

The Rape of the Lock

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Abstract

In *The Rape of the Lock*, Pope satirises the trivialities of London high society and the absurdities of epic conventions. The mock-epic style allows him to ridicule the poem's characters by ostensibly elevating their petty disputes and jealousies into a grand narrative. The poem both conforms to, and perhaps mockingly subverts, traditional gendered roles, as Belinda is shown both as a hero, or goddess, arming herself for battle and as a frivolous and vain woman. Yet in adapting the conventions of epic to the world of eighteenth-century London, Pope also draws attention to the absurdities and contradictions that are present in epic poetry. He examines the feminisation of epic heroes, and depicts tensions between male and female roles. Pope thus exposes the frivolity of men and women in his society, and also confronts anxieties about women desiring power over men.

The Rape of the Lock mocks the triviality of eighteenth-century London society, yet also exposes the inherent absurdities of epic poetry itself. Belinda is credulous and almost infantilised, but is nevertheless the central character of the poem. Belinda's importance could be part of Pope's subversion of epic, as he suggests that it is unnatural for women and their 'soft bosoms' to experience the epic quality of 'mighty rage'.¹ It is significant that this line

1 Alexander Pope. 1993. 'The Rape of the Lock.' In *The Oxford Authors: Alexander Pope*, ed. Pat Rogers, 77–100. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1.12. Further references to canto and line numbers are given in text, as *RL*.

recalls the phrase at the beginning of the *Aeneid*, ‘Can heavenly spirits cherish resentment so dire?’² Belinda’s rage here is mockingly compared to that of the goddess Juno, who attempts to thwart Aeneas’ journey to Italy. Belinda’s fury at the loss of her lock of hair is also similar to that of Dido, Queen of Carthage, whom Juno attempts to protect. The beginning of Canto IV, ‘But anxious care the pensive nymph oppressed’, recalls Book IV of the *Aeneid*, which, in Dryden’s translation, opens with the line, ‘But anxious cares already seized the Queen’.³ Pope mockingly compares Belinda’s rage to Dido’s frenzied despair when Aeneas abandons her. Belinda’s ‘screams of horror’, which ‘rend the affrighted skies’ when her hair is cut, resemble the ‘loud cries’ with which ‘the sounding palace shook’ and which ‘mount the vaulted skies’ at Dido’s suicide (*RL*, 3.156; *A.*, 955, 961).

Moreover, Belinda’s loss of the lock and Dido’s suicide are compared to the fall of a great city. Pope likens the Baron’s scissors to ‘steel’ that could ‘strike to dust the imperial towers of Troy’ (*RL*, 3.173–74), while the lamentations following Dido’s death are compared to the ‘clamour’ of ‘ancient Tyre’ or ‘new Carthage, set by foes on fire’ (*A.*, 962–63). This similarity implies that Pope is mocking not only Belinda’s hyperbole but also the extravagant emotions of true epic poetry. Pope could be suggesting that Dido’s extreme reaction to Aeneas’ departure is in some ways as overblown as Belinda’s. Indeed, Williams has argued that Pope was aware that classical epic could contain moments of ‘the trivial or burlesque’.⁴ In the dedication, Pope states that ‘the ancient poets’ make incidents ‘appear of the utmost importance’ that are ‘never so trivial in themselves’.⁵ Although this is evidently a jocular passage, it could also indicate that Pope was aware that epic poetry itself could be a target for mockery.

Weinbrot has shown that criticisms of epic poetry, and especially of Homer’s, became more common throughout the seventeenth century. Homer’s plots were regarded as weak and incoherent, and the language of the gods and heroes

2 Virgil. 1916. *Eclagues. Georgics. Aeneid: Books 1–6*. Trans. H. Rushton Fairclough, rev. by G.P. Goold. Loeb Classical Library 63. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1.11.

3 John Dryden. 1987. ‘The Fourth Books of the Aeneis.’ In *The Works of Virgil in English*, ed. William Frost. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 4.1 Further references to line numbers are given in text, as *A.*

4 Carolyn D. Williams. 1990. ‘Breaking Decorums: Belinda, Bays and Epic Effeminacy.’ In *Pope: New Contexts*, ed. David Fairer. Hemel Hempstead, Herts: Harvester Wheatsheaf, p. 70.

5 Alexander Pope. 1993. Dedication to ‘The Rape of the Lock.’ In *The Oxford Authors: Alexander Pope*, ed. Pat Rogers, 77–100. Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 77–78.

as insufficiently elevated. Both the gods and men were seen as barbarous and cruel, and the graphic descriptions of warfare distasteful.⁶ Thus, Pope's use of epic conventions is not altogether positive, and the contrast between modern and ancient ways of life sometimes reflects poorly on both. The syntactical inversion of the opening lines, ending with 'I sing', recalls the opening line of the *Aeneid*, 'arma virumque cano'.⁷ Pope ostensibly sets out to explore not arms and the deeds of men, but the petty disputes of upper-class men and women in contemporary London. The incongruity between Belinda's confined world of bedroom, boudoir and court, and the epic scale of her beauty and her emotions demonstrates the superficiality of Belinda's world.

Pope describes Belinda as a 'goddess' decked with 'glittering spoil', arming herself for battle (*RL*, 1.132). The scene mockingly recalls heroes equipping themselves for battle. Belinda's petticoat is imaged as a 'seven-fold fence' that is 'stiff with hoops, and armed with ribs of whale' and has a 'silver bound' (*RL*, 2.119–21). This protective undergarment resembles the shields of epic heroes, including Ajax's 'sevenfold shield', and Achilles' 'broad shield', which is surrounded by 'living silver'.⁸ The comparison of a warrior's shield to a woman's petticoat connotes the inconsequentiality of Belinda's world. Yet it is important to note that Achilles' shield is extremely decorative and, like Belinda's dress, seems designed for show as much as for protection. Achilles' armour was forged, at Thetis' request, by Vulcan, who claims that Achilles would have the 'most envy'd Arms, the Gaze/Of wondering Ages and the World's Amaze!' (*Il.* 18.535–36) Indeed, Achilles is frequently feminised by his association with appearance and disguise.⁹ Although not present in the *Iliad*, the story of Achilles' mother Thetis disguising him as a girl in order to protect him from the war was well known at the time.¹⁰ Thus, in drawing similarities between the epic hero and the frivolous Belinda, Pope exposes both characters' absurd interest in outward show and blurs the distinctions between feminine and masculine behaviour.

6 Howard D. Weinbrot. 1988. 'The Rape of the Lock and the Contexts of Warfare.' In *Eighteenth-Century Satire: Essays on Text and Context from Dryden to Peter Pindar*, 100–119. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 101–3.

7 Virgil, *Eclogues. Georgics. Aeneid: Books 1–6*, 1.1.

8 Alexander Pope. 1967. *The Iliad of Homer: Books I–IX*, ed. Maynard Mack. London: Methuen, 7.296; Alexander Pope. 1967. *The Iliad of Homer: Books X–XXIV*, ed. Maynard Mack. London: Methuen, 18.701–3. Further references to book and line numbers are given in text, as *Il.*

9 Carolyn D. Williams. 1993. *Pope, Homer, and Manliness*. London: Routledge, pp. 176–7.

10 Williams, 'Breaking Decorums', p. 63.

Moreover, the dispute between the Baron and Belinda mirrors Agamemnon and Achilles' struggle over the slave-girl Briseis.¹¹ Achilles experiences a blow to his pride when Briseis is snatched away, just as Belinda is perceived to have lost her honour when her lock is cut. By comparing Achilles' rage, which fuels much of the *Iliad*, to a drawing-room quarrel, Pope deflates Belinda's and Achilles' histrionics. He thus underlines the similarities between the extravagant emotions of epic and the excessive reactions of the characters in *The Rape of the Lock*. Indeed, Ferguson argues that Pope's depiction of the ramifications of his characters' anger and fear resemble those of the *Iliad*.¹² Just as Achilles sheds 'tears of anger and disdain' (*Il.*, 1.458), Belinda feels 'rage, resentment and despair' at the cutting of her lock (*RL*, 4.9). Belinda, like Achilles, surrenders to her passion, which can ultimately only be detrimental to her. Pope disapprovingly wrote in a note to his translation of the *Iliad* that Achilles 'lets his anger prevail' over his desire for glory (*Il.*, 9.530n). Indeed, Pope maintained that 'the chief moral of Homer was to expose the ill-effects of discord', and that Achilles' anger is contrasted with the perfectly manly Hector, who is 'unruffled by rage' and displays 'temperance' (*Il.*, 3.53n). Pope's disdain for Achilles' feminised emotions could demonstrate his anxieties about epic poetry, which did not always present truly masculine heroes. Thus, Williams argues that *The Rape of the Lock* illustrates the entwining of the trivial and the serious in epic poetry.¹³

The Baron is also depicted as an effete and rather feckless man of the court.¹⁴ He needs female assistance to be able to cut Belinda's lock, as Clarissa 'present[s] the spear' and 'arm[s] him for the fight' (*RL*, 3.130). This perhaps recalls Thetis offering Achilles his armour, and Venus arming Aeneas. The Baron's triumphant speech after the cutting of the lock recalls Achilles' oath that he would no longer fight for the Greeks after his dispute with Agamemnon. The Baron swears 'on this sacred lock', just as Achilles vows 'by this sacred sceptre' (*RL*, 4.133; *Il.*, 1.309). Thus, the prize of Belinda's hair is compared to an object of religious authority, suggesting both the Baron's power over Belinda but also his overweening passion. Yet the comparison is ironic, since

11 George deForest Lord. 1987. *Classical Presences in Seventeenth-Century Poetry*. New Haven: Yale University Press, p. 173.

12 Sarah Ferguson. 1986. *The Unbalanced Mind: Pope and the Rule of Passion*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, p. 42.

13 Williams, 'Breaking Decorums', p. 70.

14 David B. Morris. 1984. *Alexander Pope: The Genius of Sense*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, pp. 92–3.

Achilles swears not to fight, while the Baron's oath provokes a parodic battle between the sexes. The sexual innuendo of the Baron who 'sought no more than on his foe to die' mocks the polite society in which men can be 'killed ... with a frown' (*RL*, 5.78, 68). Pope also continues to expose the absurdities of epic itself. The war of the *Iliad* stems from causes not entirely removed from those of *The Rape of the Lock* – a beauty contest between three goddesses and the abduction or seduction of Helen.¹⁵ As we have seen, heroes such as Achilles and Agamemnon are interested not only in prowess on the battlefield but also in the possession and conquest of women. Thus, in his parody of an epic battle, Pope exposes the similarities as well as incongruities between the battlefield and the court. He discloses the contradictory and exaggerated emotionality of traditional epic poetry, while simultaneously deflating the importance of contemporary society and its ridiculous preoccupations.

In tandem with his feminisation of epic heroes and of the Baron, Pope explores the trivial and ultimately powerless lives of women in eighteenth-century society. He attacks women as commercial and shallow, and suggests that they use religion as a part of their adornment. The 'cosmetic powers' that Belinda 'adores/With head uncovered', in a mockery of a religious ceremony, suggest society's worship of the veneer of appearance (*RL*, 1. 123–24). The intrusion of 'bibles' in the otherwise alliterative catalogue of '[p]uffs, powders, patches' reinforces the superficiality of religion in Belinda's society (*RL*, 1.138). The purportedly religious nature of society is constantly undercut by sacrilegious uses of Christian symbolism and overtly pagan references. Belinda's divine appearance as one who is the 'rival of [the Sun's] beams' portrays her as an idol to be worshipped, perhaps above God (*RL*, 2.3). Indeed, Belinda treats a sacred object as an ornament in wearing her 'sparkling cross', which 'Jews might kiss and infidels adore' (*RL*, 2.7–8). Belinda's blend of Christian and pagan religion is also evident in her despairing speech after the 'rape'. She begins by lamenting that she should have 'said [her] prayers at home', yet immediately afterwards turns to a superstitious belief in 'omens' and 'mystic visions' in an attempt to understand her fate (*RL*, 4.160–61, 166).

Pope's presentation of the sylphs and gnomes also melds different belief systems, as the supernatural creatures seem to be modelled both on Olympian deities and on Milton's angels and devils. Ferguson has argued that 'superstition' is the

15 Helen Deutsch. 1996. *Resemblance and Disgrace: Alexander Pope and the Deformation of Culture*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, p. 41.

main governing force of these beings, who instil ‘destructive passions’ into the characters of the poem.¹⁶ Yet there are also significant parallels between Ariel and Satan, especially in Ariel’s speech to Belinda in her dream, which resembles Satan’s temptation of Eve.¹⁷ Ariel flatters Belinda, telling her that she is the ‘fairest of mortals’ and that she should ‘[her] own importance know’ (*RL*, 1.27, 35). This echoes Satan’s blandishments in *Paradise Lost* in which he claims that there is ‘no fair to [Eve’s]/equivalent or second’ and that she should be ‘a goddess among gods’ and ‘empress of this fair world’.¹⁸ Ariel’s repetition of the word ‘know’, as he tells Belinda to ‘know, then’ and ‘know further yet’, recalls the serpent tempting Eve with knowledge (*RL*, 1.41, 67).

Ariel’s confidences turn out to be just as false as Satan’s guileful words. Ariel speaks disingenuously when he reassures Belinda that she is being looked after by a ‘thousand bright inhabitants of air’, since Ariel and the sylphs will abandon Belinda when she is in danger from the Baron (*RL*, 1.28). Moreover, Ariel sets himself to be ‘the guard of Shock’, leaving Belinda’s ‘favourite lock’ to the diminutively named sylph Crispissa (*RL*, 2.115–16). Ariel’s satanic power over Belinda could suggest that she is a victim of a society that forces women into frivolity and flirtatiousness. The curl of Belinda’s lock could even recall Eve’s ‘golden tresses’ that ‘in wanton ringlets waved’ (*PL*, 4.305–6). Eve’s hair seems here to almost prefigure her temptation and fall, as ‘wanton’ implies both ‘unrestrained’, but also immodest or lustful.¹⁹ Belinda’s ‘shining ringlets’ and ‘fair tresses’ similarly demonstrate her dissipation, since it is they that ‘ensnare’ the Baron, suggesting Belinda’s role as temptress (*RL*, 2.22, 27). Indeed, Fairer argues that the curl of Belinda’s hair also recalls Satan’s sinuous movements as he entangles Eve in sin.²⁰

In her Eve-like longing for supremacy, Belinda demonstrates male anxieties about female power, especially as it might be used to entrap men. During the round of ombre, Belinda initially revels in her role of goddess, biblically crying, ‘Let Spades be trumps!’ (*RL*, 3.16). Her eventual triumph implies

16 Ferguson, *Unbalanced Mind*, p. 42.

17 Kent Beyette. 1976. ‘Milton and Pope’s *The Rape of the Lock*.’ *Studies in English Literature, 1500–1900* 16(3): 426.

18 John Milton. 2004. *Paradise Lost*, ed. Stephen Orgel and Jonathon Goldberg. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 9.608–9, 547, 567. Further references to book and line numbers are given in text, as *PL*.

19 Milton, *Paradise Lost*, 4.306n.

20 David Fairer. 1979. ‘Imagination in *The Rape of the Lock*.’ *Essays in Criticism* 29(1): 65.

a sexual dominance, as the Baron's Ace of Hearts is crushed by Belinda's card, which 'falls like thunder on the prostrate Ace' (*RL*, 3. 98). Belinda celebrates her triumph in a suitably deific manner, as her 'exulting fills with shouts the sky', while the 'walls, the woods, and long canals reply', just as natural features echo shouts in epic poetry (*RL*, 3.99). Yet she does not long enjoy her celebratory feast before she is punished for her pride and for her attempt to usurp masculine power. Moreover, Umbriel's collection of '[s]ighs, sobs, and passions', which he gathers during his mock descent to the Underworld, removes all agency from Belinda, and makes sure that she will succumb to her feminine emotions (*RL*, 4.86). In this respect, she resembles epic heroes and heroines whose lives are dictated by the gods, rather than Adam and Eve who are supposed to be 'free to fall' (*PL*, 3.99). The final stellification of Belinda's hair reminds the reader once again of the absurd pretensions of Belinda and her society. Yet it also makes clear just how narrow the gap is between the absurd events of *The Rape of the Lock* and those of epic and classical poetry.

Pope thus constructs a poem that mocks the extravagant affectations of eighteenth-century society and of epic heroes and heroines. Pope satirises Belinda's emotionality and obsession with her appearance, but makes it clear that the characters of epic poetry share these same qualities. He also discloses anxieties about gender roles and the questionable masculinity of epic heroes. Ultimately, Pope achieves a satiric portrayal of the trivial and superficial concerns of men and women, whether in ancient or contemporary times.

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