

The Rape of the Lock

ALEXANDER POPE

Context

Alexander Pope was born in London in 1688. As a Roman Catholic living during a time of Protestant consolidation in England, he was largely excluded from the university system and from political life, and suffered certain social and economic disadvantages because of his religion as well. He was self-taught to a great extent, and was an assiduous scholar from a very early age. He learned several languages on his own, and his early verses were often imitations of poets he admired. His obvious talent found encouragement from his father, a linen-draper, as well as from literary-minded friends. At the age of twelve, Pope contracted a form of tuberculosis that settled in his spine, leaving him stunted and misshapen and causing him great pain for much of his life. He never married, though he formed a number of lifelong friendships in London's literary circles, most notably with Jonathan Swift.

Pope wrote during what is often called the Augustan Age of English literature (indeed, it is Pope's career that defines the age). During this time, the nation had recovered from the English Civil Wars and the Glorious Revolution, and the regained sense of political stability led to a resurgence of support for the arts. For this reason, many compared the period to the reign of Augustus in Rome, under whom both Virgil and Horace had found support for their work. The prevailing taste of the day was neoclassical, and 18th-century English writers tended to value poetry that was learned and allusive, setting less value on originality than the Romantics would in the next century. This literature also tended to be morally and often politically engaged, privileging satire as its dominant mode.

The Rape of the Lock is one of the most famous English-language examples of the mock-epic. Published in its first version in 1712, when Pope was only 23 years old, the poem served to forge his reputation as a poet and remains his most frequently studied work. The inspiration for the poem was an actual incident among Pope's acquaintances in which Robert, Lord Petre, cut off a lock of Arabella Fermor's hair, and the young people's families fell into strife as a result. John Caryll, another member of this same circle of prominent Roman Catholics, asked Pope to write a light poem that would put the episode into a humorous perspective and reconcile the two families. The poem was originally published in a shorter version, which Pope later revised. In this later version he added the "machinery," the retinue of supernaturals who influence the action as well as the moral of the tale.

After the publication of *The Rape of the Lock*, Pope spent many years translating the works of Homer. During the ten years he devoted to this arduous project, he produced very few new poems of his own but refined his taste in literature (and his moral, social, and political opinions) to an incredible degree. When he later recommenced to write original poetry, Pope struck a more serious tone than the one he gave to *The Rape of the Lock*. These later poems are more severe in their moral judgments and more acid in their

satire: Pope's *Essay on Man* is a philosophical poem on metaphysics, ethics, and human nature, while in the *Dunciad* Pope writes a scathing exposé of the bad writers and pseudo-intellectuals of his day.

Summary

Belinda arises to prepare for the day's social activities after sleeping late. Her guardian sylph, Ariel, warned her in a dream that some disaster will befall her, and promises to protect her to the best of his abilities. Belinda takes little notice of this oracle, however. After an elaborate ritual of dressing and primping, she travels on the Thames River to Hampton Court Palace, an ancient royal residence outside of London, where a group of wealthy young socialites are gathering for a party. Among them is the Baron, who has already made up his mind to steal a lock of Belinda's hair. He has risen early to perform an elaborate set of prayers and sacrifices to promote success in this enterprise. When the partygoers arrive at the palace, they enjoy a tense game of cards, which Pope describes in mock-heroic terms as a battle. This is followed by a round of coffee. Then the Baron takes up a pair of scissors and manages, on the third try, to cut off the coveted lock of Belinda's hair. Belinda is furious. Umbriel, a mischievous gnome, journeys down to the Cave of Spleen to procure a sack of sighs and a flask of tears which he then bestows on the heroine to fan the flames of her ire. Clarissa, who had aided the Baron in his crime, now urges Belinda to give up her anger in favor of good humor and good sense, moral qualities which will outlast her vanities. But Clarissa's moralizing falls on deaf ears, and Belinda initiates a scuffle between the ladies and the gentlemen, in which she attempts to recover the severed curl. The lock is lost in the confusion of this mock battle, however; the poet consoles the bereft Belinda with the suggestion that it has been taken up into the heavens and immortalized as a constellation.

Characters

Belinda - Belinda is based on the historical Arabella Fermor, a member of Pope's circle of prominent Roman Catholics. Robert, Lord Petre (the Baron in the poem) had precipitated a rift between their two families by snipping off a lock of her hair.

The Baron - This is the pseudonym for the historical Robert, Lord Petre, the young gentleman in Pope's social circle who offended Arabella Fermor and her family by cutting off a lock of her hair. In the poem's version of events, Arabella is known as Belinda.

Caryl - The historical basis for the Caryl character is John Caryl, a friend of Pope and of the two families that had become estranged over the incident the poem relates. It was Caryl who suggested that Pope encourage a reconciliation by writing a humorous poem.

Goddess - The muse who, according to classical convention, inspires poets to write their verses

Shock - Belinda's lapdog

Ariel - Belinda's guardian sylph, who oversees an army of invisible protective deities

Umbriel - The chief gnome, who travels to the Cave of Spleen and returns with bundles of sighs and tears to aggravate Belinda's vexation

Brillante - The sylph who is assigned to guard Belinda's earrings

Momentilla - The sylph who is assigned to guard Belinda's watch

Crispissa - The sylph who is assigned to guard Belinda's "fav'rite Lock"

Clarissa - A woman in attendance at the Hampton Court party. She lends the Baron the pair of scissors with which he cuts Belinda's hair, and later delivers a moralizing lecture.

Thalestris - Belinda's friend, named for the Queen of the Amazons and representing the historical Gertrude Morley, a friend of Pope's and the wife of Sir George Browne (rendered as her "beau," Sir Plume, in the poem). She eggs Belinda on in her anger and demands that the lock be returned.

Sir Plume - Thalestris's "beau," who makes an ineffectual challenge to the Baron. He represents the historical Sir George Browne, a member of Pope's social circle.

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 heavy 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 Caryl) 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."

Canto 2

Summary

Belinda, rivaling the sun in her radiance, sets out by boat on the river Thames for Hampton Court Palace. She is accompanied by a party of glitzy ladies ("Nymphs") and gentlemen, but is far and away the most striking member of the group. Pope's description of her charms includes "the sparkling Cross she wore" on her "white breast," her "quick" eyes and "lively looks," and the easy grace with which she bestows her smiles and attentions evenly among all the adoring guests. Her crowning glories, though, are the two ringlets that dangle on her "iv'ry neck." These curls are described as love's labyrinths, specifically designed to ensnare any poor heart who might get entangled in them.

One of the young gentlemen on the boat, the Baron, particularly admires Belinda's locks, and has determined to steal them for himself. We read that he rose early that morning to build an altar to love and pray for success in this project. He sacrificed several tokens of his former affections, including garters, gloves, and billet-doux (love-letters). He then prostrated himself before a pyre built with "all the trophies of his former loves," fanning its flames with his "am'rous sighs." The gods listened to his prayer but decided to grant only half of it.

As the pleasure-boat continues on its way, everyone is carefree except Ariel, who remembers that some bad event has been foretold for the day. He summons an army of sylphs, who assemble around him in their iridescent beauty. He reminds them with great ceremony that one of their duties, after regulating celestial bodies and the weather and guarding the British monarch, is "to tend the Fair": to keep watch over ladies' powders, perfumes, curls, and clothing, and to "assist their blushes, and inspire their airs." Therefore, since "some dire disaster" threatens Belinda, Ariel assigns her an extensive troop of bodyguards. Brillante is to guard her earrings, Momentilla her watch, and Crispissa her locks. Ariel himself will protect Shock, the lapdog. A band of fifty Sylphs will guard the all-important petticoat. Ariel pronounces that any sylph who neglects his assigned duty will be severely punished. They disperse to their posts and wait for fate to unfold.

Commentary

From the first, Pope describes Belinda's beauty as something divine, an assessment which she herself corroborates in the first canto when she creates, at least metaphorically, an altar to her own image. This praise is certainly in some sense ironical, reflecting negatively on a system of public values in which external characteristics rank higher than moral or intellectual ones. But Pope also shows a real reverence for his heroine's physical and social charms, claiming in lines 17-18 that these are compelling enough to cause one to forget her "female errors." Certainly he has some interest in flattering Arabella Fermor, the real-life woman on whom Belinda is based; in order for his poem to achieve the desired reconciliation, it must not offend (see "Context"). Pope also exhibits his appreciation for the ways in which physical beauty is an art form: he recognizes, with a mixture of censure and awe, the fact that Belinda's legendary locks of hair, which appear so natural and spontaneous, are actually a carefully contrived effect. In this, the mysteries of the lady's dressing table are akin, perhaps, to Pope's own literary art, which he describes elsewhere as "nature to advantage dress'd."

If the secret mechanisms and techniques of female beauty get at least a passing nod of appreciation from the author, he nevertheless suggests that the general human readiness to worship beauty amounts to a kind of sacrilege. The cross that Belinda wears around her neck serves a more ornamental than symbolic or religious function. Because of this, he says, it can be adored by "Jews" and "Infidels" as readily as by Christians. And there is some ambiguity about whether any of the admirers are really valuing the cross itself, or the "white breast" on which it lies--or the felicitous effect of the whole. The Baron, of course, is the most significant of those who worship at the altar of Belinda's beauty. The ritual sacrifices he performs in the pre-dawn hours are another mock-heroic element of the poem, mimicking the epic tradition of sacrificing to the gods before an important battle or journey, and drapes his project with an absurdly grand import that actually only exposes its triviality. The fact that he discards all his other love tokens in these preparations reveals his capriciousness as a lover. Earnest prayer, in this parodic scene, is replaced by the self-indulgent sighs of the lover. By having the gods grant only half of what the Baron asks, Pope alludes to the epic convention by which the favor of the gods is only a mixed blessing: in epic poems, to win the sponsorship of one god is to incur the wrath of another; divine gifts, such as immortality, can seem a blessing but become a curse. Yet in this poem, the ramifications of a prayer "half" granted are negligible rather than tragic; it merely means that he will manage to steal just one lock rather than both of them.

In the first canto, the religious imagery surrounding Belinda's grooming rituals gave way to a militaristic conceit. Here, the same pattern holds. Her curls are compared to a trap perfectly calibrated to ensnare the enemy. Yet the character of female coyness is such that it seeks simultaneously to attract and repel, so that the counterpart to the enticing ringlets is the formidable petticoat. This undergarment is described as a defensive armament comparable to the Shield of Achilles (see Scroll XVIII of *The Iliad*), and supported in its function of protecting the maiden's chastity by the invisible might of fifty Sylphs. The Sylphs, who are Belinda's protectors, are essentially charged to protect her not from failure but from too great a success in attracting men. This paradoxical situation dramatizes the contradictory values and motives implied in the era's sexual conventions.

In this canto, the sexual allegory of the poem begins to come into fuller view. The title of the poem already associates the cutting of Belinda's hair with a more explicit sexual conquest, and here Pope cultivates that suggestion. He multiplies his sexually metaphorical language for the incident, adding words like "ravish" and "betray" to the "rape" of the title. He also slips in some commentary on the implications of his society's sexual mores, as when he remarks that "when success a Lover's toil attends, / few ask, if fraud or force attain'd his ends." When Ariel speculates about the possible forms the "dire disaster" might take, he includes a breach of chastity ("Diana's law"), the breaking of china (another allusion to the loss of virginity), and the staining of honor or a gown (the two incommensurate events could happen equally easily and accidentally). He also mentions some pettier social "disasters" against which the Sylphs are equally prepared to fight, like missing a ball (here, as grave as missing prayers) or losing the lapdog. In the Sylphs' defensive efforts, Belinda's petticoat is the battlefield that requires the most extensive fortifications. This fact furthers the idea that the rape of the lock stands in for a literal rape, or at least represents a threat to her chastity more serious than just the mere theft of a curl.

Canto 3

Summary

The boat arrives at Hampton Court Palace, and the ladies and gentlemen disembark to their courtly amusements. After a pleasant round of chatting and gossip, Belinda sits down with two of the men to a game of cards. They play ombre, a three-handed game of tricks and trumps, somewhat like bridge, and it is described in terms of a heroic battle: the cards are troops combating on the "velvet plain" of the card-table. Belinda, under the watchful care of the Sylphs, begins favorably. She declares spades as trumps and leads with her highest cards, sure of success. Soon, however, the hand takes a turn for the worse when "to the Baron fate inclines the field": he catches her king of clubs with his queen and then leads back with his high diamonds. Belinda is in danger of being beaten, but recovers in the last trick so as to just barely win back the amount she bid.

The next ritual amusement is the serving of coffee. The curling vapors of the steaming coffee remind the Baron of his intention to attempt Belinda's lock. Clarissa draws out her scissors for his use, as a lady would arm a knight in a romance. Taking up the scissors, he tries three times to clip the lock from behind without Belinda seeing. The Sylphs endeavor furiously to intervene, blowing the hair out of harm's way and tweaking her diamond earring to make her turn around. Ariel, in a last-minute effort, gains access to her brain, where he is surprised to find "an earthly lover lurking at her heart." He gives up protecting her then; the implication is that she secretly wants to be violated. Finally, the shears close on the curl. A daring sylph jumps in between the blades and is cut in two; but being a supernatural creature, he is quickly restored. The deed is done, and the Baron exults while Belinda's screams fill the air.

Commentary

This canto is full of classic examples of Pope's masterful use of the heroic couplet. In introducing Hampton Court Palace, he describes it as the place where Queen Anne "dost sometimes counsel take--and sometimes tea." This line employs a zeugma, a rhetorical device in which a word or phrase modifies two

other words or phrases in a parallel construction, but modifies each in a different way or according to a different sense. Here, the modifying word is "take"; it applies to the paralleled terms "counsel" and "tea." But one does not "take" tea in the same way one takes counsel, and the effect of the zeugma is to show the royal residence as a place that houses both serious matters of state and frivolous social occasions. The reader is asked to contemplate that paradox and to reflect on the relative value and importance of these two different registers of activity. (For another example of this rhetorical technique, see lines 157-8: "Not louder shrieks to pitying heaven are cast, / when husbands, or when lapdogs breathe their last.") A similar point is made, in a less compact phrasing, in the second and third verse-paragraphs of this canto. Here, against the gossip and chatter of the young lords and ladies, Pope opens a window onto more serious matters that are occurring "meanwhile" and elsewhere, including criminal trials and executions, and economic exchange.

The rendering of the card game as a battle constitutes an amusing and deft narrative feat. By parodying the battle scenes of the great epic poems, Pope is suggesting that the energy and passion once applied to brave and serious purposes is now expended on such insignificant trials as games and gambling, which often become a mere front for flirtation. The structure of "the three attempts" by which the lock is cut is a convention of heroic challenges, particularly in the romance genre. The romance is further invoked in the image of Clarissa arming the Baron--not with a real weapon, however, but with a pair of sewing scissors. Belinda is not a real adversary, of course, and Pope makes it plain that her resistance--and, by implication, her subsequent distress--is to some degree an affectation. The melodrama of her screams is complemented by the ironic comparison of the Baron's feat to the conquest of nations.

Canto 4

Summary

Belinda's "anxious cares" and "secret passions" after the loss of her lock are equal to the emotions of all who have ever known "rage, resentment and despair." After the disappointed Sylphs withdraw, an earthy gnome called Umbriel flies down to the "Cave of Spleen." (The spleen, an organ that removes disease-causing agents from the bloodstream, was traditionally associated with the passions, particularly malaise; "spleen" is a synonym for "ill-temper.") In his descent he passes through Belinda's bedroom, where she lies prostrate with discomfiture and the headache. She is attended by "two handmaidens," Ill-Nature and Affectation. Umbriel passes safely through this melancholy chamber, holding a sprig of "spleenwort" before him as a charm. He addresses the "Goddess of Spleen," and returns with a bag of "sighs, sobs, and passions" and a vial of sorrow, grief, and tears. He unleashes the first bag on Belinda, fueling her ire and despair.



There to commiserate with Belinda is her friend Thalestris. (In Greek mythology, Thalestris is the name of one of the Amazons, a race of warrior women who excluded men from their society.) Thalestris delivers a speech calculated to further foment Belinda's indignation and urge her to avenge herself. She then goes to Sir Plume, "her beau," to ask him to demand that the Baron return the hair. Sir Plume makes a weak and slang-filled speech, to which the Baron disdainfully refuses to acquiesce. At this, Umbriel releases the

contents of the remaining vial, throwing Belinda into a fit of sorrow and self-pity. With "beauteous grief" she bemoans her fate, regrets not having heeded the dream-warning, and laments the lonely, pitiful state of her sole remaining curl.

Commentary

The canto opens with a list of examples of "rage, resentment, and despair," comparing on an equal footing the pathos of kings imprisoned in battle, of women who become old maids, of evil-doers who die without being saved, and of a woman whose dress is disheveled. By placing such disparate sorts of aggravation in parallel, Pope accentuates the absolute necessity of assigning them to some rank of moral import. The effect is to chastise a social world that fails to make these distinctions.

Umbriel's journey to the Cave of Spleen mimics the journeys to the underworld made by both Odysseus and Aeneas. Pope uses psychological allegory (for the spleen was the seat of malaise or melancholy), as a way of exploring the sources and nature of Belinda's feelings. The presence of Ill-nature and Affectation as handmaidens serves to indicate that her grief is less than pure ("affected" or put-on), and that her display of temper has hidden motives. We learn that her sorrow is decorative in much the same way the curl was; it gives her the occasion, for example, to wear a new nightdress.

The speech of Thalestris invokes a courtly ethic. She encourages Belinda to think about the Baron's misdeed as an affront to her honor, and draws on ideals of chivalry in demanding that Sir Plume challenge the Baron in defense of Belinda's honor. He makes a muddle of the task, showing how far from courtly behavior this generation of gentlemen has fallen. Sir Plume's speech is riddled with foppish slang and has none of the logical, moral, or oratorical power that a knight should properly wield.

This attention to questions of honor returns us to the sexual allegory of the poem. The real danger, Thalestris suggests, is that "the ravisher" might display the lock and make it a source of public humiliation to Belinda and, by association, to her friends. Thus the real question is a superficial one-- public reputation--rather than the moral imperative to chastity. Belinda's own words at the close of the canto corroborate this suggestion; she exclaims, "Oh, hadst thou, cruel! been content to seize / Hairs less in sight, or any hairs but these!" (The "hairs less in sight" suggest her pubic hair). Pope is pointing out the degree to which she values outward appearance (whether beauty or reputation) above all else; she would rather suffer a breach to her integrity than a breach to her appearance.

Canto 5

The Baron remains impassive against all the ladies' tears and reproaches. Clarissa delivers a speech in which she questions why a society that so adores beauty in women does not also place a value on "good sense" and "good humour." Women are frequently called angels, she argues, but without reference to the moral qualities of these creatures. Especially since beauty is necessarily so short-lived, we must have something more substantial and permanent to fall back on. This sensible, moralizing speech falls on deaf ears, however, and Belinda, Thalestris and the rest ignore her and proceed to launch an all-out attack on

the offending Baron. A chaotic tussle ensues, with the gnome Umbriel presiding in a posture of self-congratulation. The gentlemen are slain or revived according to the smiles and frowns of the fair ladies. Belinda and the Baron meet in combat and she emerges victorious by peppering him with snuff and drawing her bodkin. Having achieved a position of advantage, she again demands that he return the lock. But the ringlet has been lost in the chaos, and cannot be found. The poet avers that the lock has risen to the heavenly spheres to become a star; stargazers may admire it now for all eternity. In this way, the poet reasons, it will attract more envy than it ever could on earth.

Commentary



Readers have often interpreted Clarissa's speech as the voice of the poet expressing the moral of the story. Certainly, her oration's thesis aligns with Pope's professed task of putting the dispute between the two families into a more reasonable perspective. But Pope's position achieves more complexity than Clarissa's speech, since he has used the occasion of the poem as a vehicle to critically address a number of broader societal issues as well. And Clarissa's righteous stance loses authority in light of the fact that it was she who originally gave the Baron the scissors. Clarissa's failure to inspire a reconciliation proves that the quarrel is itself a kind of flirtatious game that all parties are enjoying. The description of the "battle" has a markedly erotic quality, as ladies and lords wallow in their mock-agonies. Sir Plume "draw[s] Clarissa down" in a sexual way, and Belinda "flies" on her foe with flashing eyes and an erotic ardor. When Pope informs us that the Baron fights on unafraid because he "sought no more than on his foe to die," the expression means that his goal all along was sexual consummation.

This final battle is the culmination of the long sequence of mock-heroic military actions. Pope invokes by name the Roman gods who were most active in warfare, and he alludes as well to the *Aeneid*, comparing the stoic Baron to Aeneas ("the Trojan"), who had to leave his love to become the founder of Rome. Belinda's tossing of the snuff makes a perfect turning point, ideally suited to the scale of this trivial battle. The snuff causes the Baron to sneeze, a comic and decidedly unheroic thing for a hero to do. The bodkin, too, serves nicely: here a bodkin is a decorative hairpin, not the weapon of ancient days (or even of Hamlet's time). Still, Pope gives the pin an elaborate history in accordance with the conventions of true epic.

The mock-heroic conclusion of the poem is designed to compliment the lady it alludes to (Arabella Fermor), while also giving the poet himself due credit for being the instrument of her immortality. This ending effectively indulges the heroine's vanity, even though the poem has functioned throughout as a critique of that vanity. And no real moral development has taken place: Belinda is asked to come to terms with her loss through a kind of bribe or distraction that reinforces her basically frivolous outlook. But even in its most mocking moments, this poem is a gentle one, in which Pope shows a basic sympathy with the social world in spite of its folly and foibles. The searing critiques of his later satires would be much more stringent and less forgiving.