

Transgressive Language in the Ancient World

Keynote Address by Dr. Amy Richlin, UCLA

“The Rise of the Low: Classics and the Study of the Abject”

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Transgressive language—whether **written or visual**—lies at the center of cultural innovation and cultural self-definition as the means through which individuals and groups test boundaries and values. Depictions and discussions of sex, death, profane actions, and impious or obscene speech are integral tools by means of which participants in the ancient world explored and defined their religious practices and beliefs, literary genres, and sexual norms.

The articulation of transgressive ideas through art and writing created more colloquial and vigorous means of artistic expression while reinforcing central beliefs in Greco-Roman cultures. Transgressive language and the varied reactions it elicits raise a number of questions for us as modern readers.

In what ways did obscene or sexual language serve different functions in varied contexts or genres? What fears or cultural necessities motivate ancient societies to create notions of the taboo? How did transgression of prescribed norms and taboos reinforce or diminish existing social, religious, or economic institutions? How did the political establishment move to control transgression in speech or act through the use of censorship? Under what circumstances was cultural or literary transgression permitted or encouraged? What power dynamics and hierarchies are strengthened or questioned by obscenity? How did ancient religion regulate certain actions, depictions, or manners of communication in order to avoid taboos? How do our own notions of the taboo or obscenity affect our study of these topics in the Greco-Roman world?

The University of Colorado Boulder Classics Graduate Colloquium seeks papers from current graduate students addressing how the taboo, censorship, profanity, obscenity, or other culturally regulated behaviors operate in the ancient world. We welcome papers on topics relating to literature, art history, archaeology, philosophy, religion, and ethnography, among others. Please send abstracts of no longer than 300 words to transgressiveconference@gmail.com by November 14, 2016.

Possible topics may include:

- the role of obscenity in creating a written colloquial style
- observation or transgression of established taboos or cultural norms
- treatment of sexual imagery in art
- herms and other apotropaic iconography and their civic utility
- graffiti, curse tablets, and other defiant modes of expression
- obscenity as a tool for reinforcing social status
- curses and profane speech



Rape of the Sabine Women
by Giambologna, 1583