Rape and rebellion

Lesley Smith

DEFINITION OF RAPE

The Oxford Dictionary gives a definition of the word ‘rape’ as: “late Middle English (originally denoting violent seizure of property, later carrying off a woman by force): from Anglo-Norman French rap (noun), raper (verb), from Latin rapere ‘seize’”.

This definition shows that rape has meant different things at different times in history. In addition, forced vaginal or anal penetration of an individual with a penis was not necessarily seen as a localised crime, but an event that could cause national outrage and even rebellion.

ROMAN RAPE AND REBELLION

In 509 BC, when Rome was ruled by kings, a nobleman called Lucius Tarquinius Collatinus and his wife Lucretia lived in the king’s household. The king at that time was Lucius Tarquinius Superbus, who had a son, Sextus Tarquinius. Sextus deeply desired Lucretia, who rebuffed his attentions; this ended with him forcing himself upon her in a violent act of rape. Lucretia was distressed at bringing dishonour to her husband, who according to Roman law owned her as his personal property, and so she committed suicide. Her body was carried through the streets of Rome, and angry crowds gathered and a great rebellion rose up and banished the king and his family. The leadership void was filled by the founding of the Roman Republic. The raped woman had become a powerful political icon.

Another case within the British Isles was as dramatic in its own way. Around 60 AD, two young girls were raped publicly by Romans in front of their mother, Boudica, leader of the mighty Iceni tribe, who had just been tied up and whipped like a dog. By raping these girls from a royal family, Rome was making the point that it could do anything it wanted to make the Barbarians bend the knee to Rome. The violent uprisings that followed caused a shudder of horror and disbelief across the Roman Empire. Boudica joined ranks with other tribal leaders and burnt and slaughtered great rafts of the Roman settlements in England. Eventually, Boudica lost her last battle and the population settled back down, if rather reluctantly, to life under Roman rule for another three and a half centuries. However, Boudica and the Britons had made the point that rape would not be tolerated and the outcome of such an act can be war.

During the early mediaeval period a father, who in law owned his daughter, could win substantial damages from a rapist as his property would then be ‘damaged goods’ and therefore of lesser value in any marriage market negotiations. The father could win almost as much from a daughter’s consensual lover as the outcome was the same.

RAPE IN TUDOR TIMES

By the time of the Tudors, rape had become a capital offence, reflecting the seriousness of the crime. Despite these strict legal and moral laws, rape remained a brutal weapon of control and humiliation. It is also clear that although prosecutions were brought before the courts, it was very difficult to prove a charge. It continued to be very difficult until relatively recent advances in science produced the absolute evidence provided by DNA analysis.

Interestingly, however, when the young Elizabeth of England was brought into the house of her last stepmother Catherine Parr and her new husband Thomas Seymour, who made a point of trying to seduce her, it was the fact that after examination by a doctor, Elizabeth was declared virgo intacta that saved her in many ways, including her reputation. It did not save the life of Thomas Seymour, however, as he was executed for his ambitions on royal blood.

MALE VS FEMALE RAPE

Rape against men and boys, although now recognised and named as such, was then considered a variation of sodomy. This was not necessarily a lesser charge...
as many men died for homosexual practices in loving relationships. In fact, male rape cases carried the heaviest of punishments. Cases were fairly few and far between. It was assumed that no man could possibly want the sexual advances of another man, whereas a woman could be responsible for bringing a man to the point of sexual frenzy and then complain he had raped her. Women were usually considered much more suspect in a rape case. It is important to appreciate that there was a widespread belief that the womb lived within a woman and dominated much of her sexual behaviour. Women were believed to be almost out of control and thus originated the well-known phrase “she asked for it”.

This idea fixed firmly in society gives rise to the reason why women were so keen to protect their reputations as moral and chaste. The quiet and demure woman with downcast eyes was considered an asset to a husband who was keen to know that the child in her womb was his.

Pregnant women were particularly protected by law. They were seen as carrying the Holy Spirit within their unborn child and having a direct link with the Virgin Mary. There was another belief rooted in medicine that any attack on a woman might bring on a miscarriage and also the belief that a woman who suffered a miscarriage might not conceive again.

Of all the cases I have read of in my studies, the girls who conceived following rape are the saddest, as there was a widespread belief in dual ejaculation. The victims would have to explain how they could have conceived following rape unless they had reached orgasm and therefore they were using rape as an excuse. Some women claimed that witchcraft had been used by their attacker to enable them to resemble the woman’s husband and that is why they had conceived. Those who remember the legend of the conception of King Arthur will recall how Merlin changed the appearance of Uther Pendragon by magic into the husband of Ygraine so that she could conceive decently in her castle of Tingagel. This part of the legend not only reinforced the belief in dual ejaculation, but also protected the reputation of Ygraine and the mother of King Arthur, who must not have a stain upon her image.

CONCLUSION
This is rather a rapid sweep over 2000 years on the subject of rape, but it does remind us that the act of rape has always been unacceptable in society. Rape in war seems to have always been (and continues to be in some theatres of conflict) a perk of the job like plundering property. Today we still hear the saying “she asked for it”. Not enough has changed.

FUTURE ARTICLES
The next article in this series will consider “Pessaries in the history of contraception”.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR
Lesley Smith is currently a postgraduate student in the Centre for the History of Medicine of the University of Birmingham, where she is developing a PhD in obstetrics and gynaecology in early modern Britain. She holds an honorary degree for ‘services to history’. She makes 200–300 public appearances a year and also works as a TV historian in the UK and abroad including the USA. Lesley is also Curator of Tutbury Castle in Staffordshire and is a member of the Society of Apothecaries of London and the Society of Medical Writers. She has recently been appointed a Fellow of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland.

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