exist however they may be construed.

But Crane suggests that these images are Tritsch's essential vision of Mexico, a ridiculous assumption. Anyone who has been to Mexico knows there are so many facets to this country, one cannot help but absorb the atmosphere of Puerto Vallarta, Barra de Navidad, Guanajuato, Uruapan... all strikingly different from one another. And one letter cannot possibly capture the essence of all these places. But then Tritsch's intention was not to give any broad description of her Mexican experience.

She has simply taken an experience in Puerto Vallarta (a trip included in program tuition), and a confrontation with poverty in Guadalajara and juxtaposed them, creating a stark contrast between the luxury and wealth one finds as a tourist in Puerto Vallarta, and the hunger and desperation you encounter on a daily basis as a student living in Guadalajara. The difference between Guadalajara and Puerto Vallarta is that the poverty is masked in the latter.

If one goes to Puerto Vallarta and falls prey to the mask of luxury, reality will certainly slip through the cracks when you walk down the streets of Guadalajara and see distraught, helpless souls who sink into the crack between the ground and the wall until they become only apparitions which haunt us with pangs of hunger and desperation. Tritsch illustrates this contrast well in her letter. She is not, as Crane suggests, a victim of ignorant stereotypes. Nor

does she avoid questions of social justice and political ideology.

Regardless of what questions we ask, what energy we expend to deep-reaching issues, we must also be able to relate to people on a simple emotional basis as Tritsch has shown in her letter. Does Crane mean to say that because Tritsch feels compassion for a little girl she's not conscious of such issues—or was she referring to only herself? Perhaps instead of giving away her popcorn, Tritsch should have asked the Mexican girl the political ramifications of PRI and the social consequences of her poverty.

As for the last paragraph, Crane should follow her own advice, and challenge herself to find the truth in Tritsch's letter. Often when we read things, we see what we want to and not what is actually written. Though I agree with Crane's last statement, Tritsch did not in any way equate "cultural exchange" with a lower drinking age and a favorable exchange rate. We must challenge ourselves to find the truth in what we read.

Victor Johnson

### Employment Still Biased

To the Editor:

Henry Hood's letter in the last *Guilfordian* (November 19) revealed some common misconceptions about the issue of affirmative action. Hood's description of the "injustice" of affirmative action makes the blaring assumption that minorities are presently living within a just system. He equates affirmative action with preferential treatment, failing to recognize the enormous privilege whites have in relation to people of color.

The statement that affirmative action "encourages blacks to rely in past oppression" implies that oppression of blacks no longer exists, and therefore assumes that whites in power are

only there because they are harder working and more intelligent. The creation of affirmative action in part came out of the understanding that selection for employment is biased.

Carol Joy Crane  
Elia Mavronikolas

### No Equating Situations

To the Editor:

Henry Hood's letter to *The Guilfordian* was convoluted as full of errors in logic. Hood's point was unclear. Is the "racism" Hood is talking about the affirmative action that supposedly hurts blacks? Or the blacks-voting-for-blacks that supposedly hurts whites? Who is Hood looking out for?

I want to make a simple point: there is no equating blacks (and whites) working for the advancement of the black race with whites (and blacks?) working for the advancement of the white race.

Eliza Blake

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