A Cultural Perspective on Rape

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In the Trojan council, Paris argues against returning Helen to the Greeks:

Sir, I propose not merely to myself
The pleasures such a beauty brings with it;
But I would have the soil for her fair rape
Wiped off in honorable keeping her.
What treason were it to the ransack’d queen,
Disgrace to your great worths, and shame to me,
Now to deliver her possession up
On terms of base compulsion!^

So goes Troilus and Cressida, Shakespeare’s 17th-century version of Homer’s Iliad. Written around the 10th century BC, The Iliad is the earliest literary work produced by Western civilization. Based as it is on the “rape” of a woman and her society’s attitudes and responses to it, The Iliad and its various interpretations throughout history provide some interesting perspectives on the cultural context of rape.

In this context, several elementary ideas characterizing important aspects of male–female relations can be isolated. These ideas first appear in our cultural past and can be traced in variant forms to the present. Though modified and subdued, they continue to influence male–female relations and to figure predominantly in modern-day myths about rape and in personal and institutional responses to rape. These ideas are all essentially based on the notion that women, though sometimes idealized, are lesser beings than men, intrinsically inferior to them.

To illustrate how these ideas relate to current rape myths and attitudes, actual quotations have been used from victims and their families, as well as from various professional and community personnel who deal with rape. These quotations were recorded by the author over a two-year period of rape counseling, in a personal journal.  

The first idea is that a woman, as man’s inferior, finds her rightful place in society by fulfilling his destiny. She has no destiny of her own. Her role, and her pleasure, is to live out his purpose. Mythology reiterates this theme many times, for example, in Eve’s creation out of Adam’s rib because Adam was lonely and wanted a companion. The “rape of the Sabine women” by the founding fathers of Rome was not only forgivable but preordained and heroic on the basis of historic necessity. Even in the primary matter of procreation, the essential role was thought to be male, and women served only secondarily as receptors. In The Eumenides of Aeschylus, the notion is first expressed that women have no part in conception but serve simply to incubate the male’s fetus. Thus, Orestes was acquitted of patricide because his mother was not a true parent. As late as the 16th century, engravings still appear of sperm drops or cells containing little, intact homunculi, curled up in the fetal position, indicating that this idea of the female’s subordination in procreation still existed.

In Paris’s speech quoted above, the weight of his argument as to Helen’s fate rests on the importance of the preservation of male honor. Hector has entered the council saying, “She is not worth what she doth cost the holding,” but later he is convinced by Paris’s argument. Even though he concedes that it is morally wrong to steal and, furthermore, unwise to set such unlawful precedents among nations, he is resolved to keep Helen, to protect “our joint and several dignities.” Troilus then adds,

She is a theme of honor and renown;
A spur to valiant and magnanimous deeds,
Whose present courage may beat down our foes,
And fame in time to come canonize us.

Modern versions of this idea appear in the tendency, at times, to take rape lightly as a crime. The assumption is that rape is in some way expectable, even “natural,” as a man’s superior will or his “having his way” with women is natural. This idea is carried to an extreme by some who flatly state, “There is no such thing as rape,” or “Any woman who gets raped asked for it.” Commonly, there is the suspicion that the woman agreed to

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3Shakespeare, op. cit., p. 50.
4Ibid., p. 55.
5Ibid., p. 55.
6Morrison, op. cit.