

# Appearing holy in a superficial society



**ASSIGN  
BUSTER**

The gorgeous and charming protagonist Belinda of “ Rape of the Lock” by Alexander Pope goes to great lengths to beautify her outer appearance. Pope’s description of her elaborate beauty ritual is a clear sign of this- her primping process is detailed in a flurry of seemingly superficial trinkets, and amidst all of it are Bibles, grouped with the “ Puffs, powders, [and] patches” (138). The wedging of the Bibles between baubles and beauty items has been interpreted to represent the divide between Pope’s Catholic and Protestant England, which is a contextual and symbolic understanding of the religious symbol. An article by Alex Hernandez explains this point, “ The Bible, to some extent, came to absorb and encompass these tensions...” While I agree with this point, but believe it is overindulged in his essay. I argue that the Bible’s placement amid the beauty items bears a stronger usage, which is actually Belinda’s method of appearing moral among her superficiality. Although Hernandez’s essay effectively explicates the importance of the Bible among Belinda’s superficial trinkets to be the contradiction of Catholicism and Protestantism in his society, nevertheless I dissent that the Bible is actually not as imaginative as it is representative, and more significantly, Belinda uses the Bible and her cross necklace to portray an ethical appearance amidst her own vanity.

Hernandez does provide some reasoning as to how Belinda’s Bible connects to deceptive religiousness and ultimately shows how the abundance of personal trinkets such as her ivory and tortoise shell combs display her consumerism. Yet the more thoroughly elaborated point of his essay is regarding the Catholicism and Protestantism of 18th-century England tying into symbols in “ Rape of the Lock.” Thus, I will elucidate more on the idea

that items such as the Bible and cross Belinda wears not only show her own desire to be seen as devout, but can also be representative of the public's attitude of superficial religiousness during her time period. Belinda's possession of these religious symbols, as well as her desire to be seen as pious, will assist in my explanation of Belinda's facade.

The first insight given to signify the insincere religiousness of Belinda is the Bible sitting among her beauty items. Among Belinda's gewgaws surrounding the Bible are gems, shell and ivory combs, hair pins, puffs, powders, patches, and love letters. Many of these items represent youthfulness, or rather tools for youthfulness. Whereas these are tools used to attempt to gain a youthful appearance, the Bible is similarly used as a tool to gain a moral appearance. Just as " Betty's praised for labors not her own," Belinda may be praised for simply having the Bible (Canto 1, Line 3).

Although we can consider that Belinda is making an earnest effort to be religious and faithful by possessing and actually reading the Bible, we as readers inherently understand the deceptive nature of the ownership of the scripture. Belinda likely never cracked open the book, as we can tell by its ironic placement among her trinkets. This Bible's placement shows Belinda's view of it- it is ranked among her beauty tools and novelties. The reader can infer from this that Belinda views the Bible as no more than one of her showy, beautiful combs or her cosmetics. If Belinda was truly a devout, avid Bible reader as she would likely prefer to portray, she might have had her holy book residing on her table or desk rather than on her dressing table. In seeing Pope's deliberate description of where Belinda stores her Bible, we can interpret her spirituality to be lacking, like many other members of her

society, which she reunites with in later in the poem. Belinda's Bible in plain sight blending with her "glittering spoil" is representative of her own desire to be recognized as ethical, yet naturally being more drawn to her vanity items. This is not to say that Belinda was a completely unethical outright sinner, but she blatantly is ignorant to, or chooses to ignore, one of the most important themes of the Bible: humility (at least regarding her physical appearance.)

A direct comparison can be made between the Bible amidst Belinda's vain beauty supplies and the "sparkling cross she wore [on her white breast]" among her vain appearance (Canto 2, Line 7). Both of these are used by Belinda to keep up a moral front, especially the cross, which seems like it is being worn and exploited by Belinda for its religious meaning, not because she is a pious young woman. In the case of the cross, the placement is as significant as the Bible's and can be interpreted as the opposite of what the holy cross represents because while "every eye was fixed on her alone," the cross drew attention to her breast (Canto 2, Line 6). Belinda wearing the cross on her white breast further pushes the idea of her chastity and morality, yet this hint of religion is clearly more visible to the public. When she is in her own abode, the narrator informs us of the Bible which otherwise would not be noted by the other "high society" characters in the story in relation to Belinda. The cross is Pope's way of showcasing Belinda's attempts to prove her holiness, but in a more outright way than the Bible among the makeup. Whereas the Bible's placement in the poem is for the benefit of the reader, the appearance of the cross on Belinda's breast is for the benefit of the other characters in the story. These two items are especially attention-

grabbing because of the heavy weight they held during Belinda's time period. The Bible and cross accentuated Belinda's appearance by adding a religious element to her, which combined with her undeniable beauty to make her even more desirable 18th century woman.

Although I do not disagree with Hernandez's claim that Pope revealed religious sentiments for his time period through Belinda and her society circle by using the Bible and the cross, I argue that the more intentional and noteworthy purpose of the religious symbols is to show how society members presented themselves as pious worshippers, but in reality simply wanted to appear like they were devout so that they could focus on other worldly things. For example, when Belinda is in the process of getting ready for her outing at Hampton Court, it is made into essentially a religious ritual. Pope compares the women to religious figures in the church when he writes, "The inferior priestess, at her altar's side, Trembling begins the sacred rites of Pride" (Canto 1, Lines 127-128). This blatant comparison in the form of satire reveals how highly the women regarded their beauty and beautification routines. Along with linking the glamorization of Belinda to a sacred ceremony, this extended metaphor reveals how seriously and highly regarded this process was for women, in Pope's eyes, instead of a real religious ceremony. In this moment, and when Pope inserted the Bible and cross as ornaments, I do not believe Pope was attempting to make so much a claim about the religious diversity of his time, but rather a more focused, person-level approach at the people of his time who want to be seen as religious, but really are more devout to consumerism and beautification. Belinda (and her society's) desire to be recognized as religious is not simply

for the gain of looking pious to the social sphere, it is also for the gain of becoming more attractive to potential partners as religion was such a significant topic for the time period. Once again, if Belinda was truly a religious woman who studied the Bible, she would not be portrayed as proud. Belinda allows much too much effort to be put into her appearance to be regarded as humble as the Bible would preach.

The Bible, cross jewelry, and metaphor of the beauty or religious ritual all contribute to the significance of appearance and merits of being perceived as religious in Belinda's society. The Bible's placement was a very direct way of likening it to the superficial trinkets it was situated with, the holy cross weaving into Belinda's gorgeous and non-humble appearance was also a direct way to bring Belinda even more attention, not just for her perfect beauty, but her religiousness as well. These religious symbols helped Belinda to have the best of both worlds- she may appear as a devout young woman who reads the Bible and adorns crosses, yet can also be the gorgeous center of attention as she does not abide by the humility principle of the Bible. Belinda synthesizes the best of both worlds- appearing religious and gaining social adoration for her delightful outer appearance. This is not to imply Belinda was immoral because she valued an appearance over the effort of true piousness, she is simply more focused on her appearance and worldly things at Hampton Court than actually carrying out the devout image she is expected to uphold. Ultimately, Belinda's religious items and her deception of holiness reveal the society she lives in. As Hernandez writes, "[The Bible] becomes an ideological tool for a rapidly industrializing society." Belinda utilizes this tool outwardly (in the form of the cross jewelry), in order to

advance her social status, increase her desirability, and prove she was a well rounded, beautiful woman, who was also ethical and chaste because of her connection to religion. Belinda's godly symbols make it possible for her to appear extremely appealing, yet also to portray the notion that she is a moral, desirable woman.

## **Works Cited**

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