

# A Look into Mock Epic Poetry: The Rape of the Lock by Alexander Pope

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**Abstract:** It's clear to everyone in our present day that the word "rape" describes a terrible situation that one would dare find a funny topic to laugh about. But back in 1714, when the "Rape of the Lock", was published by Pope, the word "rape" had a totally different concept. Of course, it was understood as we now know it today, but it could also mean taking anything forcibly. (In our analysis we will discuss how both meanings are active)

Two years before the publishing of the poem, at a very fancy party outside London, young Lord Petre cut off a lock of hair from young lady Belle Fermor's head, by sneaking up behind her. Of course neither Belle nor her parents approved of this action, especially since they were considering him as a husband for Belle. Instead of a marriage, the two families went into a feud, Capulet, Montague style. After a while things got so bad between the two families that a mutual friend asked Alexander Pope to write a poem about the situation to make it seem funny. Back in the old days, it was popular to write political and social satire that everybody would read.

Pope took the incident and turned it into a satire on both social pretension and vanity. In the end, Pope succeeded in uniting the two families together through his poem. He ridiculed the crisis of a spoiled society girl who lost a piece of hair to a rich boy's prank. Pope made the situation larger and more interesting and comical by adding supernatural beings, like the Sylphs, and compared it to major Classical epics like Homer's Iliad and Odyssey.

Alexander Pope's The Rape of the Lock delivers on many levels: social, poetic, political, and aesthetic. All that is to say that the poem is a great Mock Epic!

**Keywords:** Mock Epic Poetry, Alexander Pope's.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

To discuss "The Rape of the Lock", we must be clear with what we call the epic. An epic or a heroic poem is one that tells the story of a hero whose exploits have a national significance. It is a long, narrative poem written in an eminent style. It is a long, narrative poem written in an epic form and served as models for later writers. The epic hero is often a great national figure. The epic hero is more than human, for his fate and the fate of his nation are the concern of the gods or God. Generally poet begins an epic with the declaration of the theme and with an invocation either to the heavenly Muse or to the Muse of Poetry to assist him in the task. The beginning of the action is told in retrospect, and sometimes its ultimate conclusion foretold at the end of the poem. The mock-heroic epic is a poetic form which uses the epic structure but on a miniature scale and with a subject that is mean or trivial. Its purpose is satirical: to make the subject look ridiculous by placing it in a framework entirely inappropriate to its importance.

The Rape of the Lock is the best-known and most brilliant example of the mock-heroic epic by Alexander Pope. The central incident of the poem is based on a real incident in which Mr. Petre cuts off the lock of hair of a beautiful lady namely, Arabella Fermor, which results into a dispute between two families which have social, religious, and family ties. By placing this incident in such a framework, Pope hoped to show the rape as trivial and so to reconcile the two families. No doubt, he fails in this purpose, but this work gives the reader an everlasting pleasure. The employment of the "machinery", which every epic is supposed to require, and many passages in which scenes and phrases from the great epics are directly imitated and burlesqued. All these things are so admirably managed that the work is considered as the most perfect thing of its kind in English literature.

The Rape of Lock is the master piece of the mock-heroic because it mocks at the maximum amount of the epic. It is a parody of the epic poem, at its form, manner with its invocations, its simile, its frequent use of "He said", use of machinery, and its battles, its journeys on water and down to the underworld.

We find Belinda flashing lightning from her eyes. In order to attain his object, the Baron prays to heaven before sunrise to grant him success. He prays to every heavenly power, but chiefly to Love.

Pope has also used supernatural elements like, salamanders, nymphs, gnomes and sylphs. The function of the sylphs is to protect the purity and virtue of young maidens. He says that when the beautiful women die at the height of their pride, their spirits return to the elements (earth, air, fire and water). Thus, the poem is parodies of Homer, Virgil, Ariosto, Spenser and Milton. Instances of burlesque-treatment in the poem include Belinda's voyage to Hampton Court which suggests the voyage of Aeneas up the Tiber in Virgil; the coffee party which is a parody of the meals frequently described in Homer; Belinda's petticoat which is treated as the shield of Ajax, and the combat at the end which recalls such fighting as may be found anywhere in the ancient epics. The Cave of Spleen is a parody of an allegorical picture that we can find in Spenser's poems. It is the poem of comparison between the arming of an epic hero and Belinda's dressing and using cosmetics in order to kill.

In canto-5 Pope has introduced his mouth piece-Clarissa. She draws attention of all. Every one becomes silent. She says that why beautiful women are so greatly admired and honored. Why they are the objects of the passion of even wise men and why boastful young men propose to them. Why they embellish themselves with all the garments and ornaments from all parts of the world. Clarissa says that all these honors which women receive and try hard to obtain are useless unless they are able to retain by their good sense when they win their beauty. A woman's hair locks, whether curled or uncurled, shall turn grey when she grows old. A woman's face, whether painted or not painted, shall fade. The only appropriate course that remains for the woman, is to make the fullest use of the power of her beauty and no matter what else she loses, she should take care not to lose her humor.

The mock-heroic epic is generally written to reform society and therefore, Satire always remains in the center of the poem. In "The Rape of the Lock", we find Pope as the spokesman of his Age. It is an expression of the artificial life of the Age-of its card-playing, parties, toilets, lap-dogs tea-drinking, snuff-taking and idle-vanities. It is not only a satire on society. It is also a witty parody of the heroic style in poetry. Even the verse form is treated humorously. The satire in the poem is general. Every part of the poem is excellently done, but the descriptions are notably fine.

When we scrutinize the poem we find it Pope's most perfect piece. It is the epic of the reign of Queen Anne and the only epic possible for that age of reason. The fault of the Age can be clearly seen and even felt in the poem, where the trivial thing has been given much importance rather than life and relations. The poem depicts the artificial tone of the Age and the playful aspect of womanliness. It is the epic of trifling. It is about pleasure seeking life of fashionable beauty, of the toilet-chamber and card table. In the very beginning of the poem we are told about the idleness, late-rising and fondness for domestic pets of the aristocratic ladies of the time. Belinda wakes up at 12 o'clock and falls asleep again. We are also told about superficiality of the ladies and their ambition to marry peers and dukes, or men holding other high titles.

*Then gay ideas crowd the vacant brain,*

*While peers and dukes, and all their sweeping train.*

The women of the time felt glad to receive love-letters. For them to keep domestic pets such as dogs and parrots is a matter of pride-vanity. They treated the "toilet" as their chief concern. The ladies have no moral scruples. Honor is a work with little meaning for them, and reputation is more important to them than honor. The loss of honor does not matter if reputation is not lost. In the poem a frail china-jar receiving a crack is equated with a lady's losing her chastity. A lady's missing a dance-party is taken as serious as her forgetting her prayers, losing her necklace is as serious as losing her heart. Like ladies, even the aristocratic young men of the time were lacking in any serious purpose of morality. Florio and Damon represent them. One fashionable young man wishes to defeat another by winning the heart of a young girl. Their life is as empty and shallow as the life of the ladies which is represented by the empty headed Sir Plume with a bit "unthinking face". He is proud of his snuff-box.

Pope uses hyperbolic language in describing Belle's faultless beauty and even divinity, e.g. nymph, maid, the fair, virgin, Goddess, etc. Pope never loses even a single opportunity to satirize her. She is portrayed as a lady having a care-free temper.

## 2. THE RAPE OF THE LOCK ANALYSIS

### CANTO I

Pope introduces the poem by means of a letter to Mrs. Arabella Fermor (1696-1737). He explains that the poem was intended only to divert a few young Ladies, who have good sense and good humor enough to laugh not only at their sex's little unguarded follies, but at their own. The occasion for the poem is a party prank which, in the summer of 1711, had caused a rift between two Catholic families of aristocratic rank. Arabella Fermor (sweet sixteen at the time) was a belle of London society, already celebrated in her circle for her conspicuous beauty; one portrait confirms that she had golden hair curling up from her shoulders. Lord Petre (Robert, 7th Baron Petre) was an impulsive twenty-year-old, a 'rash youth' who, out of sheer devilment, had taken a pair of scissors to one of Arabella's 'equal curls' and thereby spoiled the picture. The reason for the Fermors' bitter indignation was that women in Queen Anne's time were valued almost exclusively for their physical appearances. Lord Petre's cousin John Caryll, 2nd Baron Caryll of Durdur, intervened, asking Pope to make a jest of it, and laugh at them together again. From the outset, Pope's attitude is that this quarrel is a storm in a tea-cup. From his Letter of Dedication, it is clear that he thinks that the Augustan values of 'good sense and good humor' should prevail: to be exact, that Arabella should be better able to take a practical joke. From his very title, it is clear that he thinks that Arabella is over-reacting: after all, there is something oxymoronic about the 'rape' (a serious offence) of a 'lock' (a trivial adornment). From start to finish, it is this kind of incongruity which accounts for the humor and the 'good humor' of the poem.

The Rape of the Lock is a mock-heroic poem: that is, a form of satire in which a trivial event is given an added importance by an incongruous use of epic/heroic devices. Pope writes about the snipping off of Belinda's lock in an elaborate language which is totally out of keeping with the frivolity of the event; he makes her grievance look ridiculous by exaggerating its impact on the world/by ludicrously over-estimating its significance.

Ian Jack observes that this genre had been devised 'for the very purpose of resolving petty quarrels and that it combines the two sorts of writing in which the age was most interested: epic and satire. Specifically, The Rape of the Lock is a satire in that it makes a humorous criticism of Belinda's fit of pique; it mocks her behavior by describing it in a style which elevates it to an inappropriately heroic status.

The epic poem involves a continuous narrative of heroic action; it is for this reason that such poems are also called "heroic" poems. Because Pope intends to mock this heroic genre, Canto I begins as follows:

*What dire offence from am'rous causes springs,*

*What mighty contests rise from trivial things,*

*I sing This verse to Caryll, Muse! is due:*

*This, ev'n Belinda may vouchsafe to view.*

*Slight is the subject, but not so the praise,*

*If She inspire, and He approve my lays.*

Few poems in English depend more heavily for their effects upon a foreground knowledge of earlier literature than The Rape of the Lock. Here, Pope is relying upon his readership's familiarity with the first eleven lines of the Aeneid and the first six lines of Paradise Lost. To the extent that Pope is relying for his effects upon a variety of classical sources, The Rape of the Lock is a pastiche of Latin verse; because he creates his effects for fun, it is a parody. If an epic shows how heroes ought to behave in battle, then a mock-epic might show how lords and ladies ought to behave in polite society. In this way, Pope's witty poem can amount to a serious criticism of eighteenth-century social values. Appropriately for his purpose, Pope composes The Rape of the Lock in heroic couplets: pairs of rhymed iambic pentameters in which one sentence concludes after two lines with a monosyllabic snap or thump. Frequently, the tone of his writing is disingenuous:

*Say what strange motive, Goddess! could compel*

*A well-bred Lord t' assault a gentle Belle?*

*Oh say what stranger cause, yet unexplored,*

*Could make a gentle Belle reject a Lord?*

*In tasks so bold, can little men engage,*

*And in soft bosoms dwells such mighty Rage?*

Here, the intonation is controlled by the confident expectation of the clinching rhyme-sound: when he asks these three questions, his tongue is audibly in his cheek. He is only pretending not to know the answers: on the one hand, he knows that lords, not being 'well-bred', are often guilty of sexual 'assault'; on the other, he is aware that ladies, being socially dependent and vulnerable, will therefore be too timid to reject them. How, then, can little men such as Pope (only four feet six inches tall) be equal to the mighty task of explaining why Lady Arabella has taken umbrage at Lord Robert? At the start of the narrative, Pope portrays Belinda as a sluggish adolescent, unable to get herself out of bed in a morning. Her sleepiness supplies him with an immediate opportunity to introduce the neo-classical machinery of the poem: 'the Rosicrucian doctrine of Spirits'. From this company, Pope selects Belinda's guardian angel, a sylph named Ariel whose speech occupies the following eighty-eight lines of the poem.

The purpose of Ariel's speech is to explain the heroic function of these supernatural agents: specifically, he explains that his precise role in Belinda's post-pubescent life is to protect her against men: 'but most beware of Man!' To this end, Ariel issues a dire warning of a 'dread event' impending that very day. Pope punctuates Ariel's speech in heroic manner ('He said') and then proceeds to describe how Belinda manages to drag her lazy bones out of bed:

*He said; when Shock, who thought she slept too long  
Leaped up, and waked his mistress with his tongue.*

The effect of this juxtaposition is bathos, created by the incongruous intervention of Belinda's lap-dog. Self-evidently, Shock is not a character of heroic stature: first, the animal's impatience with the heroine is itself out of keeping with heroic convention; second, he slobbers all over her, a transaction conveyed by means of the circumlocution ('with his tongue') which comically completes the rhyme. Here, Pope portrays Belinda as a giddy female. He confirms that, as soon as she awakes, she sets eyes on a love-letter ('a Billetdoux') with the result that Ariel's serious warning flies straight out of her pretty little head. Now, Pope portrays Belinda as a vain beauty: as soon as she rises, she sits in front of a mirror and applies cosmetics.

At the start of the final verse-paragraph, the ironic contrast

*And now, unveil'd, the Toilet stands display'd,*

*Each silver Vase in mystic order laid.*

*First, rob'd in white, the nymph intent adores,*

*With head uncover'd, the Cosmetic powers.*

*A heav'nly Image in the glass appears,*

*To that she bends, to that her eyes she rears;*

*Th' inferior Priestess, at her altar's side,*

*Trembling, begins the sacred rites of Pride*

is between a holy shrine and a dressing table. Belinda idolizes herself: 'in the description of the toilet-table Pope shows Belinda lavishing on her own beauty the adoration which should be reserved for a higher object' (Ian Jack). The verb 'adores' betrays the close relationship which she enjoys with the 'treasures' (perfumes and powders, pins and combs) upon her table. Because these

'Cosmetic powers' augment her looks, she prostrates herself before them; upon seeing her own enhanced 'Image in the glass', she worships it with a religious reverence which becomes narcissistic. The chiasmic movement of Pope's line 'To that ..., to that' captures her rhythmical ritual of genuflection and supplication.

Finally, Pope's strategy is to write about Belinda's boudoir as if it is Achilles' tent (in which glittering spoil refers not to shining armor, but to powder compacts and jewelry boxes). Continually informing the poem is Pope's Letter of Dedication in which he likens the ancient Poets' to many modern Ladies: let an action be never so trivial in itself, they [both Poets and Ladies] always make it appear of the utmost importance. By describing a coquettish female putting on her make-up as if she is a great warrior arming himself for battle, Pope makes fun of the utmost importance which gentle

belles attach to their personal appearances.

The ironic parallel

*Now awful Beauty puts on all its arms;*

*The fair each moment rises in her charms, Repairs her smiles, awakens ev'ry grace,*

*And calls forth all the wonders of her face*

is between two kinds of conquest, one military, one sexual; it is between a man dressing to kill literally and a woman dressing to kill metaphorically. Pope's final touch is especially playful. Because the invisible sylphs are busy doing Belinda's hair and arranging her dress, Betty (her maid) finds herself praised for labors not her own. By its careful placing, the noun 'labors' mischievously insinuates that creating Belinda's look is a Herculean task.

## CANTO II

Pope has an encourageable sense of fun. Nowhere is the tone of his writing more disingenuous than in the tortuous sentence which describes the progress of Belinda's barge up the River Thames. The epic echo is of Aeneas' voyage up the River Tiber (Aeneid VII):

*Not with more glories, in th' ethereal plain,*

*The sun first rises o'er the purpled main,*

*Than issuing forth, the rival of his beams*

*Launched on the bosom of the silver Thames.*

By means of circumlocution, Pope suggests that Belinda's voyage is just as grand and stately; by means of a classical hyperbole, he suggests moreover that her rival is not Aeneas, not even Queen Elizabeth I, but 'the sun' itself. His elaborate syntax parodies the heroic idiom; his epithet for Belinda (the rival of his beams) both complicates and elevates a simple figure. As her launch progresses, the Virgin Nymph is presented as acknowledging her people with her queenly air:

*Favours to none, to all she smiles extends,*

*Oft she rejects, but never once offends.*

*Bright as the sun, her eyes the gazers strike, And, like the sun, they shine on all alike.*

*Yet graceful ease, and sweetness void of pride,*

*Might hide her faults, if Belles had faults to hide.*

By writing with such formal ease, Pope is suggesting that Belinda's progress towards Hampton Court is serene. Unfortunately, Belinda's serene appearance is deceptive. At this stage of the narrative, Pope mentions that Belinda nourished two Locks : that is, that she took a hubristic pride in the equal curls on each side of her smooth ivory neck. At the next stage of the narrative, Pope paints his portrait of Belinda's nemesis, Lord Petre. He introduces the Baron:

*Th' advent'rous Baron the bright locks admir'd; He saw, he wish'd, and to the prize aspir'd.*

*Resolv'd to win, he meditates the way By force to ravish, or by fraud betray.*

This realistic undercurrent puts Belinda's subsequent ire in perspective; such epigrammatic couplets stress that the rape is not a rape as it so easily could have been and sometimes was. Meanwhile, Pope proceeds to make fun of the Baron's own self-image. To assist him in his pursuit of women, the Baron as if he were a hero in an epic poem wishes to enlist the aid of the gods; to win their favors, he has raised an unlikely altar. What this romantic warrior stacks religiously in his tent are the spoils of his previous conquests:

*to Love an altar built,*

*Of twelve vast French romances, neatly gilt. There lay three garters, half a pair of gloves; And all the trophies of his former loves.*

Compared with a true warrior, this philanderer appears more than faintly ridiculous an effect achieved by the comical use

to which he has put his pile of novels. The Baron is a serial seducer who keeps 'trophies' (a garter, a glove) of his intimate encounters, finding for each item a place upon his DIY 'altar' of tomes. This hero is not so much a killer as a lady-killer. In his effort to propitiate the gods, he is portrayed as regarding relics of his earlier affairs with a pious reverence which such accoutrements obviously do not merit.

That epic poetry requires the treatment of national/universal catastrophe, it is fitting and proper that he should consider the dire disasters which might befall his heroine. The three couplets in which he speculates

*Whether the nymph shall break Diana's law, Or some frail China jar receive a flaw,*

*Or stain her honor, or her new brocade, Forget her pray'rs, or miss her masquerade, Or lose her heart, or necklace, at a ball;*

*Or whether Heav'n has doom'd that Shock must fall*

are scathingly ironic at the expense of Belinda's character. In his Letter of Dedication, Pope remember has assured Lady Arabella that the character of Belinda, as it is now managed, resembles you in nothing but in Beauty; here, however, his self-contained couplets encapsulate juxtapositions which imply a serious criticism of her values.

The final rhyme serves to indict the broader scale of female values. Deeply to upset a young woman of this world, it would take not the loss of a trinket, but the death of her lap-dog. For this reason, Ariel himself shall be the guard of Shock. In effect, Ariel is recognizing that, in Queen Anne's society, a sullied reputation is the moral equivalent of a mark on a new dress. At the end of Canto II, Pope heralds the imminence of the 'dire event' and describes it in lofty, portentous terms ('the birth of Fate') which become comical because it does not live up to them.

### CANTO III

Up the River Thames, Belinda makes her way to the social gathering where her fate awaits her. For Virgil's Carthage, Pope substitutes Hampton Court which ironically has its own 'rising tow'rs':

*Close by those meads, forever crown'd with flow'rs,*

*Where Thames with pride surveys his rising tow'rs,*

*There stands a structure of majestic frame,*

*Which from the neighb'ring Hampton takes its name.*

This passage is a classic example of epic description Pope sets the scene of the heroic action except that this 'structure of majestic frame' is not the setting for the kind of event that Aeneid IV depicts. Consistently, this poetry has the effect of pleasing because Pope affords to his reader the sophisticated pleasure of recognizing ironical parallels to familiar passages in Homer and Virgil (Ian Jack). With his active sense of humor and his keen sense of artistic purpose, he transmutes this pastoral description into a satirical account of eighteenth-century manners:

*Here Britain's statesmen oft the fall foredoom*

*Of foreign tyrants, and of nymphs at home;*

*Here thou, great Anna! whom three realms obey,*

*Dost sometimes counsel take and sometimes Tea.*

Once again, he creates bathos by means of his sylleptic statements. In each couplet, there is an ellipsis in which one word (fall/take) is understood differently in relation to two other words (tyrants, nymphs/counsel, Tea) which it governs or modifies. Whereas we might rightly and properly expect Queen Anne's venerable ministers to be plotting the downfall of foreign adversaries, we might not expect them to be spending an equal amount of time thinking of ways to get young girls (nymphs) into bed. Whereas it is right and proper that Queen Anne, 'whom three realms obey, should be meeting her Privy Councilors, it is less becoming that she should spend so much time drinking tea (pronounced 'tay'). To this end, he depicts courtiers concerned less with the serious business of governing in the Queen's name, more with an uninterrupted life of leisure:

*Snuff, or the fan, supply each pause of chat,*

*With singing, laughing, ogling, and all that.*

The characters who populate Hampton Court are distracted by light entertainments to the point of obsession; they are

portrayed as preoccupied with 'snuff', stuff and nonsense/with tittle-tattle. Whilst the ladies fan themselves and chatter, the gentlemen eye every bosom which heaves into view.

The card game is Ombre which, in spite of its complexities, had come into vogue in the 1660s and continued to sweep Europe throughout the eighteenth-century; at this time, it was a three-handed game, played one against two. It is only essential to know that this particular game comes to 'depend' upon the ninth and final trick and that Belinda wins it, trumping the Baron's Ace of Hearts [low] with her own King of Hearts! [Spadillio = Ace of Spades, Manillio = Deuce of Spades, Basto = Ace of Clubs, Pam = Knave of Clubs, Codille = the term which signifies Victory] Hubris infects Belinda's elated reaction to this triumph. As Pope observes, she exults at her own peril:

*Oh thoughtless mortals! ever blind to fate,  
Too soon dejected, and too soon elate!  
Sudden, these honors shall be snatch'd away,  
And curs'd forever this victorious day.*

Pope interrupts his narrative in order to deliver a Virgilian verdict upon this turn of events. He resorts to epic sententiae which echo Turnus' speech in Aeneid X, forewarning in these sententious statements that Belinda's joyous celebrations are premature. The Rape of the Lock relies for its effects upon sustained foregrounding. The rhetorical model for the next stage is the Homeric feast at which a military victory was celebrated: for this grand occasion, Pope substitutes a coffee-break. He treats this interlude ironically. His figures of speech 'shining Altars of Japan' for polished coffee-tables, 'China's earth' for porcelain crockery, 'smoking tide' and 'fuming liquor' for the coffee itself endow this trivial pursuit with an incongruous splendor.

The opportunity arises when Clarissa drew with tempting grace a two-edged weapon from her shining case. Clarissa (Martha Blount 1690-1762) hands her knight not a spear, but a puny pair of clippers. The Baron takes up 'the little engine and prepares to snip. At first, a thousand sprites leap to Belinda's defense, but to no avail..... Ariel, reposing upon a locket at Belinda's cleavage, where her ideas are said mischievously to rise and fall, detects to his amazement an earthly Lover lurking at her heart; by extra-sensory perception, he gathers that Belinda does indeed harbor sexual fantasies which involve the Baron and duly retires from the fray with a sigh. Immediately, the rape takes place:

*The Peer now spreads the glitt'ring Forfex wide,  
T' inclose the lock; now joins it, to divide.  
Ev'n then, before the fatal engine clos'd,  
A wretched Sylph too fondly interpos'd;  
Fate urg'd the shears, and cut the sylph in twain,  
(But airy substance soon unites again)  
The meeting points the sacred hair dis sever  
From the fair head, forever, and forever!*

Belinda's hubris meets its nemesis. In the first couplet, Pope is aiming at a sort of onomatopoeia, asking the very structure of the second line or, rather, its last six syllables to do the paradoxical work of the scissors. At the end of the fourth couplet, Pope's exclamation (forever, and forever!) echoes Belinda's melodramatic cry that she has suffered irreparable damage as if, in fact, she has lost her virginity to rape.

Disingenuously, Pope writes as if the Baron's 'sacrilegious' severing of Belinda's lock has cosmic repercussions. The rhetorical model for this response

*Not louder shrieks to pitying Heav'n are cast  
When husbands or when lap-dogs breathe their last;  
Or when rich China vessels fall'n from high  
In glitt'ring dust and painted fragments lie!*

is from Homer's Iliad XIV. By dint of its triviality, the Fermor-Petre kerfuffle is expressly symptomatic of the society in which it occurs; in these couplets, Pope uses classical hyperbole in order gently to mock its upside-down scale of values. Imagining Belinda's 'screams' at the loss of her lock, he remarks that we do not hear any 'louder shrieks' from young ladies when their husbands or their dogs die or when a valuable vase crashes to the floor and lies in smithereens. There are more things in heaven and earth than are dreamt of in the Baron's philosophy, for he measures his own 'triumph' exclusively in terms of his society's petty values.

The final verse-paragraph of Canto III is not inconsistent with this idea. Pope composes a meditation, not upon the power of Time, but upon the power of Steel; he reflects that empires fall, not when they fail to withstand the power of time, but when they are put to the sword. For Belinda, the consequence is logical. Pope concludes Canto III with a rhetorical question which he borrows from Catullus and asks in Catullus' voice:

*What wonder then, fair nymph! thy hairs should feel*

*The conqu'ring force of unresisted steel?*

On the one hand, he may be referring only to the 'force' of Clarissa's scissors; on the other hand, he may be alluding to the hardness of the Baron's erection which Belinda, 'nymph' that she is, would be unable to resist.

#### CANTO IV

At the start of Canto IV, Pope's description of Belinda echoes Virgil's depiction of Dido in Aeneid IV: in the first couplet, he portrays Belinda as having had her secret passions stirred and implies that she is mistaking an infatuation with the Baron for Dido's deep love for Aeneas. This portrayal seems to confirm that she would much rather that the Baron had cut off her maidenhead than her lock. The Baron (rash youth) was impetuous: if only he had paused to proposition her, then her lock, if not her hymen, might still be intact. Accordingly, the anaphoric opening of Canto IV [not + adjective + noun] concludes with two couplets

*Not tyrants fierce that unrepenting die,*

*Not Cynthia when her manteau's pinn'd awry,*

*E'er felt such rage, resentment, and despair,*

*As thou, sad Virgin! for thy ravish'd Hair*

which point again at the topsy-turvy chaos of values in Belinda's world (Jack): in this light, the Virgin is sad not only because she has lost her hair, but also because she is envious of it: that is, she is still herself unravished and a virgin. Her rage at this frustrating turn of events is as we shall see a splenetic rage. Pope turns for inspiration to Robert Burton's *The Anatomy of Melancholy* (1621). Pope conducts his own autopsy of this condition. When Umbriel arrives at his dismal destination, he discovers that attendant upon the Queen are two

*handmaids, one on each side of her throne:*

*Here stood Ill-Nature like an ancient maid,*

*Her wrinkled form in black and white array'd.*

One personification Ill-Nature is an old maid: according to Burton, the common source of an ill nature is sexual denial/frustration (of the very kind from which Belinda is suffering). The other figure Affectation is no more than two years older than Belinda herself and is quickly recognizable. Affectation lisps, tilts her head coquettishly and practices hypochondria: for instance, she feigns an illness simply so that she can lie abed in a new night-dress. Although Pope can sound like Shakespeare's Puck, Umbriel (raise a pimple on a beautiful face) is more malevolent. The basis on which he asks her to supply him with the wherewithal to keep Belinda in a bad mood

*Hear me, and touch Belinda with chagrin*

*That single act gives half the world the spleen*

is the collateral damage which her tantrum would then cause; his plea, of course, is entirely consistent with the earlier vaunt that Belinda has only to smile and all the world is gay. Umbriel's plan is to exploit Belinda's misfortune and turn her against the world: that is, goad her into a petulant reaction to her mishap and ensure that she goes on reacting bitterly (just

as Lady Arabella did). At the next stage of the narrative, Umbriel returns from Hades to Hampton Court where he discovers that Thalestris (Lady Browne) is ministering to Belinda, attempting to comfort her in her distress. He empties 'the swelling bag' over their heads and rouses Thalestris to rhetorical anger. Under the influence of the contents, she becomes an agent provocateur. By means of anaphora, Thalestris, living up to the name that Pope has given her, constructs a furious diatribe which echoes with a classical indignation: Was it for this you took such constant care The bodkin, comb, and essence to prepare?

*For this your locks in paper durance bound*

*For this with tort'ring irons wreath'd around?*

*For this with fillets strain'd your tender head,*

*And bravely bore the double loads of lead?*

Here, Pope uses his knowledge of eighteenth-century hair-dressing, writing about Belinda as if she were a Greek or Roman captive who, having bravely suffered a series of tortures, escapes only to be defeated and dishonored on the battlefield. As if she really were Queen of the Amazons, the Thalestris- figure urges her girl not to stand for such mistreatment and exhorts her instead to react with rancour/with splenetic rage to the perpetrator of the dastardly deed. By means of anaphora, Thalestris echoes Hecuba's voice in Iliad XXII and Aeneas' voice in Aeneid II:

*Methinks already I your tears survey*

*Already hear the horrid things they say,*

*Already see you a degraded toast,*

*And all your honor in a whisper lost!*

*How shall I, then, your helpless fame defend?*

*'Twill then be infamy to seem your friend!*

Here, the ironic comparison is between two visions of the future, one rather less horrific than the other: Hecuba foreseeing Hector's death, Lady Browne foreseeing Arabella's discomfiture. For the fourth time in the poem, Pope catalogues a series of trivial events or eventualities by which Augustan high society (the beau monde) takes its moral bearings: sooner, rants Thalestris, let men, monkeys, lap-dogs and parrots perish than suffer such humiliation in silence.

At the same time, Leslie's portrait does show that the ringlet on her right-

hand side remains intact. J. S. Cunningham considers that this brief episode is the broadest burlesque of heroic ire. These couplets

*My Lord, why, what the devil?*

*Z-- ds! damn the lock! 'fore Gad, you must be civil!*

*Plague on't! 'tis past a jest nay prithe, pox!*

*Give her the hair he spoke, and rapp'd his box.*

*It grieves me much (reply'd the Peer again)*

*Who speaks so well should ever speak in vain*

are ironic at the expense of Sir Plume's idiocy and inarticulacy: by pleading Belinda's case in an incoherent series of fashionable expletives, he makes a mockery of its heroic pretensions. Pope's mimicry of Sir Plume's snuff-fuelled speech-style is a satire of Belinda's disproportionate reaction; it is not the ridicule of a literary form but the setting of a lovers' tiff in true perspective (Jack). At every turn, The Rape of the Lock is a humorous criticism of the beau monde's grandiose idea of itself. At this point, Umbriel empties the vial over Belinda's breast with the result that she responds in the same elegiac key. In Part IV of his chapter, Ian Jack refers to the dignified march of the verse: here, the movement of the verse sounds exactly as if it is a funeral lament. What is more, the word-order casts Belinda as Achilles (Iliad XVIII) bewailing the death of Patroclus:

*Forever curs'd be this detested day,*

*Which snatch'd my best, my fav'rite curl away!*

For fifteen couplets, her grave cadences mourn a ravished curl of hair/a lost lock. No fewer than eight exclamation-marks punctuate the sentences in which she bewails her own hamartic complacency and sheer bad luck. Belinda's self-recriminations are such as might inspire pity for any tragic heroine, any vanquished queen. The ironic conflict, however, is between the dramatic/'mighty' tone of her utterances and the 'trivial' situation that they describe. Throughout the poem, Pope has been politely endeavouring to suggest that splenetic rage is an inadequate and undignified response to an act of puerile horse-play and that a sense of proportion must always be kept. The closing couplets of Belinda's lament

*The sister-lock now sits uncouth, alone,*

*And in its fellow's fate foresees its own;*

*Uncurl'd it hangs, the fatal sheers demands,*

*And tempts once more thy sacrilegious hands.*

*Oh hadst thou, cruel! been content to seize*

*Hairs less in sight, or any hairs but these!*

confirm and emphasise the extent to which this common sense has been lost. In all seriousness, Belinda is declaring that, if the Baron were going to seize any of her hairs, then he should have seized her pubic hairs simply because they are less in sight (as she puts it). Her ringlets are among her public parts: given a choice, she would therefore have opted for a sexual assault, a fondling of her private parts. To the rape of a lock, rape itself is preferable because the rape of a lock is there for all the world to see!

#### CANTO V

Pope completed *The Rape of the Lock* in 1714 with one exception. In 1717, he felt impelled to insert Clarissa's speech which occupies Lines 9–34: at the time, he said that it was a Parody of the Speech of Sarpedon to Glaucus in Homer. When William Warburton came to edit *The Rape of the Lock* in 1751, he quoted Pope as having said that Clarissa's speech to her fellow women was added to open out more clearly the moral of the poem. It does so explicitly:

*How vain are all these glories, all our pains,*

*Unless good sense preserve what beauty gains ....*

*What then remains but well our pow'r to use,*

*And keep good humor still whate'er we lose? And trust me, dear! good humor can prevail,*

*When airs, and flights, and screams, and scolding fail.*

The moral of the poem is that beaux and belles, boys and girls, should always show good sense and keep good humor no matter what else it costs them. Anticipating Dr. Johnson's precept, Pope's poetry aims to instruct his readership in an alternative attitude to life: that it should be lived not in a mood of seething resentment, but with good humor. As a result, Pope's tone is didactic: in Clarissa's speech, he is telling his readership (including Robert and Arabella) how to behave. For the remainder of Canto V, Pope follows the course of the mock-epic battle between the Fermors and the Petres in which everything is scaled down to the dimensions of the baroque drawing room. In this context, Pope bestows upon Lady Browne (Thalestris) Virgil's epithet for the warrior princess Camilla: *virago* derived from *vir*, the Latin noun for man. Combat commences when this fierce

*Virago calls her family to arms:*

*All side in parties, and begin th' attack;*

*Fans clap, silks russle and tough whalebones crack ....*

*When bold Sir Plume had drawn Clarissa down,*

*Chloe stepp'd in, and kill'd him with a frown.*

In such a caper, looks can kill. Cunningham observes that the language of combat wounding, killing, perishing, dying has an epic grandeur, but that it descends here and becomes a coded means by which to describe a low comedy of manners. As befits this attenuated theatre of war, Belinda's weapon of choice is a bodkin. Eyes flashing, she heads towards the Baron in search of satisfaction. After first subduing him with a charge of snuff, she draws her deadly bodkin and jabs him in the side. As the innuendo reveals, the Peer who sought no more than on his foe to die wants nothing more than to sleep with Belinda: that is, ejaculate inside her/die on her. Accordingly, his response is gallant:

*Nor think, to die dejects my lofty mind  
All that I dread is leaving you behind!  
Rather than so, ah let me still survive,  
And burn in Cupid's flames but burn alive.*

Still under the influence of the vial, Belinda issues her own demand for the restoration of her shorn lock; her sorrowful cry "Restore the Lock!" reverberates to the rooftops. At this epic imperative, events in keeping with the mode of the poem take a comic turn:

*The Lock, obtain'd with guilt, and kept with pain,  
In ev'ry place is sought, but sought in vain.*

The contentious curl is nowhere to be found! It transpires that it has been magically transported to the heavens above and there transformed into a star: A sudden Star, it shot thro' liquid air, And drew behind a radiant trail of hair. As Pope indicates, the comparison is with Berenice of Cyrene, Queen of King Ptolemy III of Egypt (c. 246 BC) who dedicated her hair to the Goddess Venus and then had a constellation Coma Berenices named after her. Such a fantastic resolution to the dispute pays an extravagant and tactful compliment to Arabella/Belinda.

Then cease, bright Nymph! to mourn her ravished hair, Which adds new glory to the shining sphere appeals to her vanity, appearing to guarantee her a kind of immortality. Not least by its literal application of the adjective bright, Pope's peroration keeps the grace and the wit which characterizes the whole poem.

### 3. CRITICAL REVIEW ON THE RAPE OF THE LOCK

The Rape of the Lock, was considered the most popular of Alexander Pope's writings and the finest satirical poem in the English language. Pope's larger purpose in writing the poem, however, was to ridicule the social vanity of his day and the importance attached to trifles.

When Robert Lord Petre cut off a lock of Arabella Fermors hair one fateful day early in the eighteenth century, he did not know that the deed would gain fame, attracting attention over several centuries. What began as a trivial event in history turned, under the masterly guidance of Pope's literary hand, into one of the most famous poems in the English language and perhaps the most perfect example of burlesque in English.

The poem uses the essentially trivial story of the stolen lock of hair as a vehicle for making some thoroughly mature and sophisticated comments on society and on women and men. The entire poem, divided into five cantos, is written in heroic couplets (pairs of rhymed iambic pentameter lines). Pope makes the most of this popular eighteenth century verse form, filling each line with balance, antithesis, bathos, allusions to serious epic poetry, and puns.

The literary genre of burlesque typically takes trivial subjects and elevates them to seemingly great importance; the effect is comic, and Pope manages an unbroken sense of amusement as he relates. What dire offense from amorous causes springs, What mighty contests rise from trivial things. clear. Pope knew well not only the Iliad and the Odyssey but also John Milton's Paradise Lost (1667, 1674). The narrator of The Rape of the Lock speaks like Homer, raising the epic question early in the poem: .Say what strange motive, goddess! could compel, A well-bred lord t assault a gentle belle?

The effect of Popes use of epic conventions is humorous, but it also helps establish a double set of values in the poem, making the world of Belinda and Sir Plume at the same time trivial and significant. The poem rewards a reading that focuses on the seriousness of Belindas activities and experience. The truth is, for a woman of her place and time, the unwanted cutting of a lock of hair was a serious matter. Epic conventions contribute to this double sense in each canto. The first canto is the epic dedication and invocation. The second is the conference of protective gods. The third details the games and the banquet. The fourth tells of the descent into the underworld. The fifth tells of heroic encounters and apotheosis. The overall result is that, although readers are presented with a basically silly situation, the poem has

characters, such as Clarissa, who utter the always sensible virtues of the eighteenth century:

The heroic couplet merges perfectly with the epic devices in the poem, for as a verse form the heroic couplet naturally seems to express larger-than-life situations. It is, therefore, profoundly to Pope's credit that he successfully applies such a verse form to a subject that is anything but larger than life. Perhaps more than anyone else writing poetry in the eighteenth century, Pope demonstrates the flexibility of the heroic couplet. Shaped by his pen, it contains pithy aphorisms, social commentary, challenging puns, and delightful bathos (that is, the juxtaposition of the serious with the small, as in the line. wrapped in a gown for sickness and for show.).

Pope had a keen interest in the life of London's aristocracy, though he was always a critic of that life. A Catholic by birth, he was not always in favor with the Crown, but before the death of Queen Anne in 1714, he enjoyed meeting with a group of influential Tories. Sir Richard Steele and Joseph Addison, England's first newspaper editors, courted him on behalf of the Whig Party, but he refused to become its advocate.

Forbidden by law from living within several miles of London, Pope lived much of his adult life at Twickenham, a village on the Thames not too far from London but far enough. He transformed his dwelling there into an eighteenth century symbol with gardening and landscaping; he included vineyards, and the house had a temple and an obelisk to his mother's memory. During the 1720's he built his grotto, an underpass connecting the parts of his property under a dividing road. The grotto was a conversation piece; according to one contemporary, it had bits of mirror on the walls that reflected "all objects of the river, hills, woods, and boats, forming a moving picture in their visible radiations". For Pope, four feet, six inches tall and sick all his life, it was a symbol of the philosophical life and mind. Although he never married, his biographers have written that he felt a warm, if not always happy, affection for Martha and Teresa Blount, neighbors during his youth. Pope enjoyed great literary fame during his lifetime, and near the end of his life, when he entered a room, whispers of "Mr. Pope, Mr. Pope" would buzz among the occupants.

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