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Diary

Mary Beard

In September 1978, on a night train from Milan, I was forced to have sex with an architect on his way to the site of a biscuit factory he was designing somewhere outside Naples (or so he claimed). It's a simple enough story. I was a graduate student, changing trains at Milan, and laden with luggage for a term's research in Rome. There were a couple of hours to wait for the most convenient train south, so I went to the station bar on the look-out, I suppose, for an opportunity to wheel out my still very faltering Italian. The architect was there, on the look-out, too, presumably. Discovering that I had no couchette for the journey, he insisted on trying to book one for me; he took my ticket (which I meekly gave him), returned triumphant and then helped me with my cases and backpack to the train. Predictably enough as it now seems (though I'm sure I didn't foresee it at the time), what he had actually booked was a two-berth first-class wagon lit. He bundled me in, took off my clothes and had sex, before departing to the upper bunk. I woke a few hours later just outside Rome to find him on top of me again, humping away – taking his last chance before handing me over to the sleeping-car steward to deposit on the platform, while he no doubt slept on to Naples. The only face I have chosen to remember (or perhaps re-create) from the whole incident belongs to this steward, the sly and uncomfortably knowing face of a man who had recognised exactly what was going on and had seen it all before, many times. As he pressed a small plastic cup of coffee into my hand in a routine way, I could tell that it would have been useless appealing to him for help, even if I'd had the chance.

To all intents and purposes this was rape. I did not want to have sex with the man and had certainly not given consent. If I appeared to be compliant, it was because I had no option: I was in a foreign city, with enough of the local language to ask directions to the cathedral maybe, but not to search out a reliable protector and explain convincingly what was happening. If no violence was used, it was because the man's weapon was my own tiredness (a mind set on sleep, rather than watching for the tell-tale signs of danger) and the luggage. With two heavy cases and a backpack I couldn't make a dash for it, nor could I just abandon a couple of pieces: never mind the clothes, I had spread my precious thesis and all the notes carefully through the different cases (a misplaced faith in the eggs-in-one-basket-caveat, as it turned out).

That said, I can't claim to have been particularly traumatised by what happened. I suffered no subsequent aversion to late-night trains, foreign railway stations or even Neapolitan biscuits; and I would give my eye-teeth to be able to zoom around Europe in a first-class wagon lit – something I haven't been able to afford since. Instead, I nursed some strange and oddly misplaced grudges. One was against the funding council that was sponsoring my research; for had they not insisted, I reasoned, on my using the cheapest method of transport (at that time, a train), and allowed me to go by plane instead, none of this would have happened. Another was against the friend who had been going to travel with me – even though it was I who'd changed my plans and had come on later. Another was against the biscuit-factory man himself, not so much for what he did, but for doing it twice. Even now, more than twenty years later, I can still

Mary Beard spoke about the public voice of women in the second of this year's *LRB* Winter Lectures at the British Museum.

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rage at the memory of waking up to find him doing it again.

If all this suggests that I'm letting my 'rapist' off comparatively lightly, that is partly because in the intervening years the retelling of this story (to myself as much as to other people) has generated quite other interpretations of what went on, which coexist – and compete – with the account I've just given. The first of these is the predictable slide from 'rape' to 'seduction': I wasn't overpowered or coerced; whatever happened in the station bar, it amounted to 'persuasion' or to an exercise of choice on my part. In fact, something like that was the first euphemistic version I chose to tell my friends on arriving in Rome: I had, I complained, been 'picked up' in Milan and ended up in bed with the guy on the train; I never mentioned the word 'rape'. But I have also caught myself making sense of the whole incident as a much more emphatically willed part of my sexual history: the perfect degree-zero sexual encounter between complete strangers, happening in no single place but on the move, in the more or less exotic (or at least cinematically resonant) location of a wagon-lit. In this version, any seduction was done – however inadvertently – by me; the triumph was my own.

In pointing to this ambivalence in my responses, I'm not intending to condone the rapist; nor to weaken the case for seeing rape in general as a crime of male violence and male power over women. I'm also well aware that I got off extremely lightly, and that there are many victims of rape for whom an 'ambivalent response' would be an undreamt-of luxury. (I can see, conversely, that my alternative versions of this encounter could so easily be interpreted as classic exercises of denial, or refusal to face the rape as rape.) What I am trying to highlight is the crucial importance, both culturally and personally, of rape-narratives. For rape is always a (contested) story, as well as an event; and it is in the telling of rape-as-story, in its different versions, its shifting nuances, that cultures have always debated most intensely some of the unfathomable conflicts of sexual relations and sexual identity. The tale of the Rape of Lucretia, for example, is hardly tellable – as many Roman writers themselves discovered – without raising the question of where 'seduction' ends and 'rape' begins; the Rape of the Sabines puts a similar question-mark over the distinction between 'rape' and 'marriage'.

In fact, almost every narrative of sexual coercion (including my own) forces its teller to confront the question of sex as something women do, or something they have done to them; and of how a slightly different spin on the rape-story can lead to an entirely different answer. Narratives also take much longer in the telling than the event itself. It is now a truism of feminist sociology that the courtroom testimony of the rape victim amounts to a replay of the rape; a re-rape. But it doesn't stop there. The fact that I have taken care to recall my own relatively harmless encounter with sexual coercion more than twenty years ago is not so much to do with its unforgettable trauma, but with the psychic and ideological function that remembering the event still fulfils. I may well be a bad judge of what that function is; but my sense is that the narrative was not only a useful way of understanding my own post-adolescent sexual experience at the time (what exactly was I doing?), but has been an important focus for rethinking that experience from the perspective now of motherhood and middle age. The same must be true for hundreds of thousands of women with equally tawdry, everyday stories of sexual coercion to tell. Remembering rape is about making sense of sex.

Few modern accounts of rape have much time for any of this discursive complexity. One particularly notorious recent example is Randy Thornhill and Craig Palmer's *A Natural History of Rape: Biological Bases of Sexual Coercion*. * This book, as its title suggests, pushes the line that rape is a relatively straightforward biological affair, and probably the natural product of evolutionary adaptation within the human (and almost every other) species. Put at its most simple, it's one way that a male may maximise his chances of reproductive success, particularly when he lacks an 'alternative reproductive option' (what is apparently known as the 'mate-deprivation hypothesis'); while rape is resisted by the female, not only because she might get hurt, but crucially because it 'reduces her ability to choose the timing and circumstances for reproduction', and circumvents her 'ability to use copulation as a means of securing material benefits from men for herself and/or for her offspring'. My own case could no

doubt be slotted into this scheme without too much difficulty. The biscuit-factory man must have had relatively restricted access to potential mates (Thornhill and Palmer would almost certainly be able to rustle up some statistical ‘evidence’ for the paucity of females on South Italian building sites). The fact that I was not greatly traumatised would probably have to be explained by my state of temporary infertility (otherwise known as being on the pill). In *A Natural History of Rape*, Thornhill and Palmer devote many pages to ‘demonstrating’ that potentially fertile women of reproductive age feel much greater pain on being raped than girls and grannies. Only those who might plausibly conceive are seriously affected by the loss of reproductive choice that rape threatens – or so they say.

When this book first appeared in the United States earlier this year, it caused a storm. It was greeted by a whole series of anguished protests, mostly from mainline feminists who objected to its explanation of rape as ‘natural’, rather than the product of culture, politics and the differential power of men over women. While my sympathy is, in principle, entirely with the feminist objectors, it is hard now, after just a few months, to see why the book seemed worth all the fuss. For a start, none of the arguments are new. Thornhill has been publishing along these lines (and, in some passages, in exactly these words) since the early 1980s; and not only in specialist biological journals – all the main planks of his position are, in fact, already laid out in an article in *Rape*, a well-known 1986 collection edited by Sylvania Tomaselli and Roy Porter, which is still one of the best guides to different theories in this field. But what is really objectionable about the book has very little to do with its gender politics, much more with its arrogant scientism and messianic zeal for evolutionary biology as the key to unlock the whole of world culture, backed up by the shoddiest of arguments.

‘When one is considering any feature of living things, whether evolution applies is never a question,’ Thornhill and Palmer assert in their first chapter. ‘The only legitimate question is how to apply evolutionary principles. This is the case for all human behaviours – even for such by-products as cosmetic surgery, the content of movies, legal systems and fashion trends.’ In order to demonstrate how this preposterous article of faith applies to rape, they proceed in almost every instance by one distinctive method of argument: 1) make a prediction (‘if rape is an evolutionary adaptation along the lines we suggest, then we would expect it to show this or that characteristic’); 2) assemble some data which apparently do show such a characteristic; 3) conclude on that basis that rape is an evolutionary adaptation; and QED. A classic example is the ‘demonstration’ that women of reproductive age are more distressed by (vaginal) rape than younger or older women. The point here is that, if – as Thornhill and Palmer want it to be – women’s psychological pain is ultimately related to the removal of their reproductive choice, you would expect the pain to fall particularly heavily on those who are potentially fertile; if you can’t reproduce, then your choice hasn’t been removed. But there are problems underlying the overall procedure here, to do with the way in which Thornhill and Palmer have assembled the data.

The evidence they produce for the pattern of differential pain comes from a study conducted on 790 rape victims who were examined at the Philadelphia General Hospital in the mid-1970s; their ages ranged from two months to 88 years. Thornhill and Palmer claim that the data clearly show that ‘reproductive-age rape victims suffered significantly more psychological trauma than non-reproductive-age rape victims.’ In a carefully critical review of the book in the *New Republic*, Jerry Coyne has already exposed the statistical sleight of hand that produces this result: that is, you can see a significant difference only if you lump the children and grannies together; post-reproductive-age women, in fact, show much the same psychological pain as reproductive-age women; it’s children that appear to be different. Coyne did not, however, examine the 13 questions posed to the victims (or the victims’ carers, if they were too young to answer for themselves) in order to assess the level of their distress. Here the sheer unreliability of the data is glaring. All were asked, for example, whether they felt greater fear in being home alone after the attack – a ludicrous question for the youngest victims (who should never have been home alone anyway), and one that would almost certainly have quite different implications for the active 19-year-old and the housebound pensioner. To be fair, the study was sensible enough not to ask the

under-12s about the effect of the rape on their sexual relationship with their regular partner. That question, however, was put to all the others; even though, here again, the responses of the average octogenarian, even the sprightliest, could hardly have been reasonably compared with those of the happily (or unhappily) married 30-year-old. And so, with arguments of this kind, the book rambles on and on, hitting rock-bottom, I might add, when it tries to claim (on the basis of a Thornhill article in the appropriately named periodical, *Animal Behaviour*, for 1995) that human females have more orgasms when they mate with men who have a high degree of bodily symmetry.

I have to admit that I have long been suspicious of any argument that starts with a chimp and ends with a human being; and I may, for this reason alone, be an unsuitably prejudiced commentator on any study in evolutionary biology. In the case of *A Natural History of Rape*, however – apart from a few raping orangutans – the strongest comparanda come not from primates at all, but from the insect kingdom. Randy Thornhill is a well-known expert on the sex life of the scorpionfly, which does (he assures us) display exactly that pattern of rape and resistance he wants to foist on humans. Some male scorpionflies obtain mates by offering a gift (a mass of hardened saliva is one of the most favoured) – and these are the mates that the females prefer. If the male does not have a ‘nuptial gift’ to offer, and so is relatively ‘mate-deprived’, he will use force or ‘rape’ – for which he is endowed not only with a pair of ‘genital claspers’ (also useful in fights with other males) but with a ‘notal organ’, whose only known function is to hold the female down during his assault. This ‘notal organ’ is, Thornhill and Palmer claim, the classic case of an evolutionary adaptation specifically for the purposes of rape. And so indeed it may be.

There are, of course, literally thousands of reasons why human beings are not like scorpionflies. First among them are language, storytelling and the capacity to remember. All of which set human rape (from my encounter with biscuit-factory man to much nastier crimes) so far apart from insects with ‘notal organs’ as to make the comparison utterly worthless.

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