

The rape of the lock



The Rape of the Lock Alexander Pope
What mighty contests rise from trivial things, I sing—This verse to Caryl, 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. Say what strange motive, Goddess! could compel A well-bred lord t' assault a gentle belle? O say what stranger cause, yet unexplor'd, Could make a gentle belle reject a lord? In tasks so bold, can little men engage, And in soft bosoms dwells such mighty rage? Sol thro' white curtains shot a tim'rous ray, And op'd those eyes that must eclipse the day;

Now lap-dogs give themselves the rousing shake, And sleepless lovers, just at twelve, awake: Thrice rung the bell, the slipper knock'd the ground, And the press'd watch return'd a silver sound. Belinda still her downy pillow press'd, Her guardian sylph prolong'd the balmy rest: 'Twas he had summon'd to her silent bed The morning dream that hover'd o'er her head; A youth more glitt'ring than a birthnight beau, (That ev'n in slumber caus'd her cheek to glow) Seem'd to her ear his winning lips to lay, And thus in whispers said, or seem'd to say. Analysis: Themes and Form

The Rape of the Lock is a humorous indictment of the vanities and idleness of 18th-century high society. Basing his poem on a real incident among families of his acquaintance, Pope intended his verses to cool hot tempers and to encourage his friends to laugh at their own folly. The poem is perhaps the most outstanding example in the English language of the genre of mock-epic. The epic had long been considered one of the most serious of literary forms; it had been applied, in the classical period, to the lofty subject matter

of love and war, and, more recently, by Milton, to the intricacies of the Christian faith.

The strategy of Pope's mock-epic is not to mock the form itself, but to mock his society in its very failure to rise to epic standards, exposing its pettiness by casting it against the grandeur of the traditional epic subjects and the bravery and fortitude 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 the trivial is handled with the gravity and solemnity that ought to be accorded to truly important issues.

The society on display in this poem is one that fails to distinguish between things that matter and things that do not. The poem mocks the men it portrays by showing them as unworthy of a form that suited a more heroic culture. Thus the mock-epic resembles the epic in that its central concerns are serious and often moral, but the fact that the approach must now be satirical rather than earnest is symptomatic of how far the culture has fallen. Pope's use of the mock-epic genre is intricate and exhaustive.

The Rape of the Lock is a poem in which every element of the contemporary scene conjures up some image from epic tradition or the classical world view, and the pieces are wrought together with a cleverness and expertise that makes the poem surprising and delightful. Pope's transformations are numerous, striking, and loaded with moral implications. The great battles of epic become bouts of gambling and flirtatious tiffs. The great, if capricious, Greek and Roman gods are converted into a relatively undifferentiated army of basically ineffectual sprites.

Cosmetics, clothing, and jewelry substitute for armor and weapons, and the rituals of religious sacrifice are transplanted to the dressing room and the altar of love. The verse form of *The Rape of the Lock* is the heroic couplet; Pope still reigns as the uncontested master of the form. The heroic couplet consists of rhymed pairs of iambic pentameter lines (lines of ten syllables each, alternating stressed and unstressed syllables). Pope's couplets do not fall into strict iambs, however, flowering instead with a rich rhythmic variation that keeps the highly regular meter from becoming eavy or tedious. Pope distributes his sentences, with their resolutely parallel grammar, across the lines and half-lines of the poem in a way that enhances the judicious quality of his ideas. Moreover, the inherent balance of the couplet form is strikingly well suited to a subject matter that draws on comparisons and contrasts: the form invites configurations in which two ideas or circumstances are balanced, measured, or compared against one another.

It is thus perfect for the evaluative, moralizing premise of the poem, particularly in the hands of this brilliant poet. Canto 1 Summary *The Rape of the Lock* begins with a passage outlining the subject of the poem and invoking the aid of the muse. Then the sun ("Sol") appears to initiate the leisurely morning routines of a wealthy household. Lapdogs shake themselves awake, bells begin to ring, and although it is already noon, Belinda still sleeps. She has been dreaming, and we learn that the dream has been sent by "her guardian Sylph," Ariel.

The dream is of a handsome youth who tells her that she is protected by "unnumber'd Spirits"—an army of supernatural beings who once lived on earth as human women. The youth explains that they are the invisible

guardians of women's chastity, although the credit is usually mistakenly given to "Honour" rather than to their divine stewardship. Of these Spirits, one particular group—the Sylphs, who dwell in the air—serve as Belinda's personal guardians; they are devoted, lover-like, to any woman that "rejects mankind," and they understand and reward the vanities of an elegant and frivolous lady like Belinda.

Ariel, the chief of all Belinda's puckish protectors, warns her in this dream that "some dread event" is going to befall her that day, though he can tell her nothing more specific than that she should "beware of Man!" Then Belinda awakes, to the licking tongue of her lapdog, Shock. Upon the delivery of a billet-doux, or love-letter, she forgets all about the dream. She then proceeds to her dressing table and goes through an elaborate ritual of dressing, in which her own image in the mirror is described as a "heavenly image," a "goddess. The Sylphs, unseen, assist their charge as she prepares herself for the day's activities. Commentary The opening of the poem establishes its mock-heroic style. Pope introduces the conventional epic subjects of love and war and includes an invocation to the muse and a dedication to the man (the historical John Caryll) who commissioned the poem. Yet the tone already indicates that the high seriousness of these traditional topics has suffered a diminishment.

The second line confirms in explicit terms what the first line already suggests: the "am'rous causes" the poem describes are not comparable to the grand love of Greek heroes but rather represent a trivialized version of that emotion. The "contests" Pope alludes to will prove to be "mighty" only in an ironic sense. They are card-games and flirtatious tussles, not the great

battles of epic tradition. Belinda is not, like Helen of Troy, “ the face that launched a thousand ships” (see the SparkNote on The Iliad), but rather a face that—although also beautiful—prompts a lot of foppish nonsense.

The first two verse-paragraphs emphasize the comic inappropriateness of the epic style (and corresponding mind-set) to the subject at hand. Pope achieves this discrepancy at the level of the line and half-line; the reader is meant to dwell on the incompatibility between the two sides of his parallel formulations. Thus, in this world, it is “ little men” who in “ tasks so bold... engage”; and “ soft bosoms” are the dwelling-place for “ mighty rage. ” In this startling juxtaposition of the petty and the grand, the former is real while the latter is ironic.

In mock-epic, the high heroic style works not to dignify the subject but rather to expose and ridicule it. Therefore, the basic irony of the style supports the substance of the poem’s satire, which attacks the misguided values of a society that takes small matters for serious ones while failing to attend to issues of genuine importance. With Belinda’s dream, Pope introduces the “ machinery” of the poem—the supernatural powers that influence the action from behind the scenes.

Here, the sprites that watch over Belinda are meant to mimic the gods of the Greek and Roman traditions, who are sometimes benevolent and sometimes malicious, but always intimately involved in earthly events. The scheme also makes use of other ancient hierarchies and systems of order. Ariel explains that women’s spirits, when they die, return “ to their first Elements. ” Each female personality type (these types correspond to the four humours) is

converted into a particular kind of sprite. These gnomes, sylphs, salamanders, and nymphs, in turn, are associated with the four elements of earth, air, fire, and water.

The airy sylphs are those who in their lifetimes were “light Coquettes”; they have a particular concern for Belinda because she is of this type, and this will be the aspect of feminine nature with which the poem is most concerned. Indeed, Pope already begins to sketch this character of the “coquette” in this initial canto. He draws the portrait indirectly, through characteristics of the Sylphs rather than of Belinda herself. Their priorities reveal that the central concerns of womanhood, at least for women of Belinda’s class, are social ones.

Woman’s “joy in gilded Chariots” indicates an obsession with pomp and superficial splendor, while “love of Ombre,” a fashionable card game, suggests frivolity. The erotic charge of this social world in turn prompts another central concern: the protection of chastity. These are women who value above all the prospect marrying to advantage, and they have learned at an early age how to promote themselves and manipulate their suitors without compromising themselves. The Sylphs become an allegory for the mannered conventions that govern female social behavior.

Principles like honor and chastity have become no more than another part of conventional interaction. Pope makes it clear that these women are not conducting themselves on the basis of abstract moral principles, but are governed by an elaborate social mechanism—of which the Sylphs cut a fitting caricature. And while Pope’s technique of employing supernatural

machinery allows him to critique this situation, it also helps to keep the satire light and to exonerate individual women from too severe a judgment.

If Belinda has all the typical female foibles, Pope wants us to recognize that it is partly because she has been educated and trained to act in this way.

The society as a whole is as much to blame as she is. Nor are men exempt from this judgment. The competition among the young lords for the attention of beautiful ladies is depicted as a battle of vanity, as “ wigs with wigs, with sword-knots sword-knots strive. ” Pope’s phrases here expose an absurd attention to exhibitions of pride and ostentation. He emphasizes the inanity of discriminating so closely between things and people that are essentially the same in all important (and even most unimportant) respects. Pope’s portrayal of Belinda at her dressing table introduces mock-heroic motifs that will run through the poem. The scene of her toilette is rendered first as a religious sacrament, in which Belinda herself is the priestess and her image in the looking glass is the Goddess she serves. This parody of the religious rites before a battle gives way, then, to another kind of mock-epic scene, that of the ritualized arming of the hero. Combs, pins, and cosmetics take the place of weapons as “ awful Beauty puts on all its arms. ”