

The interplay of the gender dialectic

[Literature](#), [Poem](#)



“ Dialectic”: According to the oxford dictionary the word Dialectic stands for the meaning; “ The way in which two aspects of a situation affect each other.” The poem Rape of the Lock discusses the relationship between men and women and how they affect each other. Pope examines the oppressed position of women infringement on a woman's personal space, her person and pride by an aggressive male (the Baron) are certainly problems not to be taken lightly. In today's society these things translate to sexual harassment. Pope also raises the issue of conflicting love, the opposition between spiritual and secular love.

The poem portrays men and women as more concerned with social status, material values and physical beauty than the development of the spirit or of the character, Pope suggests former is the morally wrong part and criticises(through satire) his character for the vanity and lack of morality. The significance of a woman's outward beauty (especially Belinda's) has direct consequence for her role in the society. The place of a woman is shaped by social and economic forces. Women are routinely sub-ordinate in the “ public” sphere, partly because of their confinement to role associated with being wives.

Belinda is an unmarried upper class woman, maintaining her position in high society will depend on marriage; though not one necessarily of her choosing, her marriage will not ultimately depend on her intelligence or her personality, as women were not valued as objects of individuality but as beautiful objects to possess. “ The adventurous Baron the bright locks admired, He saw, he wished, and to the prize aspired” Therefore Belinda's strength is her physical appearance as he compares a hero's donning of

armour to Belinda's being made up w a her dressing table; here files of pins extend their shining rows, puffs, powders, patches, Bible, billets doux .

“ Now awful beauty puts on all its- arms”

We see a women ready to go into battle of the sexes whom the Baron (her opponent) already regards as a threat specifically, her beauty is a threat in that it empowers Belinda and means he may have to compete with other men for her affection. The idea of a women holding power of any sort over a man attacks the male ego. He is resolved to win, or by fraud betray; “ For when success a lover's toil attend, few ask if fraud or force attained his ends” The Baron will either have the lock or destroy the any power she possesses with it. The war Pope illustrates between men and women continues with the playing of the card game. Instead of fighting on the traditional battlefield Belinda plays cards against the Baron.

The playing of the game and the use of the word conquest could also represent the idea that Belinda is fighting for survival in her survival in her societal circle. She could view the playing of the game as a battle to win suitors, knights. Regardless Belinda wins the card game and offends the Baron's pride. Out to take the revenge, to reclaim his dignity and steal hers, the Baron cuts Belinda's prized locks of hair. The baron has taken Belinda's hair as if he has taken her power away. He cuts from her a symbol of her beauty, stealing what she regards as her honour. This disempowerment is not unlike an actual rape.

Belinda values her lock of hair as her source of honour; hence the baron takes away her virtue. Belinda is approached by older women of the court,

who has lost her own beauty and advises Belinda to rely on inner grace; “ Charms strike the sight, but merit wins the soul” While the comment strikes a stinging chord with Belinda, the court does not find merit in the idea that women’s inner values are important.

“ Clarissa” the dame, sounds a title feminist for her time. The idea that the women’s beauty existed in the character was not yet a popular notion, still Belinda is belittled by Carissa, and she attacks Belinda’s sense of worth as a woman by not accepting the Baron’s trick with more grace. If the Baron’s ego hadn’t been inflated enough by claiming Belinda’s lock, Carissa only conforms the Baron’s and Belinda’s misguided values by attacking Belinda’s inner beauty, in essence, her value system (morals) as well. Belinda has been insulted twice in the course of action. Pope writes of a world whose value system is confused.

Clarissa almost takes the role of the pope when she admonishes Belinda’s favour but on claiming her honour, the prized lock of hair.

This is rather twisted goal. The civilised thing to do would to have honourably courted Belinda. Instead the Baron is only interested in the fame which the claiming of the lock will bring. It is a long sought after prize indicating the Baron’s mind has been on the frivolous and cruel prank of clipping Belinda’s hair. Morally the Baron should have been thinking of more spiritual, less flighty things, yet in worshipping the lock, the Baron makes it a spiritual thing, which goes against the ideals of Christianity.

If there was any doubt Belinda is a materialistic creature, it is confirmed when the sylph read her thoughts and discovers the close recesses of the

virgins thought. In Belinda's mind is distinctly dwells material and secular matters, not those spiritual and holy. The sylph suggests that her virginal, beautiful appearance is only an image she portrays, not a truth. Indeed Belinda is linked to a painted ship, " If not literally called a painted vessel" Pope through the Baron's unseemly behaviour suggests that society has granted men the right to do what they want. Women are expected to support, or tolerate men's aggressiveness because they have no socially sanctioned right to protest whatever men choose to do.

The Rape of Belinda's honour is sanctioned because women are valued only as objects of beauty. In the same turn, Belinda, the Baron and the society they represent are obsessed with material thing such as the lock and self worship. We find that the women are just the commodity or objects of use in the hands of male. Who become their best admirer and user. They look at its outer beauty but have no dignity for them in their eyes. That's the scenario the male, the female and the society.

A satire on the superficial values of fashionable society in the reign of Queen Anne, Pope's " Rape of the Lock" criticizes the sterility and social vanity of a world in which appearances have actually become substitutes for things themselves, where virtue has been reduced to reputation and men themselves to sword knots The world of Hampton Court is imaged by Pope as a world of empty forms where people are dehumanized exteriors while, in the underground Cave of Spleen objects are alive: teapots live, goose pies talk.

Yet there are limits to Pope's satire on the irrational materialism of bourgeois values that objectify human beings by giving primacy to surface over

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substance. For even as Pope attacks drawing-room society for its sterile fetishism, in which women is made to function as the sign not of her own subjectivity but of a male desire of which she is the object. Pope's satire on a culture that objectifies individuals is itself a pretext for his own objectification of the female as the poem opens Belinda is presented as the very antithesis of social being. She is rather the embodiment of self narcissism.

The dominant image of narcissism is off course, our vision of the heroine worshipping her own image in the mirror as she performs the rites of the pride. The epic machinery of the poem further elaborates this idea, the sylph providing Pope yet another way of representing the autoerotic love of the coquette. As the spirits of dead coquette - as in effect, projection of Belinda's self-involvement as an involvement as an involvement with beings other than herself, with beings whose sex is conventionally, infinitely transformable. Thus, early in poem, Belinda's self love is identified with her desire for power and specifically, with her desire for the sort of the power she might obtain by avoiding the wedlock and its subjection of the female. Her lock becomes the metaphor for the pleasure she withholds from men in order to secure this type of power. As a product of her art, it is a part of the armour by which she makes herself invulnerable to men.

But as woman's only armour is the art by which she ornaments herself, Belinda's invulnerability as Pope portrays it contains the very seeds of i. e. indeed is an invitation to its own destruction. And, as we soon discover, Belinda is not invulnerable to men at all. Her power, on the contrary, is severely limited. Even her guardian sylphs are neither omniscient nor

omnipotent. Although Ariel knows enough to foretell some dread event in Belinda's ruling star, he cannot actually forestall the maiden's fate which is, ultimately, to have her chastity appropriated by a man. Despite their supernatural protectors, women are finally vulnerable to men; their natural vulnerability is built into the very super nature, or metaphysics, of Pope's poetic universe. It is this idea, this message that woman ultimately belongs to man and that, as such, she is not just a part but also an expression of him, Pope's poem repeatedly reaffirms by persistently collapsing Belinda's subjectivity into her status as an object, and specifically as an object of male desire and ownership. Manifestly, Belinda is at the centre of Pope's fictional universe, as she is as the belle of the ball at the centre of Hampton Court society where all eyes are fixed on her alone.

Dramatically speaking, the Baron seems to play a relatively insignificant role. As a presence in the poem he almost seems a kind of shadow of Belinda; he doesn't even have a proper name. Ideologically, however, it is Belinda who is situated on the margins of this text. For her visibility in the poem not only signals her nonexistence as a subject, but finally points to the latent, and more powerful, masculine presence of which she has been figured as the sign.

Female rivalry as rhetorical strategy: Although the central adversary relationship of the poem seems to be between Belinda and the Baron really want the same thing and ultimately stand not as rivals but as accomplices in its attainment. The conflict is instead between Belinda and Clarissa. Their rivalry is one of the central sustaining tensions of the poem. As equal but conflicting forces, these two females engage in a kind of horizontal hostility

which—far from representing an anti-male solidarity among women, as Earl Wasserman's view of the poem suggests it does—actually clears the ground on which woman's conquest by man is to be ritually enacted

The metaphysics of femininity: Pope seems to be positing a one-to-one correspondence between specific female types and their supernatural counterparts and, up to a point, the shape of his drama appears to confirm this structure of relationships. The sylph who derive from coquettes protect virgins in a continual efforts to perpetuate their kind while the gnomes, through the medium of their human embodiment in prudes, ever seek to tempt or otherwise damage female purity. Pope's female types are distinguished from one another not according to the kinds of elements present in their constitutions, but according to their relative degree. Belinda ultimately demonstrates a full range of nyphean, salamandrine and gnomonic qualities.

Pope's paradox of female power: In the mythic economy of the Rape female power is always self-consuming. In the linear progression of the poem, Belinda as an image of strength and wholeness gives way to Belinda as an image of impotent disarray; but in Pope's symbolic system, these two contradictory images are not so much one another's negations as they are complementary and mutually sustaining aspects of Pope's objectification of the female. Through such an objectification, Pope uses his heroine to reflect and reaffirm the passive sexual and economic role of women in mercantile society.

At the root of the myth of female power in Pope is the premise that female sexuality is responsible for the exercise of desire in both men and women.

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For, indeed, at the dramatic center of the Rape, where the Baron performs the action of a desiring subject— “ The’ Adventurous Baron the bright Locks admired He saw, he wished, and to the Prize aspired” Belinda is defined as both the object and the source of that desire:

“ This Nymph, to the Destruction of Mankind, Nourished two Locks, Which graceful, hung behind. In equal Curls, and well conspired to deck With shining Ringlets, the smooth Ivory Neck. Love in these Labyrinths his Slaves detains, And mighty Hearts are held in slender Chains. Fair Tresses Man's Imperial Race insane, And Beauty draws us with a single Hair.”

In the absence of any concept of female autonomy, Belinda's self-involvement and apparent indifference to the Baron are an automatic challenge to assault, her “ ravishing” beauty a passive-aggressive inducement to revenge.

Though the agency of the drama is located in the Baron, its motivation is situated in her. Belinda's status as a prime motivating force in the Rape is established in a variety of ways. In her glory she is likened to the sun, the bright centre of attention around whom “ Fair Nymphs, and well-dressed Youths” gather as mere satellites to envy and admire and over whom, saint-like, she impartially extends the benevolence of her smiles. She is a priestess at whose altar “ The various Offerings of the World “ unite, a Goddess who’s “ awful Beauty” assumes a grace beyond the reach of art. In her “ mighty Rage” toward “ Little Men” she is compared to Juno herself, the very Queen of Heaven who drove Aeneas through so many toils and perils. She is fickle and self-centred in herself adoration; she performs the “ Rites of pride” and this toy-shop belle ultimately shrinks under the invocation of Divinity.

Belinda's narcissism, while satirized according to propriety as unfeminine and subversive, is also glorified as keeping commerce in motion. Belinda as coquette occupies as basic and indispensable a place in the providential order. Of all the work regarded by the modern critical establishment as classics of English poetry, Pope's " Rape of the Lock" is perhaps the most liberal in its use of that synecdoche principle by which a part is made to stand for the whole.

In it women- whom it defines as mere appendage to man, her world a mere corner to his, represents the whole world in what amounts to a large scale repetition of that more basic equation by which Belinda's lock, the symbol of her chastity becomes a proxy to Belinda herself, where the fall of the china jar is given the same weight as the loss of lady's honour. In fact throughout the " Rape of the Lock" Pope is engaging in extended play on notion, already conventional in his day but to which his work gave new force, that women's entire value is tied up with her identity as a piece of property transferable among men.