Rubens’s *Rape of the Daughters of King Leucippus*: Reassessing the Political and Moral Thought of the Early Dutch Republic as Depicted in the Female Nude

Elizabeth Ramsey Wise
Henry Street School for International Studies
New York, NY

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The assortment of Dutch artistry from the seventeenth century successfully marketed a revival of historical, religious and mythological narratives as well as contemporary landscape, portraiture, and still life paintings. As such, much of the political and sociological history of the Dutch Republic can be gathered from the glimpses of civic duty and domestic life as portrayed in art of this period. Given that the early stages of the Dutch Republic stimulated, in part, by the burgeoning political and moral ideology of Calvinist and Protestant religious groups, it seems paradoxical that Peter Paul Rubens, one of the most popular artists of the time, was renowned amongst his contemporaries and courtiers for primarily having mastered the sensuality of the female nude. The women depicted in Rubens’s art convey such vibrant emotions and a tantalizing sensual quality that one might question how art of this relatively erotic style reconciled with the moral ideals of that era. Needless to say, the epic works of Rubens that exhibited the female nude was done so as an interpretation of mythological and religious figures in the acceptable manner of previous Italian Renaissance artists. Nonetheless, the contrast between Rubens’s sensual artistic style and strict religious ideology begs to ask what the female nude represented for Dutch society. What was the social attitude towards women and sexuality during this time? Were these women, simply put, the objectified figures of male lust and dominance? Did the female nude portraits also contain significant political connotations? In brief, this essay is a contemporary reassessment of the juxtaposition between the political and moral life of the early Dutch Republic and the powerful expressions of sexuality portrayed in Rubens’s art.

To preface this study, it is necessary to first indulge the reader in a brief understanding of how developments in seventeenth century art are related to the Dutch revolution against Spain and the creation of the Republic. Although the Republic’s Golden Age is considered historically to have begun as early as the revolt against Phillip II in 1568, the next fifty years were actually a tumultuous period of transition, conflict, and the attempt to unify the once separately functioning provinces of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. Since the Medieval Ages, absolutist monarchist such as the foreign Burgundian and Habsburg regimes had governed the Low Countries, which were comprised of the present-day Netherlands, Belgium, and Luxembourg. The early Dutch
Republic, therefore, is often a case study of politics and religion; however, the years to follow the establishment would prove significant also in terms of the developments in art as well as architecture. A leading authority in historicizing its Golden Age from 1581-1795, Jonathan Israel recounts the Dutch Republic as “a society in which no one could live without continual sensing the interaction of land and sea, town and country, one town with the next, soldiers and seamen with burghers, the exotic with the mundane, and the foreign with the local” (Israel 563). Indeed, it was a period of complex differentiation in many regards of society, and art was the vehicle by which such conflicting sentiments could become reconciled. Conveyed through stark realism and embellished imagination, Dutch art became the iconography that “strove to adapt and interpret the Dutch physical and social world of the time in terms of faith, nostalgia, and cultural values” (Israel 563). In this sense, Dutch art did more than imitate the fashions of the day; it shaped the societal standards relative to the imagination of the artists who constructed the essence of what was to become the Dutch Republic.

The issues of morality, societal expectations, and gender roles in the Dutch Republic seemed to have varied from each household; moreover, historians have interpreted the era as demonstrating a distinction between the semi-strict societal values designed to produce public conformity versus the actual acceptance and practice of moral ideologies in the private sphere. In this regard, the Dutch Republic seemed to permit individualism, although legally forbidding public acts contrary to Calvinistic ideology that governed the policies of the state. Women, in particular, were confined to strict gender roles and societal expectations; yet, foreigners who published observations of their travels found that women, in particular, experienced immense freedom in comparison to other European societies. For example, the Italian Protestant writer Gregorio Leti wrote, "Dutch women, even young, unmarried women, were free to come and go, unaccompanied and unchaperoned, to work, conduct business, and engage in conversation almost like men" (Israel 677). Remarking on this observation, Dutch women were not entirely free in the sense that they were completely independent of men or considered equal in some social constructs. However, women in the Dutch Republic were allowed to participate in activities outside of the home and domestic life that elsewhere were not considered permissible in other patriarchal European societies. Nonetheless, stationed within the home, women in art were depicted in one sole fashion, which demonstrates the masculine point of view that women had but one purpose, as the bible says, “to multiply” and perhaps also to keep the home in order.
Despite the amount of leniency and tolerance that may have existed within the Dutch Republic, the actuality of Dutch ethics proved to have more stringent limits, opposing any deviant behavior or unorthodox ideas. Jonathan Israel explains, “Dutch society was not less, but more, prone than other European societies to repress bawdiness, eroticism, undisguised homosexuality, and street prostitution” (682). In Antwerp, it was estimated that there were 125 brothels by the beginning of the century, which may have been a larger amount in comparison to other cities of Holland, but this number also demonstrates a very tangible difference between Dutch public policy and practice with that of private life of its citizens. Even so, the tolerance of such private affairs was limited. Oftentimes, these houses of ill repute were disguised as music halls or taverns and one might not recognize them as houses of prostitution, as the women were dressed plainly and wore modest attire as any reputable Dutch woman would (Israel 683). In private, eroticism and sexuality were fairly common pursuits that most were fully aware of as existing mutually with other forms of social life. However in public, any expression of sexual desires or tendencies was highly restricted as the attitude towards sex fell strictly under the Dutch Calvinist ideology, not only for women, but for men as well.

In relating the Republic’s stinted attitude towards sexuality to the sensuality of the produced art of the time, there is an obvious contrast apparent in the manner of which women are depicted in religious narratives and domestic scenes. When situated in domestic life, women conformed to a particular ideal of the period, with the exception, of course, when the artist’s purpose is a didactic lesson on morality. The strict gender roles alluded to in such scenes suggest that women are one dimensional, especially when it comes to their role in society, which is often tied also to their identity and sexuality. Women in most of the scenes of domestic life are either depicted as motherly caregivers for the family, or economical in household duties. Compare below the two domestic scenes that provide a sharp alternative depiction of Dutch women as seen in samples of seventeenth century works of art.
Figure 1: Nicolaes Maes's "The Lacemaker" (1656)
In the first scene, the woman is dutifully participating in domestic work, both economical and familial. In the second scene, the women of the house are depicted, in contrast to the earlier mentioned ideal, as foolish, indulgent, and unreserved in their folly, be it drunkenness, licentiousness or the less obscene, but equally inappropriate, idle indolence. Ironically, Dutch art that seemed overwhelmingly subjective to distorting this ideal of womanhood without revealing an ounce of flesh, was considered to be more lewd than the openly sensual portrayal of the female nude.

Returning to our earlier inquiry, why then were Rubens’s female nude portraits more permissible during a period of strict religious moral conformity? What made a Rubens painting, as erotic and exposed to human sexuality as they were, considered great works of art rather than debased pornography? Lynda Naed offers contemporary insight in the debate of art and pornography by arguing that art reflects the values of society, whereas, pornography symbolizes
moral degradation, “a symptom of a rotten society” (325). One of the more extreme examples of Dutch suggestive sexual symbolism is often referenced as Frans van Mieris’s “Brothel Scene” (1658). Art historian, Simon Schama explains that these brothel scenes, as they have been regularly referred to, were examples “more frequently [of] the nature of sexual bargaining (and in these matters art historians might like to recall that money, as well as sex, was something of a Dutch fixation) represented by the visual equivalent of a wink, a leer or a nudge: the proffering of a single coin, or a glass of wine held at the stem, or a strategically placed foot” (12). In this sense, sexuality in art, through a mix of symbolism and metaphor, revealed a tendency of the Dutch society to suppress human eroticism and sexuality. Schama further contrasts the two portrait styles of domestic settings within a sociological context, stating that the Dutch were “not the first culture to make a fetish of domesticity, but they did perhaps refine it more comprehensively than any previous urban society since the Romans” (12). The domestic scenes of Dutch art, therefore, often conveyed moral connotations and public foreboding, but could also risk being too erotic, by social standards of this time, by suggestive images of illicit immorality, exemplified below in Figure 3.
Frans van Mieris’s “Brothel Scene” (1658)
To juxtapose the Dutch domestic scene portraits, I’ve chosen to look more closely at Peter Paul Rubens’s “Rape of the Daughters of King Leucippus” (1617) in order to reassess this question of morality and high art of the Dutch Republic. See Figure 4 below.

Figure 4: Peter Paul Ruben’s “Rape of the Daughters of King Leucippus” (1617)
Originating from Greek mythology, the story that Rubens depicts in this scene tells of two brothers, Castor and Polydeuces, who abducted, sexually violated, and defiled two sisters, Phoebe and Hilaeira, by force and later coerced them into marriage. What’s most visually striking, perhaps in this painting is the energy and violence exhibited in the work. Aspects of the piece that suggest force, fear and submission are seen through the work’s evocative movement, stretched diagonally across the page; the juxtaposition of the masculine, feminine and animal figures; the exuding turbulence and monumentality of the figures who up most of the canvas; coupled by the intense lighting and vibrant color. Rubens’s painting appears, perhaps at first glance, to be an example of arrogant, masculine dominance. However, there is something else sensual in the lighting and brush strokes alone, which seems to elevate the central female figures to a level of sexual energy and tension in contrasts to the context of the story illustrated. Although these characteristics correspond with the mythological scene that is taking place, this new interpretation also seems to have more contemporary significance as well.

Rubens painted “Rape of the Daughters of King Leucippus” within a decade after having returned from Italy, where he dedicated years of study to Italian Renaissance art as well as the contemporary work of Caravaggio from 1600-1608. Upon returning to Antwerp during the waning years of the Eighty Years War and Habsburg regime, “Rubens’s humanism compelled him to contemplate contemporary politics through allegorical language...[where] questions of war and peace, and good government, had a specific, local urgency” (Rosenthal 4). An academic in the study of art history, Lisa Rosenthal explores how the multiple and shifting meaning attached to gender in early modern social practice and humanist thought allowed for Rubens's painted figures to disrupt as well as uphold the allegorical programs in which they participate.

Margaret Carroll relates this example of force to be synonymous with the political absolutist thinking of the recent sixteenth century: "Force, which had previously been thought to be just one of several factors which determined politics, now came to be regarded as the decisive factor" (5). For some, this piece of early seventeenth century art is much less the promotion of masculine dominance than a political commentary against the forcefulness of hegemonic powers. Some have viewed the brothers of this scene to represent Spanish power under Phillip II, while the femininity of Phoebe and Hilaeira may be "deployed by Rubens as a trope for the fruitfulness and pleasures of peace, while it is also associated with a morally dangerous and anxiety-provoking sexuality. Similarly, masculinity, although allied with valor and philosophical truth, is represented also in these allegories as war-like and inimical to the aims of civilization" (Rosenthal
10). If we are to then view this piece less from the emphasis placed on the literal violence and sexual submission that pertains to the classical story, another avenue of curiosity and interpretation may lead to question what idea or feeling the artist himself may be projecting onto the central figures of his portraits, namely the representation of the feminine nude figures.

Rubens’s “Rape of the Daughters of King Leucippus” is far from a simplistic cautionary tale of sexual subjugation as one might initially conclude. Yet, like many of his mythological narratives, Rubens’s references and communication of humanistic ideas, which are partially rooted in Catholic and Calvinistic tradition, derives new meanings from the mythological stories illustrated as applicable to his contemporary social and political connotations.

To look further into the gender symbolism of Rubens’s nudes, the technique of utilizing light, color, and shape to “caress form into the luxurious physicality” of the feminine figure, implying the male artist to be “productive, active, controlling, a man whose sexuality is channeled through his brush, who finds expression and satisfaction through the act of painting” (Carroll 47). Sensuality certainly consumes the energy and vibrancy of Rubens’s work; however, the allegorical nature of erotic art refrains society from looking it as purely pornographic or sadomasochistic. Therefore, my opinion of the feminine nudes in Rubens’s works is that they are neither simply about sexuality or gender dominance. Although such themes certainly burden the central figures in these portraits, this perhaps indicates more so the sociopolitical repression of sexuality within the Dutch Republic for not only women, but also men who are burdened by the same patriarchal, Christian ideology. In an article on gender and sexuality, Lynda Naed similarly concludes that the female nude is an indication of “patriarchal culture, that is, possession, power, and subordination…testify not only to patriarchal understandings of female sexuality and femininity, but they also endorse certain definitions of male sexuality and masculinity” (326). To therefore study the feminine nude in terms of gender roles and expectations, it is an incomplete argument to assess the issue of feminine subjugation within Dutch society when ultimately the strict Calvinist ideology and lack of public tolerance of the erotic inhibited both male and female expression and exploration of societal structures and norms. Despite the limited tolerance of public forms of sexuality in Dutch society, it is clear that the art of this period, specifically the feminine nudes, were one avenue by which questions of power, force, dominance, gender, and politics could be expressed in a tasteful, rather traditional manner.

Exhibiting the naked form has long been a focus of art and sculpture, yet personifying the human form in the method and style of Rubens’s works was relatively novel as well as
majestically seductive. In essence, Rubens managed to “unite diverse visual traditions in a surprising new synthesis” from the current artistic innovations both north and south of the Alps (Auwera 66). Due to the appreciation of the human form as seen in the Italian classicist style, reinvented by the study of anatomy during the Renaissance, the feminine nudes became a popular genre during Rubens’s time. Traditionally speaking, Italian and Greek art often idealized the perfect nature of the masculine form, but by contrast the female form was often partially covered. By not exhibiting the full body of the feminine form, artists sought to focus on the attributes of a woman as associated with fertility and life bearing, which is usually the primary function and role of women in society.

Therefore, my interest in the Dutch Republic feminine nudes lays not in the eroticism of the portraits themselves, but rather in the comparison of what was considered licit or acceptable in Dutch society. Although pornography and outward appearance of sexual impulses was certainly censured, seventeenth century Dutch female nude portraits still flourished and were highly marketable. In art, even as early as the seventeenth century, the naked body itself was not seen indecent as long as it was depicted in a work of mythological or religious narrative, much like the tradition of the Italian Renaissance painters. Mariët Westermann likewise rationalizes, "The air of illicit titillation suffusing such painting of seduction, roundly condemned by Calvinist preachers, surely enhanced their appeal, even or possibly because the represented women are ultimately two-dimensional and cold. They offer allowable pleasure, vicarious thrills that can be experienced without moral danger, neutralized by the intellectual workings of metaphor" (171). Despite the popularity of Rubens’s nudes, the imagination of the artist was not reflected in the moral policies of the Dutch Republic, at least not in public practice of tolerance or law. If Rubens’s nudes were not considered erotic because of the nature of their allegorical significance, my second purpose for reassessing the role of the feminine nude within Dutch society entails questioning whether there is societal or political significance in the representation of women in these elaborately sensual scenes.

The simplified, conservative assessment of Rubens’s female nudes can be summarized to say that women are most certainly objectified in these portraits. By definition alone, women in allegorical narratives are elevated beyond the female form to a romanticized ideal of some goddess-like, metaphysical being birthed from the artist’s own imagination, thereby becoming objectified. Yet, the masculine perspective of such metaphorical interpretations of the feminine nude form demonstrates some level admiration and awe of the women that the artists themselves depicted with such intense beauty and vibrancy, a characteristic that seems somewhat absent
when compared to its contemporary Dutch domestic portraits. When considering this emotional connection between the artist and his works, is it possible then to conclude that men were likewise repressed in acknowledging their own sexuality and gender roles in Dutch society just as women were during this time? Although the restraints of monogamy certainly restricted women more in terms of sexual exploration and sociopolitical roles outside of the home, the art of the seventeenth century, in both the epic mythological and realistic domestic portraits, demonstrate the repression of sexuality of both men and women.

Needless to say, the ideologies of the Dutch Republic were seen as progressive for its time, and indeed, the Reformation and Enlightenment both contributed greatly to the birth of what we can begin to consider as modern individual thought and societal tolerance. Nonetheless, the art exhibited during this era demonstrates the social immaturity of the Dutch political tolerance towards women’s roles and human sexuality. Essentially the ideology of the Dutch Republic restricted society from acknowledging and exploring the depth of gender roles and sexuality, for both men as well as women. Women were confined to domestic stations, but men, rarely found liberation from social constraints in public with the exception of expressing appreciation for sexuality and the human form through romanticized, metaphoric art. Moreover, the art as described in this paper also demonstrates the need for this society, on the brink of modernity, to move beyond preceding notions of eroticism and into a more progressive era of gender equality, freedom of thought, and a codified public practice of tolerance. By reexamining the art of the Dutch Republic, contemporary societies can view the awakening trajectory of modern perspectives towards these societal values, which perhaps were tolerated some in private sects, even if they were not yet publicly acknowledgeable.

Works Cited


