

BELINDA'S WORLD OF TRIVIALITY IN *THE RAPE OF THE LOCK*: A MICROCOSM OF EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY ENGLAND AND THE IRONIC JUXTAPOSITION OF HER STORY WITH THE CLASSICAL EPICS

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Abstract

The Rape of the Lock is one of the best examples of mock-epic or mock-heroic poems written in English History. It is an imitation of Horatian satire, written in the Eighteenth-Century by Alexander Pope, in which he uses irony, sarcasm, and exaggeration to expose follies and vanities of the aristocratic or upper class in England in an undignified and grandiose manner. Written in heroic couplets about a trivial subject matter, the poet juxtaposes the trivial world of the upper class with the heroic deeds mentioned in the classical epics. This paper navigates the epic allusions used in The Rape of the Lock to mock the shortcomings of the upper class in England and to also satirize the epic tradition itself.

Keywords: *Mock-epic; The Eighteenth-Century; Augustan Age; Neoclassical Period; Imperialism; Aristocracy; Triviality; Patriarchy.*



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The Eighteenth-Century is also known as Augustan Age because writers during this age consciously imitated the highly structured and stylized works of the Augustan writers of Rome like Horace, Virgil, Ovid, and others. This period also coincides with the Neoclassical Period as writers during this period focused on classicizing the then-contemporary issues. *The Rape of the Lock* is a classic example of both, a mock-epic and a neoclassical work. Written by Alexander Pope, a poet, satirist, and translator of Eighteenth-Century England, the first version of the poem was published in May 1712 and the revised edition was published in March 1714.

Mock-epic is a type of parody that imitates the epic genre but uses it to narrate a trivial subject matter. It is able to form observations about contemporary issues, culture, and religion in a funny and meaningful style. It uses the technique of satire which was a popular literary genre during Pope's time. In England, the golden age of satire included Jonathan Swift and Alexander Pope, associated with Juvenal satire and Horatian satire, respectively. Horatian satire is "playfully amusing" and it tries to direct society toward change in a gentle manner with understanding.

The inspiration for the poem was an actual incident that took place in 1711 at a party of nobles where Robert Lord Petre (Pope's Baron), a young man from an aristocratic family, sneaked up behind Arabella Fermor (Pope's Belinda), a young woman from a noble family and cut off a lock of her hair and as a result, their families fell into strife. John Caryll, a friend of Pope, and another member of the same group of Roman Catholics to which Lord Petre and Arabella Fermor belonged, requested Pope to write a light poem that would put the episode into humorous perspective and reconcile the two families. The poem was intended to grasp the attention of aristocrats and society in general, compelling them to realize their shortcomings and encourage them to make a cultural shift. Satirists are serious about wanting a change in society for which they poke fun at human follies and hypocrisy in order to correct human behavior.

On one hand, Pope trivialized the world of Belinda which can be seen as a microcosm of the aristocratic class of Eighteenth-Century England. He is holding up a mirror to their flaws and attacks hypocrisy, arrogance, vanity, and many other vices that have become an inherent part of their society. On the other hand, by writing the poem in the mock-epic style he satirizes one of the great literary genres i.e. the epic poem. Pope drew upon ancient classical texts, like *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, as models to imitate style and tone and built a theme that is too shallow to be seen or considered as a part of the epic tradition. In this paper, I will discuss both in detail by giving sufficient examples from the text and supporting my argument with the help of the opinions of others critics.

Pope has used many epic allusions from classical texts like the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, and all forms of epic elements in *The Rape of the Lock*. In the beginning, following the epic convention, Pope invokes the muse:

"I sing- This Verse to Caryll, Muse!" (I. 3)

Here, the muse is John Caryl, who had asked Pope to write this poem. Through this invocation, Pope highlights the fact that this mock-epic will follow all epic conventions. The Game of Ombre in Canto III and Belinda's quarrel with Baron in Canto V are described as epic battles. At the end of Canto I, Belinda can be seen preparing herself for "the battle" by putting "all its Arms" just as a classical warrior and practicing her charms and expressions, as she "Repairs her Smiles, awakens ev'ry Grace" (I. 141), by using which she would be "killing" men. Here, a woman is getting ready for a "social battle" and sylphs are serving her:

"The busy Sylphs surround their darling care;
These set the Head, and those divide the Hair,
Some fold the Sleeve, whilst others plait the Gown;
And Betty's prais'd for Labours not her own." (I. 145- 48)

In this poem, sylphs work as epic machinery. They continue to guide and direct Belinda's behavior throughout the poem just as Homeric gods and goddesses direct mortal affairs in classical texts.

Another epic element introduced by Pope in the poem is that of 'helplessness' when it comes to fate. Ariel warns Belinda that some tragedy will strike her just as gods warn mortals in classical epics but fail to prevent something that is destined to happen:

"I saw, alas! some dread Event impend,
Ere to the Main this Morning Sun descend.
But Heav'n reveals not what, or how, or where:
Warn'd by thy Sylph, oh Pious Maid beware!
This to disclose is all thy Guardian can.

In Canto II, Ariel assigns "Fifty chosen Sylphs" to take charge of Belinda's "sev'nfold fence" petticoat, which can be seen as a shield to protect her chastity and can be equated with the shield of the Homeric hero Achilles. Sylphs try their best to protect Belinda from Baron, but just like Homeric gods, they too are helpless when it comes to fate. Even the sylphs knew that they have the power to delay something from happening, but they cannot prevent it:

"With beating Hearts the dire Event they wait,
Anxious, and trembling for the Birth of Fate." (II. 141- 42)

The poem also includes a trip to the underworld into the cave of Spleen in Canto IV, just like those undertaken by Odysseus in Book XI of Homer's *Odyssey*, and Aeneas in Book VI of Virgil's *Aeneid*. Pope presents the quarrel between Baron and Belinda in a ridiculous

way, the silver bodkin from Belinda's hair and a pair of feminine scissors in Baron's hand are compared with the scepter of Agamemnon and the wooden horse of Troy, respectively. The concluding lines of the poem mark the transformation of mortal to divine level:

“This Lock, the Muse shall consecrate to Fame,
And mid'st the Stars inscribe Belinda's Name!” (V. 149-150)

Belinda is reinstated as a warrior in the end. These lines make a mockery of traditional epics, suggesting that the removal of Belinda's lock had divine implications. Pope uses personification throughout the poem to add to the heroic coloring of the poem and the elevation of the subject matter:

“The climactic apotheosis of Belinda's lock at the end of the poem can of course be read as a joke, but it can also be read – especially to the extent that it represents Pope's poetic consecration of her lock to fame- as a real apotheosis for the poem.” (Brown, p.149)

Though Belinda is objectified and trivialized throughout the poem, there are instances when she is sympathized with. The ending of the poem can be considered one such instance. The speech of Clarissa in Canto V can be equated with the speech of Sarpedon on heroic code in Book XII of the *Iliad*. In his speech, Sarpedon sums up the main reason for willingly going to the war: glorious death on the battlefield. All heroes in the *Iliad*, including Hector and Achilles, are consciously driven to the battlefield so that they can achieve “glory”. They all make a choice and embrace glory above anything and everything they are attached to. Similarly, Clarissa, through her speech, tries to pacify Belinda after the theft of her lock and highlights the vanity of women, which runs as an undercurrent throughout the text, and advises Belinda not to mourn her loss because one day the beauty will fade away, only your merits will stay with you:

“But since, alas! frail Beauty must decay,
Curl'd or uncurl'd, since Locks will turn to grey,
Since painted, or not painted, all shall fade,
And she who scorns a Man, must die a Maid;” (V. 25-28)

It is problematic that on one hand, Clarissa aids Baron by giving him a pair of scissors using which he cut off the lock of Belinda's hair. And on the other hand, she gives a word of wisdom to all. Clarissa represents all those women who play an important role in upholding patriarchy. The snipping off of Belinda's lock was tantamount to rape as Baron sneaked into

her private sphere and ravished the lock of her hair because of which she would not be considered a chaste woman anymore. In a way, Clarissa is covering up for Baron and chastising Belinda, a victim! She advocates for moderation in the behavior of women. Through the reactions of these characters like Clarissa, Thalestris, and Sir Plume Pope criticizes the attitude of society toward “fallen women.”

The toilette scene in Canto I shows the disorderly values of the Eighteenth-Century society. The vanity table is described in great detail. Her toilette is a place where “The various off’rings of the World appear” (I. 130), which hints at the imperial expansion of England. A language of ‘commodity fetishism’ is used where the objects become the only reality. Pope refers to Belinda’s beauty as an “awful beauty” because it is created with the help of sylphs by doing make-up. Her beauty can only be seen through the commodities that she wears. This indicates that in society, proper values have become distorted to such an extent that objects and human beings have become indistinguishable. “Billet-doux” and the Bible lying together on the dressing table indicates the implicit moral irresponsibility:

“...the placement of Bible among the other consumables on Belinda’s table in fact signifies something important, that it suggests for us a specific confusion of religion and consumer culture in Pope’s England...like the powders used to beautify Belinda, the Bible may become simply another accessory for those positioning themselves socially...” (Hernandez, p. 569).

The rising consumerism during this period wanted a market for these goods for consumption and Belinda’s toilette is illustrative of this change.

Belinda also places herself in the place of God as we can see her admiring and worshipping herself and her beauty. In self-admiration, she becomes the priestess and a deity, and performs the “Rites of Pride”. Pope, by criticizing Belinda’s self-love, criticizes women’s sense of vanity in Eighteenth-Century England. Religion is getting replaced and sexuality is being celebrated over here. For Belinda the showcasing of religion was important and the “rituals” performed at the dressing table became more important than actual religion. Pope compared her to the Sun:

“Bright as the Sun, her Eyes the Gazers strike,
And, like the Sun, they shine on all alike.” (II. 13- 14)

Pope has shown her lack of discrimination as she gives equal attention to all, just as the Sun who impartially shines on everyone.

On one hand, Pope describes Belinda as no more than the “painted Vessel” as she stands along with other objects present near her toilette. She willingly prepares herself for the male gaze and enjoys being the center of the male gaze:

“But ev’ry Eye was fixed on her alone.
On her white Breast a sparkling *Cross* she wore,
Which *Jews* might kiss and Infidels adore.” (II. 6- 8)

On the other hand, Pope introduces Baron as a man who wants to establish power. He is presented as a subject who wants something or desires something:

“Th’ Adventrous Baron the bright Locks admir’d,
He saw, he wish’d, and to the Prize, aspir’d” (II. 29-30)

By exposing the vanity of women, Pope makes a very strong statement about how women, in Eighteenth-Century England, were generally prized for beauty over their intelligence and contribution to society. Belinda is seen as an object of the male gaze in many instances in the text.

“By virtue of anatomical fact, Pope’s key verb may be inexorably gender-related, but at the hub of his poem he resolutely establishes a syntax in which woman is not a proper subject of that verb, but its passive object.” (Pollak, p.180)

After the tragic event of snipping off a lock of her hair, Belinda laments her loss of beauty, and this is where the actual tragedy lies. She was not offended on the ground that her personal space was breached or that she was seen as a mere commodity by Baron and other men, but she was more concerned about how she would look now:

“Oh! hadst thou, Cruel! Been content to seize
Hairs less in sight, or any hairs but these!” (IV. 175- 76)

Pope is pointing out the degree to which she was concerned about her outward appearance so much so that she would suffer an assault on her integrity than on her outward appearance.

The strategy of Pope in his mock-epic is to mock society for its failure to rise to the epic standards, thereby exposing its pettiness by casting it against the grandeur of traditional epic subjects, and the bravery of epic heroes. Pope’s mock-heroic treatment in *The Rape of the Lock* underscores the ridiculousness of a society in which values have lost all proportion, and triviality is handled with gravity and solemnity that is accorded to truly important issues. The

society on display, in the poem, is one that fails to distinguish between things that matter and things that do not. Pope expresses his profound dissatisfaction with the Eighteenth-Century society of England through this work of satire and he criticizes the fallen culture of his time. This piece of literature can be seen as one that is meant to make people realize the flaws inherent in their society, and initiate a social and cultural reform. Also, he has succeeded in indicating the social malice in society as well as in an individual and tries to influence the people of his age and inspire them to move forward into the new era of true enlightenment with regard to social and political morality.

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