

The normalization of rape and oppression of women in candida, a book by voltaire

[Environment](#), [Air](#)



Would the attention brought to the horrors of rape and the oppression of women by Voltaire be considered a progressive form of literature, or a form of shock value? In *Candide*, Voltaire brings light to the ugly nature of rape culture and the unfortunate normalization of sexual assault as witnessed by several characters. Not only does Voltaire write about horrendous scenes of rape as experienced by Cunegonde, The old woman, and the Baron's son/ Cunegonde's brother, but also enslavement, pedophilia, and the overall unacceptable day to day treatment of the women as in *Candide* and also deeply embedded into modern society that is paired with such normalization.

The normalization of rape is justified as the price to pay for being desired and the evidence is the attitude through speech by the women directly affected. Through no fault other than being young and beautiful, Cunegonde is raped and stabbed by an enemy soldier. Cunegonde shares her terrible experience with *Candide* but "puts to rest" any worries of multiple attacks by her current oppressors by stating "For though a person of honor may be raped once, her virtue is only strengthened by the experiences." (14). In other translations "a person of honor" is instead "a modest woman" leading to the belief that in some cases rape is to be expected while also treating previous sexual attacks as experience that carries with it strength. Cunegonde is making a drastic understatement that lessens the severity of a life changing event. The nonchalant perspective of the old woman after sharing her similar experiences of rape and enslavement further normalizes the frequent ravishing of women in the 1700s through her nonchalant tone and use of understatement. "As for myself, I was ravishing, I was loveliness and grace supreme, and I was a virgin. I did not remain so for long; the

flower which had been kept for the handsome prince of Messa-Carrara was plucked by the corsair captain; he was an abominable negro, who thought he was doing me a favor. [...] But on with my story; these are such common matters that they are not worth describing.”(20). Although the old woman briefly describes a horrible life changing event that happened to her, she treats the detail as insignificant to her overall story because it is so common and almost boring to talk about. Undoubtedly, the rape in this story is unacceptably normalized while these two female characters are forced to be defined by their assaults when it comes to their depth of person in the story, however Voltaire gives these women the bravery and strength to reject these horrors as what defines them although his approach was through understatement and the use of rape as a shock factor.

While it seems that rape is the price to pay for being desired and lusted after, the true nature of the culture behind rape is mostly a lust for power and dominance. The old woman, continuing to share her story revisits the reunion of a past caretaker, “. I opened my eyes, and saw a pretty fair-faced man, who sighed and muttered these words between his teeth, ‘ O che sciagura d’essere senza coglioni!’”(33). The man was a eunuch who had cared for the woman when she was a child, however the concerning phrase ‘ O che sciagura d’essere senza coglioni!’ meaning ‘ oh what a shame to have no testicles’ serves as evidence that the true nature of rape is not sexual desire, but a lust for domination over someone who is vulnerable. This being because a eunuch who has no testicles would therefore have no sexual urges, however still expressing a desire to violate a vulnerable person must

be a lust for power. This then brings one's attention to the sodomy of the baron/cunegonde's brother, " her body was ripped open by the Bulgarian soldiers, after they had subjected her to as much cruelty as a damsel could survive; [...] my poor pupil was served just in the same manner as his sister;" (14). While he is a young boy and not an attractive young woman such as his sister, he is still sodomized by numerous soldiers. While there is a possibility of pedophiles among the soldiers, I believe that the sexual abuse of the baron is also an example of an exertion of sexual domination as opposed to a sexual lust.

Fate that is once again shared among the female characters in the story is enslavement. In the case of the old woman, she is handled like property as she was sold by the eunuch who had once cared for her as a child, " I am going to take ship at Ceuta, and I'll take you along with me to Italy. Ma che sciagura d'essere senza coglioni!" " I thanked him with tears of joy, but, notwithstanding, instead of taking me with him to Italy, he carried me to Algiers, and sold me to the Dey of that province"(29). One would assume the presence of an emotional connection between a person and someone who once cared for that person, but the perception of women is identical to that of property and is easily sold off. Cunegonde becomes enslaved by the captain who had rescued her as a prisoner of war after her assault and the murders of her family, but similar to a play thing, " In three months, having gambled away all his money, and having grown tired of me, he sold me to a Jew, named Don Issachar,"(18). Another example of women being treated as an object to be sold, traded, or in cunegonde's case, shared. " The Grand

Inquisitor saw me one day at Mass, ogled me all the time of service, and when it was over, sent to let me know he wanted to speak with me about some private business. [...] He caused a proposal to be made to Don Issachar, that he should resign me to His Lordship. Don Issachar, being the court banker and a man of credit, was not easy to be prevailed upon. His Lordship threatened him with an auto-da-fe; in short, my Jew was frightened into a compromise, and it was agreed between them, that the house and myself should belong to both in common; that the Jew should have Monday, Wednesday, and the Sabbath to himself; and the Inquisitor the other four days of the week”(19). Despite Cunegonde’s free spirit and refusal of the advances of the Jew and the Inquisitor, similar to the past of the old woman, is treated as nothing more than property to be fought over, which for the time is a normal occurrence.

Although Candide is the hero who rescues Cunegonde and claimed to have nothing but good intentions along with the desire to marry her, he also holds a perception of women that is that of an object. ““ Reverend Father, all the quarterings in the world are of no signification. I have delivered your sister from a Jew and an Inquisitor; she is under many obligations to me, and she is resolved to give me her hand.”(39). Paired with the attitude of ownership of his sister by the baron, Candide is at this moment just as selfish as every other man who has fancied Cunegonde by exclaiming that decent human treatment warrants repayment in the form of marriage. Unfortunately this is how society has brought up Candide, and this is tragically accepted as the

norm not only by the men who hold these beliefs, but by the women who must suffer this treatment.

One could take comfort in the fact that the events taking place in *Candide* are worries of the past as the book was written in 1759, however the normalization and shaming of victims of sexual assault is still currently alive and thriving. In the summer of 2016 a Stanford student was caught in the act of sexually assaulting an intoxicated woman, a crime so horrid that the men who had stopped him, “ became very upset, to the point where he began crying while recounting the incident.”(Kingkade)

Though the crime is clear, the reality that the world similar to that of 1759 *Candide* does not differ much from the current time. The normalization is seen in a statement by the rapist’s father in response to his sentence, “ That is a steep price to pay for 20 minutes of action out of his 20 plus years of life.”(Miller). To rip bandages off of the fresh wounds of the victim, Turner received only 3 months in prison and is at this day in time a free man.

Another case in which someone of power (wealth in this case) took advantage of someone who was vulnerable and unable to protect herself.

While Voltaire may have unintentionally written strong female characters no matter how tragic their back story is for the sake of satirical and shock value, the attention brought to these horrendous crimes have not stopped such acts against vulnerable individuals. However the awareness brought to the normalization of rape culture provide steps in the direction to completely alienate any and all forms of sexual assault to all people.