



Crimes Of Passion:RepresentationOf Women And Female Sexuality In Mythological Abduction PaintingsOf Peter Paul Rubens

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ABSTRACT: *The mythological stories and legends of ancient Greece repeatedly depict the motif of a mortal woman being 'abducted' by a Greek god or a legendary hero either appearing in his true self or disguising and assuming an animal form. The artistic representation of these narratives such as the abduction of Persephone by Hades, abduction of Helen by Paris or abduction of Orithyia by Boreas interchangeably use 'rape' and 'abduction' and portray women as the embodiments of beauty and sexuality transforming them into crimes committed in hot blood and passion. The sensuality of the paintings is heightened by both subject matter and expressive use of colour and exhibit pain, fear, revulsion, or sometimes passivity by the abducted maiden contrasted by the all-powerful and supreme depictions of Gods. The violent seizure and seductive image, along with the opulent and exuberant artistic nudity intensify the eroticism and poetry of such creations. This paper strives to examine the sensual, sexual, and allegorical implications of rape and abduction in the select monumental mythological abduction and rape paintings of Flemish Baroque painter Peter Paul Rubens such as The Rape of Daughters of the Leucippus, The Rape of Orithyia by Boreas, The Rape of Europa, The Rape of Hippodamia, and The Rape of Proserpine.*

KEYWORDS: *abduction, mythology, painting, sexuality, woman, rape*

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I. INTRODUCTION

The reservoir of mythological stories in ancient Greece concerning the dazzling array of gods, demigods, deities, legendary heroes, and their rituals had extensive influence on the arts and literature of Western civilization. Through the ages, these myths have accounted for the existence and workings of natural phenomenon and the deeds of gods and heroes are employed to seek justification for social and political institutions. The myths of the Greeks have remained unsurpassable and unparalleled in the Western world as the fountainhead of appealing imaginative faculty and fanciful ideas. The themes of Greek myths originate from the cosmological narratives of the birth of the gods and the creation of the universe or cosmos out of vast void of chaos, the lineage of mighty and divine rulers, and the internecine battles that resulted in the ascendancy and hegemony of Zeus as all-powerful ruling from his palace on Mount Olympus. The myths also revolve around countless tales of Zeus's amorous affairs with goddesses and mortal women, which usually resulted in the births of younger deities and heroes, phenomenal earth-shaking battles with conflagrations where Zeus launch his famed thunderbolt destroying monsters and giants, and moral principles enlightening the mortals of gods rewarding honourable behaviour and obedience, and bringing the wrath on people who dishonoured themselves or defied the gods.

These tales glorifying the actions of gods and goddesses also details crimes committed out of passion and indoctrinate dangers inherent in immortal alliances. "The recognizable passions, such as pride, jealousy, love, and the thirst for revenge have prompted deities to leave Mount Olympus to become involved in the affairs of mortals, interacting with men and women." ("Greek mythology") The Olympian gods of ancient Greece are known for their interest in mortal women and while some appeared in their true form, some gods transformed and disguised themselves into animals, birds, or humans to trick and seduce the object of their desire and fulfill their personal desire. Zeus turned himself into a swan to seduce Leda, into a golden shower to impregnate Danae, into a satyr to enchant Antiope, into an ant to entice Eurymedusa and as the maiden Artemis to deceive

Kallisto.Eos, the personification of Dawn, is the only woman assuming the role of a pursuer in abduction and rape.

One of the recurrent motifs of Greek mythology is the trope of abduction which usually involves the malicious capture of a maiden or a princess by an evil force or a lustful deity or hero. Persephone is abducted and raped by the underworld god Hades, Helen of Troy by the Trojan prince Paris, leading to Trojan War, and Zeus transformed himself into a bull and abducts Europa. As an equivalent to the theme of abduction, in the Indian epic Ramayana, Sita, the wife of the Vishnu avatar Rama, is abducted by the demon Ravana and in the Finnish epic Kalevala, the hero Lemminkainen abducts Kylliki. The partial meaning of this motif is realized as mock abductions are common and prevalent in marriage traditions. The Oxford Companion to World Mythology gives the rationale for such representations by suggesting women as "a valuable commodity" to be desired and owned. Marriage can perhaps be seen as abduction from the mother by the patriarchal powers that see their relationship with the women in terms of ownership. The abduction of women in any context suggests the idea of the female as a valuable commodity in a male-dominated world. It might be argued, too, that abduction represents an innate resentment of innocence and of a desire to own what clearly belongs to another. (Leeming 01)

Greece, in the ancient times, dictated by a patriarchal society developed violent sexual-based myths and myths involving abduction of women by gods and heroes establishing supremacy over women. The artistic representation of such mythological tales depict highly sexualized, voluptuous beauties in the grasp of a supreme being, seduced and violated for sexual pleasure, later made consort or abandoned. The paintings of Peter Paul Rubens, one of the great Flemish artists of the 17th century, known for his Baroque tradition has skilfully captured the mythological women with his brushstrokes. The Rubenesque Baroque style is characterized by exaggerated motion and clear detail used to produce drama, exuberance, and grandeur and the term 'Rubenesque' is also used with reference to his plump, fleshy, and voluptuous female nudes. Rubens' mythological abduction and rape paintings feature gods and heroes who pursue mortal women in a dance of kidnap and seduction. The implications of such sensual paintings varies according to the subject matter and for the sake of convenience five paintings of Rubens are selected for analysing representation of women and female sexuality namely The Rape of Daughters of Leucippus, The Rape of Orithyia by Boreas, The Rape of Europa, The Rape of Hippodamia, and The Rape of Proserpine.

The Rape of the Daughters of Leucippus, (Figure 1) a 1618 life-size painting now preserved in the Alte Pinakothek in Munich, depicts the mythical tale of twins Castor, the mortal and earthly son of Tyndareus and Leda, and Pollux, the immortal son of divine Zeus and Leda abducting Hilaria and Phoebe, daughters of Leucippus, Prince of Messenia. Hilaria and Phoebe were already betrothed to the twin brothers of Thebes, Lynceus and Idas, sons of Tyndareus' brother Aphareus. Castor and Pollux aka the Discouri were set on marrying the Leucippides and they carried off the two women to Sparta where they were duly married and both women bore sons. Mnesileos was born to Phoebe and Pollux and Anogon was born to Hilaria and Castor. The painting details the moment the two women are physically abducted by the Discouri. Rubens illustrates the masculinity and power emanating from the two brothers when the manly Pollux hauls one of the nude sisters up by her underarm and the noble Castor drags the other sister while controlling his prancing steed. Castor the horse-tamer can be distinguished vividly by his Roman armour plate and sheathing, and his compliant horse placed on the left grabs the struggling Hilaria. Pollux the boxer, recognizable from his free and bare chest and unruly mount, wearing only the simple boots of a foot soldier, wrestles with the flailing Phoebe. They are identifiable by the nature of their horses as Castor's horse is well-behaved and peaceful, the reins being held by a putto, a cherub with a black wing, while Pollux's horse is rearing. The painting is unclear on the discernable attributes of Phoebe and Hilaria.



Figure 1:The Rape of the Daughters of Leucippus (1618)

The symbolism and the arrangement of the characters are meticulously designed to reveal the nemesis of the two sisters. The putto's black wing symbolises the twins' ultimate fate of being defiled by the twins. The four figures and two horses are tangled and intermeshed in a carefully choreographed mass to create a well-balanced and dynamic posture. The violent and brutal action is contrasted with the calmness of the rolling hills with gentle slopes and the tranquillity of the beautiful blue sky. Another sharp contrast noticeable is the fair white skin of the nude blonde women and the dark bodies of their kidnapper where the feet of Pollux and Pheobe stand side by side in a diagonal. The scene is made more dramatic by the contrasting light and dark tones evident in the landscape and the scene of the abduction. While the dark muscular figures identical to Michelangelo's Genesis fresco in the Sistine Chapel is contrasted by the fair-skinned innocent maidens and the pale landscape. The distress of the women can be perceived from the tensed and vulnerable unclothed bodies and their flailing arms calling for help, but at the same time, realizing the inescapable and inevitable capture as they raise their eyes towards heaven indicating their ultimate surrender.

Rubens illustrates the idea of *amorsforzato*, or forced love, with the abduction of the sisters. The sensual painting of full-bodied women combined with a compact erotic grouping is an expression of violent passion. The abduction of the sisters can only be explained as "a violent yet passionate confrontation between lustful men and beautiful generously endowed women." (Alpers 285) The women are represented as sexual beings with their bare breasts and strong thighs and buttocks aimed for the male gaze to derive pleasure.

The Rape of Orithyia by Boreas (Figure 2) is a 1620 oil on panel painting preserved in the Academy of Fine Arts, Vienna, illustrating the abduction of mortal Orithyia by Boreas. Erechtheus had four sons and four daughters. Of his daughters, two were endowed with alluring beauty and grace: Procris, who married Cephalus, and Orithyia, who was betrothed to Boreas. On being rejected by Erechtheus, after the disgrace of Tereus, the King of Thrace, Boreas took matters to his own hand. Boreas, the personification of the North Wind, abducted the beautiful Orithyia, a daughter of Erechtheus, King of Athens, from the banks of the river Ilissos near Athens. He carried her off to a cave on Mount Haimos in Thrake where she became his immortal wife. The mountain-nymph wife of Boreas was the goddess of chill mountain winds for her name means "mountain-rager", from the Greek words 'oreios' and 'thyô', and she was named the mother of Snow.



Figure 2:The Rape of Orithyia by Boreas (1620)

In this picturesque painting of Rubens, Boreas is represented in a classical guise, as a roughly-bearded old man wearing a short, pleated tunic and adorned with dark feathery wings. Unlike most of the ancient gods, the winged god of North Wind attempts to woo Orithyia by words of love rather than forcibly abducting and raping her. But when he realises that his gentle approach resulted in more distance, Boreas sweeps Orithyia up in his arms and flies high while a cluster of cupids is seen engaged in a snowball fight delighting with merry laughter. Rubens gives a slight twist in portraying the North Wind, creator of snow and hail, as he adds a playful element to Boreas's abduction of a mortal by including amoretti in the background playing with snowballs. The figures are foregrounded by emphasizing the dramatic seizure and the voluptuous trembling figure of Orithyia caught up in his arms and attached to his chest outline the doubtful passions and physical struggles. The full view of the arched nude form slightly draped with white and red fabric is a contrast to the green of Boreas' tunic. The flailing arms of Orithyia in capture and a set of flailing hands of the amoretti to catch the snowball are contrasted with the tight hold of Boreas on Orithyia. The figures fill the picture plane overshadowing the dramatic action of abduction. The employment of vivid colours, a lovely touch of humour, and a subtle reference to winter heightened by the cupids playing snowball creates a balance between the tension of abduction and sensation.

Rubens accentuates the vigorous and authoritative nature of the North Wind by depicting the abduction of a mortal woman. The attribute of power normalises such crimes of passion according to the patriarchal model. Orithyia is sketched as a meek and passive form in Boreas' hold realising the inevitability of her fate and such depictions display how a woman should behave under the assertions of authority. The abduction and rape of Orithyia by Boreas is a primary example of seventeenth-century rape imagery that objectified the nude and vulnerable female form, visually arousing the viewer with a portrayal of chase and abduction.

The oil on canvas painting, *The Rape of Europa* (1628-29) (Figure 3) is a faithful copy of a 1562 work on the same theme by Titian, now preserved in the Prado Museum, Madrid, depicting the Phoenician princess Europa after she was abducted by Zeus, who turned himself into a white bull. The painting details a soft azure sky thickening and darkening with ominous grey clouds above, with a muscular and majestic white bull wading through the water with his prized possession Europa thrashing in protest with her arms and legs raised below. The young maiden looks fixedly and fearfully over her shoulder at her companions who helplessly watch from the shore, unable to assist their abducted mistress. Arching her body backward in desperation, Europa firmly grasps one of the horns as yards of brightly colored fabric billow around her. Amoretti fly overhead and seem to realize their error in assisting the masked Zeus in his seduction and abduction of the innocent maiden, as they struggle to keep up with the escape over the sea. Two cherubic naked boys with wings and a bow and arrow escapes flying above while one rides a fleshy fish.



Figure 3: The Rape of Europa (1628-29)

The visual representation of the mythical tale recounts the story of an enraptured Zeus smitten with the beauty of the Phoenician princess Europa, daughter of Agenor, King of Tyre plotting the abduction of Europa to seduce and ravish her. Zeus disguised himself as a tame white magnificent bull and mixed with her father's herds. While she was gathering flowers, she saw the glorious creature, caressed his flanks, adorned the bull with flowers, and ultimately climbed upon his back. Zeus seized the occasion crossing the sea, with Europa clinging onto his back, to the island of Crete. Zeus then disclosed his true identity and raped Europa under a cypress tree and Europa became the first queen of Crete giving birth to King Minos of Crete. Zeus gave her a necklace made by Hephaestus and three additional gifts: Talos, Laelaps and a javelin that never missed.

The feminine flesh of bare breast and fleshy curves alludes to the sexual aspect of the painting. The carnal treatment of the rape imagery is heightened by the artist's portrayal of a chaste and innocent maiden as the prize in a game of seduction. Europa is elevated as the central point and the disarray of clothing enhances the implication of erotica, creating an aphrodisiac for the viewer. The impending union is also implied by the phallic allusion of Europa's tender yet firm grasp on the bull's horn. Through the combination of her unearthly glow and her open arms, Europa displays that her virginity is temporarily "protected" with the thin fabric around her waist.

The Rape of Hippodamia, (Figure 4) an oil on canvas painting, now preserved in the Museo del Prado, Madrid, reproduce the mythical story of Hippodamia, known as "she who masters horses", who was nearly abducted by the Centaurs, a mythological creature with the upper body of a human and the lower body and legs of a horse. During the wedding of Hippodamia and Pirithous, the barbaric and uncivilized centaurs who were invited to the wedding became wildly intoxicated, began a brawl, and attacked the other guests and even the hosts. The battle between the humans and the centaurs commenced when a centaur named Eurypus attempted to abduct the bride. The composition of the sketch with the female figure in the center with the two battling groups on either side represents the struggle for the body of a woman. In the dynamic representation, the scene bursts forth horizontally, from left to right. A contrast between civilization and bestiality is represented on either side with the humans and the centaurs.



Figure 4:The Rape of Hippodamia (1936-37)

The hybrid monster Centaurs make a drunken attempt to abduct the bride Deidamia, commonly known as Hippodamia, at her wedding to Pirithous, king of the Lapiths. Led by Eurytus, the centaurs are spurred on by Mars, who was insulted at not being invited. Hippodamia is rescued by the Athenian hero Theseus, who is the epitome of bravery and manhood as well as of order triumphing over chaos. In Rubens' formulation, like the depictions of *The Rape of the Sabine Women*, the passive female victim must be rescued by her active male hero. The painting depicts the fair heroine swooning at the center of the composition, as she leans backward toward Theseus while still in the clutches of the bearded Eurytus. An older woman who attempts to restrain the bride falls to the ground, clinging to her bright red skirt, while an older man in the left rear leads two other young women away to indoor safety. Theseus' two strong, young friends leap boldly to his assistance, toppling wine and fruit from the table of the wedding feast. Their strength matches that of the centaurs but also points subtly to the resemblance between both groups.

Rather than revealing the outcome of the battle, Rubens depicts the scene as a moment of great tension, emphasizing the contrast between Hippodamia's twisted and helpless form and the heightened musculature of the men around her. Rife with violence, disruption, and deception among gods and men, the mythological stories of abduction depict the submissive character of a woman who waits for the arrival of a hero for her rescue swooning at the occasion. The disintegration of civil order due to the passions of men and gods and the representation of women as beings of sexual nature are reiterated motifs found in the abduction paintings.

Rubens' *The Rape of Proserpine* (1636-37) (Figure 5) is oil on canvas painting, now preserved in the Museo Nacional del Prado, Madrid, delineating the abduction of Persephone, the daughter of Zeus and Demeter by the formidable god of the dead and the king of the Underworld, later entering into matrimony with Hades and becoming the queen of the underworld. The abduction myth represents Persephone's function as the personification of vegetation associated with the spring as well as the fertility of vegetation. The story of her abduction against her will is referred to as the Rape of Persephone. Persephone was a goddess of vegetation who roamed within Nature living far away from other gods and wooed by Hermes and Apollo. But Demeter rejected all their gifts and hid her away from the advances of the Olympian gods. Hades, mesmerised by the beauty, decided to plot Persephone's abduction to make her his consort as Demeter was unlikely to give her daughter away to the god of the Underworld. While Persephone was gathering flowers with the Oceanids, Artemis, and Athena in a field, Hades appeared in a chariot through a cleft in the earth. Demeter forced Hades to return Persephone causing nothing to grow on earth neglecting it on the depth of her despair. Before her release from the Underworld, Hades tricked her by giving some pomegranate seeds to eat. Persephone was released but since she had tasted the food in the underworld, she was obliged to spend half the year with the gods above.

Rubens' representation of Proserpine's abduction by Hades is dark and somber in outlook and has employed dark tones that subdue the colour patterns. Hades with an expression of annoyance and resentment for the resistance put up by Proserpine's companions Oceanids, Artemis, and Athena carries Proserpine in his arms holding her behind the thighs and supporting her upper back. Hades stares at Athena, his eyes bulging when she tries to cease the girl from being abducted. The red drapery across her lower part of her body is sliding away and the urgency is highlighted by the cupids who are pulling the chariots with the reins in their hands, one on the

ground and the other flying high above, both looking at the resistance and indicating a hastening stance. The presence of the cupids holding the chariot reigns and urging the horses on also symbolises the idea that despite the resistance, their relationship would blossom into love. They are preparing to drive the black horses on, once the couple is secured inside. Proserpine, in a state of distress and flailing arms, is not wrestling or struggling from his hold rather becoming compliant and yielding to her captor. Her companions in a stance of movement try to retrieve Proserpine from the god of the Underworld. Athena is shown wearing a helmet and holding a spear reaching for Proserpine while Artemis and Oceanids follow close by to reach for the kidnapped. Below the chariot, the basketful of flowers which Proserpine had been picking is scattered in the ground. It is an indication of the loss of innocence and her chastity as Hades struggles to lift her into the chariot.



Figure 5: The Rape of Proserpine (1636-38)

These rape scenes acted as a constant reminder of the expected virtues of the wife, in particular, the submission of self to her husband and country. The marriage of a young girl was essentially considered a transfer of physical property. Women were considered the ‘property’ of the patriarchal head of the family and subject to their will. Through marriage, the woman was transferred from one owner to the next, which reflected her status as a mere commodity. The connections constructed between rape and marriage date back to Greek and Roman times, when images of mythological rape idealized the virtues of the submissive wife, her sacrifice for family, and country and her role as peacemaker within the family.

“Classical Greece came to be a society dictated exclusively by man’s use of the phallus as a way of securing dominance over the female sex. Thus, this male-dominated society was founded on both violent sexual-based myths and myths involving national heroes’ dominance over women, and this mythological ideology served as the basis for gender roles in a truly phallic Athenian society.” (“Sexual Uses of Myth”) All the images of rape and abduction display the sensual voluptuous nude or partially nude woman to titillate and excite the viewer. It can be argued that depictions of rape and abduction are indeed double violations of women; first in the act and second in the dehumanization of visual representation. Painted images of mythological rape may have served a dual purpose, gratifying the suppressed need for erotic imagery and satisfying humanist morals and religious piety, but they are also historical documents recording the continued objectification of the female.

Painted in the Baroque tradition of depicting women as soft-bodied, passive, and highly sexualized beings, Rubens’ nudes emphasize the concepts of fertility, desire, physical beauty, temptation, and virtue. In Rubens’ mythological rape and abduction paintings, a constant and repeated aspect is how in the strong embrace of her captor, the girl abducted by force falls in love with her abductor. The complex emotions of violence and love between the captor and the captive can be considered an example of a traumatic bonding in which a submissive woman depends on her captor for every needs and requirement. Violence is what the captives suffered, but each ravished girl was happy with her ravisher. The forced sexual violence has been defended by classical writers like Ovid in his *Ars Amatoria* and has cited the tale of Phoebe and Hilaria to cite an example of how a lover might conquer his lust with the use of force. The psychological alliance between the captive and the captor after abduction leading to the victim becoming a consort or wife of the captor is a phenomenon that surprises because of the least resistance of women in relation to her abduction. The inevitability and the

salvation to a heavenly realm from a mere mortal is also a deciding factor in being compliant and submissive. Thus the mythological abduction paintings of Rubenesque tradition has oversexualised, submissive, and yielding women figures who are perceived as model figures in a male-dominated society to establish the hierarchy of gender roles and to establish the morality of abduction as a symbol of marriage and leaving parental home by introducing figures of gods and mortal women.

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