

Fortasse, pope,  
idcirco nulla tibi  
umquam nupsit (the  
rape of the lock)



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Alexander Pope is known for his scathing but intelligent critiques of high English society. His acclaimed poem *The Rape of the Lock* does support female passivity and subordination in marriage; however, the fact that they are endorsed in Pope's satirical world demonstrates his detestation of these ideas, and more importantly, of the society (comprised of both males and females) that upholds these conventions. In many aspects Belinda is infantilized; her judgment and intelligence reduced to that of a child and subject to an authority figure of some sort. For example, Pope writes: "Some secret truths, from learned pride concealed/ To maids alone and children are revealed" (ROTL 1. 37-38). Here, the "learned pride" represents the men, who, for all their erudition, are not privy to the existence of the chimerical creatures. Women, however, are not above believing in the machinery because they are naive as children are. Her "ideas crowd a vacant brain," (ROTL 1. 83) suggesting that she is not capable of any substantial considerations, certainly not anything transcending her "infant thought[s]" (ROTL 1. 29). Later, she is depicted as juvenile and unreasonable during her crying fit, while the Baron is heroic, surpassing even Aeneas in steadfastness for his refusal to return the lock of hair (ROTL 5. 5). Another way she is compared to a child is her inability to fend for herself and thus needing the Sylphs, who "guard the purity of melting maids" (ROTL 1. 71). Belinda was "claimed" (ROTL 1. 105) by Ariel, which demonstrates how the woman is not only objectified by the men she encounters, but by the Sylphs as well. Although it is specified that their sex is interchangeable, Ariel, the Sylph chiefly responsible for Belinda's well-being, is identified as a male with the masculine pronoun "he" (ROTL 1. 115, etc.). By defining Ariel as a man, Pope places Belinda under the care of yet another virile figure. An important <https://assignbuster.com/fortasse-pope-idcirco-nulla-tibi-umquam-nupsit-the-rape-of-the-lock/>

aspect of the child/woman comparison is that the ignorance is attributed to innocence. This is meant to demonstrate the virtue and sexual purity a woman was expected to possess, but this wholesomeness is undermined throughout the poem by the repeated suggestions of Belinda's sexual desire and even the satiation of this desire. First, the poet describes how a "birthnight beau...even in slumber caused her cheek to glow." (ROTL 1. 23-24) This hints at sexual desire so potent within Belinda that she cannot escape it while sleeping. Pope's discussion of female desire extends to the root of it and the facility by which a man can incite it. For example, in Canto 1, Lines 86-90 Pope writes: And in soft sounds, ' your Grace' salutes their ear'Tis these that early taint the female soul, Teach infant cheeks a bidden blush to know, And little hearts to flutter at a beau." The lines suggest that flattery " taints" the female soul from youth. Additionally, their blushing cheeks and fluttering hearts denote the awakening of their passions. Belinda's yearning is mostly fiercely attacked in lines 105-110. Here Pope juxtaposes her honor to a brocade. This implies that her worldly goods (a brocade was usually made of rich fabric and were very expensive) were esteemed on the same level as her nobility. Next, it indicates that her honor would be as easy to stain as an article of clothing. The point that Pope makes in his mentions of female desire is that attention is sought more than sexual gratification. For instance, Belinda is described as having " a thirst of fame" (ROTL 3. 25) when she sits to play ombre with the knights. Pope's use of sexually charged vocabulary (" thirst", " invites", and " burns") implies that her attention mongering is as satisfying as a sexual experience. The act of cutting the lock itself is the greatest statement on female compliance. The Baron is glorified for acting in the name of love in Canto Two, lines 30-34: He <https://assignbuster.com/fortasse-pope-idcirco-nulla-tibi-umquam-nupsit-the-rape-of-the-lock/>

saw, he wished, and to the prize aspired. Resolved to win, he meditates the way. By force to ravish, or by fraud betray; For when success a lover's toil attends, Few ask if fraud or force attained his ends. The diction in these lines demonstrates how the Baron saw Belinda as a trophy to be won by any means. Later, he boasts of his conquest, claiming that "so long [his] honor, name, and praise shall live!" (ROTL 4. 169) Although the act is not worthy of the uproar expressed in the mock epic, it would be contestable even in modern times. Instead of facing any retribution, he was exculpated from the opening lines of the poem when his motives for the assault are explained to be no stranger than those that "Could make a gentle belle reject a lord" (ROTL 1. 9-10) Belinda cements the notion in her last speech when she voices the notion that "she who scorns a man must die a maid" (ROTL 5. 28). The assumption in these lines is that a woman is obligated to accept any man that courts her without regard to her personal preferences and that it is dishonorable to die without a husband. Both ideas weaken the woman because they undercut the possibility of an independent woman being socially acceptable in their society. It is here that the reader realizes that the roles of victim and perpetrator are switched and Belinda will assume culpability for everything that happens to her. Pope makes a strong statement about the role of women in *The Rape of the Lock*, but it is important to consider that the statement is not encouraging the behavior and standards he presents; rather he condemns those who maintain those conventions. He is not attacking women in general; he is attacking the kind of woman he describes in the mock epic (and probably the kind of woman that rejected him.)