

Course: B.A. (Hons.) English II

Paper: IV

Unit 5b: *The Rape of the Lock* by Alexander Pope

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*Alexander Pope's The Rape of the Lock*

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## THE RAPE OF THE LOCK (1712)

*Alexander Pope (1688-1744)*



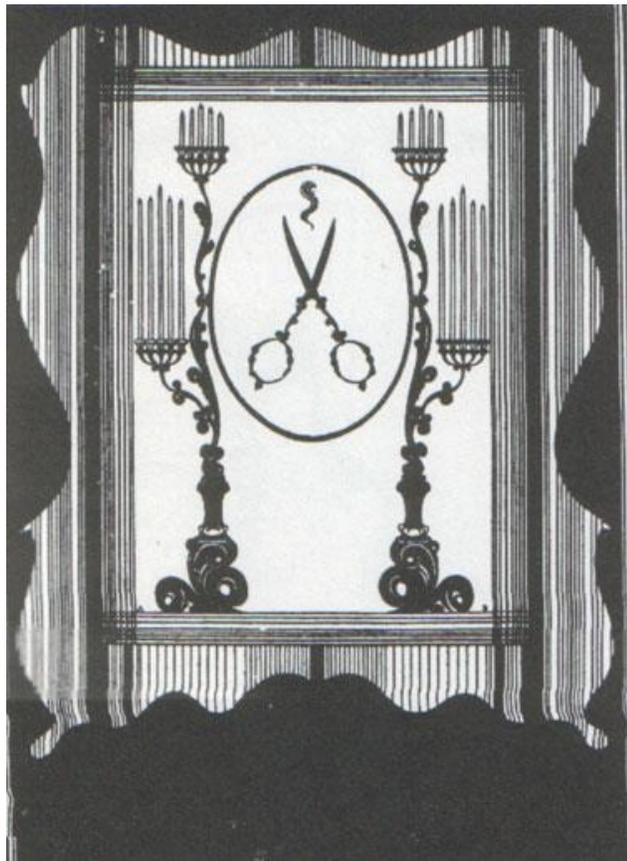
200px-Alexander\_Pope\_by\_Michael\_Dahl.jpg

### 5b.1. Alexander Pope: Biographical Sketch

Alexander Pope (1688-1744) was born into a Catholic family in London, his father being a wealthy linen draper. As a Catholic, Pope could not attend a mainstream school and get education through conventional means; he was enrolled only briefly in a Catholic school, and could not attend university. Learning the classical languages and discovering classical literature in translation at a fairly young age, Pope first attempted writing a satire around the age of ten, directing it against a schoolmaster (Rousseau 1-2).

(Cover Illustration, 1896)  
by Aubrey Beardsley  
of Alexander Pope's  
*The Rape of the Lock*  
(1712)

[http://www.achome.co.uk/artnouveau/index.php?page=pictorial\\_histories&subpage=beardsley](http://www.achome.co.uk/artnouveau/index.php?page=pictorial_histories&subpage=beardsley)



Among the various appellations for Pope, “**the wasp of Twickenham**”, “a cripple”, a “hunch-backed toad”, and “a spider”, stand out as perhaps the most sharp and

vituperative. While the ‘waspishness’ attributed to him seems more a construction based on his skill as a satirist than having any real bearing on his physical form, the other descriptions of him refer quite directly to his bodily deformity. Infection with the ‘Pott’s disease’, or tuberculosis of the spine, left him with an unusually short stature, besides several other recurring health problems.



[Pope's Villa, Twickenham](http://www.old-english.com/thameslondon/index_5.htm)

[http://www.old-english.com/thameslondon/index\\_5.htm](http://www.old-english.com/thameslondon/index_5.htm)

Despite considerable ill health, Pope’s literary output was prolific. His work was also marked by anonymity in its initial forays into the public domain.<sup>1</sup> *Pastorals*, his first published poems, were published as early as 1709. *An Essay on Criticism*, *The Rape of the Lock* (in two cantos), *Windsor Forest* followed in 1711, 1712 and 1713 respectively. A revised and enlarged version of *The Rape of the Lock* in five cantos and with the introduction of the ‘epic machinery’ was published in 1714. Translations of Homer’s *Iliad* and *The Odyssey*, as well as the writing of *The Dunciad* (in three books) followed in the years from 1715 to 1728. *The Dunciad* - clearly influenced by Dryden’s *Mac Flecknoe*, and attacking the new print and press culture of ‘Grub Street hacks’ and booksellers- along with *The Rape of the Lock*, is concerned as a satire with the correction of perceived corruption in manners, taste, judgment or morals. *Moral Essays* (1731-35), *An Essay on Man* (1733-34), *Imitations of Horace* (1733-38) and the revised *The Dunciad* (1743) in four books, constitute the last phase in his writing.

Pope was asked by John Caryll (1667-1736) - a friend and patron - to intervene in a feud between two eminent Catholic families of London, over an incident involving the

cutting of a lock of hair. Lord Petre snipped off a lock of hair of Arabella Fermor, a well known and popular single woman of nineteen.



Arabella Fermor

<http://www.english.ucsb.edu/faculty/warner/courses/w00/engl30/rapearabella.jpg>

The event led to considerable hostility and enmity between the families concerned.<sup>2</sup> Pope's intervention took the form of a mock-epic *The Rape of the Lock* based on the same event. In his own words,

The stealing of Miss Belle Fermor's hair was taken too seriously, and caused an estrangement between the two families, though they have lived long in great friendship before. A common acquaintance and well-wisher to both desired me to write a poem to make a jest of it, and laugh them together again. It was in this view that I wrote my *Rape of the Lock*, which was well received and had its effect in the two families. (Hunt 11)



Ingatestone Hall (The seat of the Petre family)

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Baron\\_Petre](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Baron_Petre)

## 5b.2. The 18<sup>th</sup> Century: A Social and Aesthetic Profile

*The Rape of the Lock* needs to be read within several discursive and historical contexts, with the critical reader engaging with the understanding of **Augustanism**, as well as ideas that challenge it as a satisfactory historical formulation on the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries in England.<sup>3</sup> The text needs to be read within the **Neoclassical** aesthetic and established literary traditions of the **epic** and the **mock-epic**, as well as the context of the identity and roles of women in existence then. Also, contemporary critical discussion on the growth of trade and commerce in that period and its impact on society provide a valuable perspective on the text.

Despite the recent critical debate around the use of the epithets "Augustan" and "Neoclassical" for the cultural and artistic profile of the 18th century, they still afford an invaluable entry point into a discussion of the text.<sup>4</sup> Supported by the upper echelons of **Restoration** society, the French import of classicism acquired an official status in the realm of art. Its features, relevant to the study of *The Rape of the Lock*, include a valorization of genres like the epic, and consequently the mock-epic, an elevated and polite diction, and regularity and symmetry in verse form.<sup>5</sup> A sense of segmentation, serialization of separable units, regularity in repetition, and proportion extends across artistic discourses, from versification in literature to architectural preferences for **Palladianism**.<sup>6</sup> The extensive use of the **Heroic Couplet** for versification is a case in point, with its symmetry and structured control of idea and expression.

As Pat Rogers contends in *The Eighteenth Century*, classical, particularly Roman models of art were studied for the purpose of translation and emulation. Ancient Greek writers like Homer, Thucydides and Pindar were read both in the original and in Latin translations; Cicero, Virgil, Ovid, Horace, Plutarch, and Juvenal were some of the most popular Roman authors for those who aspired to be well-read. (8)

Neoclassicism, based largely on an interpretation of Aristotelian poetics, flourished in the realm of artistic and literary criticism. The French critics Boileau, Rapin, and Le Bossu and Rymer and Dennis in England fashioned a unique brand of criticism which set in place a formidable lineup of rules for and demands on artistic composition and its evaluation. Examples include the emphasis on polite diction distanced from the extremes of idiosyncratic expression and common, demotic language; the valorization of genres like epic and tragedy became another marker. The use of ‘wit’, particularly in a judicious and measured way, also constitutes an emphasis in neoclassical aesthetics. Pope for instance maintained in his capacity as an arbiter of good writing that

True Wit is Nature to advantage dress’d;  
 What oft was thought, but ne’er so well express’d  
(*An Essay on Criticism* lines 297-98)

However, there was an attendant qualification on the use of wit as Pope himself described, representatively, in the Heroic Couplet form:

For Wit and Judgment often are at strife,  
 Tho’ meant each other’s Aid, like Man and Wife.  
 ’Tis more to guide than spur the Muse’s Steed;  
 Restrain his Fury, than provoke his Speed;  
 The winged Courser, like a gen’rous Horse,  
 Shows most true Mettle when you check his Course.  
(*An Essay on Criticism* lines 82-87)

Later, Samuel Johnson articulated these aesthetic tenets of ‘just’ representation and the ordering or shaping impulse in art, through the figure of Imlac in Chapter 10 of *The History of Rasselas, Prince of Abissinia* (1759):

The business of a poet [...] is to examine, not the individual, but the species; to remark general properties and large appearances: he does not number the streaks of the tulip [...] he must consider right and wrong in their abstracted and invariable state; he must disregard present laws and opinions, and rise to general and transcendental truths, which will always be the same [...]

And again in *Preface to Shakespeare* (1765):

Nothing can please many, and please long, but just representations of general nature [...] His (Shakespeare’s) characters are not modified by the customs of particular places, unpracticed by the rest of the world [...] In the writings of other poets a character is too often an individual; in those of *Shakespeare* it is commonly a species.

This is a variation of Pope's understanding of art as based on nature, as well as imposing an order on nature:

First follow *Nature*, and your judgment frame  
 By her just standard, which is still the same.  
 Unerring NATURE, still divinely bright,  
 One clear, unchanged, and universal light,  
 Life, force, and beauty, must to all impart,  
 At once the source, and end, and test of Art.

- (*An Essay on Criticism* Part I lines 68-73)

Again, Nature is seen as a source of poetry, and “methodized” through “rules” of aesthetics that give it appropriate form (lines 88-89).

There was however disagreement among English Neoclassicists with the orthodoxies of French Neoclassicism. In England, Thomas Rymer's adoption of the prescriptive brand of Aristotelian poetics fashioned by Rene Rapin, and his attack on Elizabethan drama for failing to observe the dramatic unities, was countered by critics like Dryden and Johnson in *An Essay on Dramatic Poesy* (1668) and *Preface to Shakespeare* respectively.

The figure of the writer in the Augustan Age was marked by a strong engagement with social and public issues. Dryden, Pope, **Swift**, Johnson, in varying degrees and capacities, wrote from a sense of being spokesmen of their milieu, a confidence which was, to some degree, eroded with the ushering in of the Romantic concern with private experience and a personally valuable creative vision.<sup>7</sup> Unlike Dryden, whose poet laureateship gave him an available platform for interventions in public matters, writers like Pope and Swift, also sharp critics of the Walpole regime, remained independent and free of such interpellation into ‘official’ discourse. However, like Dryden, they were active commentators on the developments of their time relating to political dissension and intrigue, conflict between Christian sects and groups, the rise of publishing, the **growth of science** and **the Royal Society**, the **Ancients vs Moderns** debate, etc.



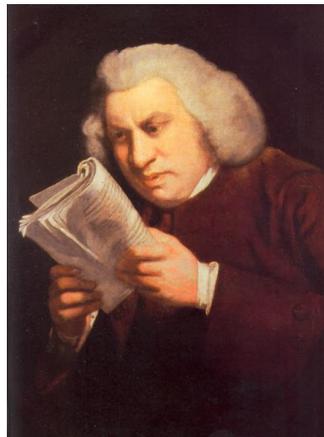
John Dryden (1631-1700)

[http://cache.thephoenix.com/secure/uploadedImages/The\\_Phoenix/News/This\\_Just\\_In/dryden.jpg](http://cache.thephoenix.com/secure/uploadedImages/The_Phoenix/News/This_Just_In/dryden.jpg)



Jonathan Swift (1667-1745)

[http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/3/3b/Jonathan\\_swift.jpg](http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/3/3b/Jonathan_swift.jpg)



Samuel Johnson (1709-1784)

<http://raote.files.wordpress.com/2009/04/samuel-johnson.png>

The **satiric** and the mock-heroic forms became especially suited to the purpose of social comment with the aim of correction. The mock heroic, in particular, worked with heroic standards of the past, juxtaposed with the 'unheroic' present, to enable critical commentary on contemporaneous issues.

The role assumed by the satirist is worth noting in Pope's self- reflexive views on his stance in writing:

Ask you what provocation I have had?  
 The strong Antipathy of Good to Bad.  
 When Truth or Virtue an Affront endures,  
 Th' Affront is mine, my friend, and should be yours.  
 Mine, as a Foe professed to false Pretence,  
 Who think a Coxcomb's Honour like his Sense;  
 Mine, as a Friend to every worthy mind  
 And mine as Man, who feel for all mankind.

(*Epilogue to the Satires. Dialogue II*. lines 197-204)

Clearly here, the writer-satirist assumes the position of an analyst of society and culture, who reserves the authority to legislate over fellow citizens on matters of decorum - morality and manners.<sup>8</sup> In the same vein, Pope comments thus on the use of satire:

O sacred Weapon! Left for Truths defence,  
 Sole Dread of Folly, Vice and Insolence!

(*Epilogue to the Satires. Dialogue II* lines 212-13)

### 5b.3. Reading *The Rape of the Lock*: Some Critical Perspectives

*The Rape of the Lock* takes on similar contours in its professed aim as articulated in the dedication to Arabella Fermor:

[...] it was intended only to divert a few young Ladies, who have good sense and good humour enough, to laugh not only at their sex's little unguarded follies, but at their own.

(Dedication, *The Rape of the Lock* lines 2-5)

Ian Jack's comment on this is typical of a generation of criticism which in the course of emphasizing the centrality of this moral corrective aim to any reading of the poem also justified it:

In so far as it (the poem) is a satire, it opposes not a person but a moral fault: immoderate female pride. Its satire is not directed against Arabella Fermor but against a weakness which she shares with half the world ... For all his delight in the beauty of Belinda's world Pope never allows it to arrogate the place which rightly belongs to the sovereignty of Sense ... Belinda and the whole *beau monde* which she represents, is guilty of a serious moral fault. (Jack 49)

*The Rape of the Lock* has been described by the author himself as a "heroicomic poem" or written in the mock-epic genre. By definition a mock-epic is a narrative poem

employing the grand style and framework of the epic for a subject not perceived as serious and dignified, or in fact as trivial. As mentioned earlier, the ensuing contrast and incongruity thus becomes a vehicle for the satiric treatment of the subject matter being considered. Maynard Mack offers a simple overview of the mock-epic conventions used in the poem to achieve a satirical perspective on the fashionable aristocratic circles of the 'beau monde' of 18th century London, with Belinda as the presiding deity and the protagonist.

The first canto, for instance, uses the standard epic convention of the invocation to the muse/s- John Caryl and Belinda in this case; other conventions reminiscent of the epic tradition available to Pope include the use of a high/elevated linguistic idiom and references to epic figures and events. "Dire offence" (line 1), "mighty contests", "mighty rage" (line 12) construct a framework of expectations to be juxtaposed with the subject matter comprising supposedly "trivial things" (line 2). Clearly, the comment "Slight is the subject, but not so the praise" (line 5) becomes a declaration of the treatment of the subject as a mock-epic. The attempt to downplay the seriousness of the loss of the lock of Arabella Fermor, and consequently her taking issue with it, is reflected also in the title of the piece. Highlighting the supposed incongruity of applying the idea of a severe violation like rape to the cutting of hair, the title brings home to Pope's (ideal) reader the mock-epic orientation of the poem. Embedded comparisons of Ariel appearing in Belinda's dream to [Satan tempting Eve](#) (line 25), the sylphs to the souls of dead heroes described in *The Aeneid* (line 55), exercise a similar deflating effect on the subject matter, including the epic machinery used.



*The Rape of the Lock*

by Thomas Stothard (1798)

[http://www2.ivcc.edu/gen2002/Rape\\_of\\_the\\_Lock.htm](http://www2.ivcc.edu/gen2002/Rape_of_the_Lock.htm)

In a more nuanced reading that problematizes the use of the mock-epic tradition in the text, Cleanth Brooks engages with the character of Belinda, in particular the scene at her dressing table. Attempting to uncover “ambiguities and complexities of attitude” (139), Brooks notes how “Belinda’s dressing table does glow with a special radiance and charm, and that Pope, though amused by the vanity which it represents, is at the same time

thoroughly alive to a beauty which it actually possesses" (139). More questions follow - Is Belinda presented as the victim, or as the aggressor bent on "the destruction of mankind"? Did she or didn't she want the lock cut? Does Pope trivialize the seriousness of the offence using the mock-epic framework, or does he recognizing the damaging social implications of the incident, work those into the poem, satirizing and censuring only Belinda's sense of injury and victimization as hypocritical?

Pursuing the larger argument of viewing the text as far more complex than a simple understanding of a mock-epic might suggest, Brooks pushes for a reading that highlights ambiguity, ambivalence and multilayered-ness, using evidence from within the text. The work is best understood, according to Brooks, beyond narrow opposing interpretations. The reading of the text as a "tempest in a teapot" with the author dismissing and trivializing the incident depicted, should negotiate with a reading which views the text as a thinly disguised account addressing "real" palpable social pressures on Belinda/Arabella Fermor relating to propriety and honour in English aristocratic circles of 1712, and possibly even accords her a measure of sympathy and admiration.<sup>9</sup>

However, **New Critical** readings like Brooks's do not address the larger social context and its imperatives that account for the complexity of interpretation that have been noted in the text. Nor do such **Formalist** readings interrogate authorial intention and design, or address ideological issues that link the text with larger social concerns. **Humanist** critiques of the text are also problematic in their emphasis on the unity of purpose and theme in the text, privileging the author's proclaimed agenda of restoring good sense and good humour to the warring families, and especially to Arabella Fermor.<sup>10</sup> Accepting Pope's corrective 'moral' vision as coherent, logical and compelling, such interpretations of the text are pitched at an 'ideal contemporary', or Pope's ideal 18th century reader.

Addressing the sociology or the **ideological** 'unconscious' of texts, politically oriented criticism on *The Rape* has in various ways sought to mount an understanding of the text on larger socio-cultural analyses of 18th century England. Ellen Pollak, for instance, uses a critique based on a **close reading** of the poem, and links it with the cultural norms of femininity and gender roles available in 18th century England. She forwards the argument that the work needs to be read beyond its Humanist reading as a satire on human (female) vanity. It is, she contends, a fable of social and sexual initiation, in which Belinda is a type not of Everyman, but of Everywoman, and in which rape is figured as a rite of passage in her 'progress'...from an intact and strident girlhood to a mutilated but stellarized maturity" (159). On analysing various features of the poem, ranging from the trajectory constructed for Belinda, to the use of the character of Clarissa and the epic machinery, the text can be seen to reinforce a "common female paradigm" and destiny (168). The satirical attack on Belinda shows her as vain and narcissistic in her "rites of pride", shallow and fickle in the appraisal of her suitors who are reduced to sword knots and coaches jostling against each other as if in a "moving toyshop". She is also portrayed as manipulative in taking elaborate care of the lock which is likened to a trap to ensnare "mankind". It can be argued that the satire here conceals deeper anxieties. Belinda's power is viewed as disturbing and possibly transgressive in her ability to be at the centre of the giddy circle of the 'beau monde' at Hampton Court, and yet being able to avoid

commitment and by extension wedlock. Interestingly then, authorial design and narrative logic seem to work to control and contain this kind of energy, by configuring it as self-destructive and paradoxical for the woman concerned. A sense of inevitability is constructed around the loss of the lock, the loss being a clear 'rape' and sign of dishonour in a social milieu as prone to demolishing reputations with "every word" as Hampton Court. This inexorable hurtling towards the 'rape' is achieved through various rhetorical strategies including setting off a Clarissa to a Belinda, a 'prude' to a 'coquette', a gnome to a sylph, while simultaneously emphasizing a common passive end to the pursuits of these diametrically opposite types of womanhood constructed. (168)

This critical argument also refers to the way the invocation to Belinda as a muse asks *her* to reveal the "strange motive" which "could compel/ A well bred lord to assault a gentle belle" (lines 7-8). Further, the question leads to a description of Belinda's day, which is of interest to critical readers for the way in which it constructs Belinda in a particular way.

A "birth-night beau" (line 23), card games like Ombre, "gilded chariots" (line 55), "courtly balls", "midnight masquerades" (line 71), and "*billet doux*" mark an average day for the *belles* and the *beaux*, as one awash in luxury and mannered courtship rituals. Canto 2 needs comment for the construction of Belinda as chock-full of "female errors" (line 15). Possessing a roving eye and an "unfixed" mind (line 10), she "conspires" to entrap unsuspecting men (line 21). She and her world of "gilded chariots", "sparkling" crosses, and the "glittering spoil" of expensive Indian ivory and Arabian perfume, are the "rival" of the sun (line 3) and the world outside which the sun presides over. The sylphs likewise add colour and shine to this world with their "glittering textures" (line 64) and "transient colours" (line 67). Also, instability, flux and chaos characterize this seemingly self-enclosed and self-sufficient world. Bibles and *billet doux*, men and monkeys, honour and virtue, chastity and china jars, suitors and sword-knots coexist in mad confusion, as an 'abnormal' antithesis of the preference for order and proportion which, broadly speaking, marked this historical moment. Using zeugmas, women like Belinda are described as

With varying Vanities, from ev'ry Part,  
They shift the moving Toyshop of their Heart;  
Where Wigs with Wigs, with Sword-knots Sword-knots strive,  
Beaus banish Beaus, and Coaches Coaches drive.  
This erring Mortals Levity may call,  
Oh blind to Truth! the *Sylphs* contrive it all. (Canto I. lines 99-104)

The dressing table becomes a rationalist's nightmare:

Here Files of Pins extend their shining Rows,  
Puffs, Powders, Patches, Bibles, Billet-doux. (Canto I. lines 137-138)

And the premonition of disaster applies to polarities of experience:

Whether the Nymph shall break *Diana's* Law,  
 Or some frail *China Jar* receive a Flaw,  
 Or stain her Honour, or her new Brocade,  
 Forget her Pray'rs, or miss a Masquerade,  
 Or lose her Heart, or Necklace, at a Ball;  
 Or whether Heav'n has doom'd that *Shock* must fall.

(Canto II. lines 105-110)

These descriptions of Belinda as superficial, prodigiously self-indulgent and the centre of a radically disordered and unstable world seem designed to orient the reader to view her critically and unsympathetically, to the extent that the 'rape' is made to seem natural and inevitable. (173-174). The Baron in aspiring for the "prize" (line 30) is absolved of all blame considering how Belinda's "fair tresses man's imperial race insnare" (line 27).



*The Toilet* (1896)  
 by Aubrey Beardsley  
[http://www.artinthepicture.com/paintings/Aubrey\\_Beardsley/The-Toilet/](http://www.artinthepicture.com/paintings/Aubrey_Beardsley/The-Toilet/)

Highlighting the construction in the text of opposing types of womanhood and spirits in attendance also addresses the ambiguity and ambivalence noted by critics like Brooks vis-à-vis the portrayal of Belinda. Pollak asserts that Pope lets Clarissa -- the antithesis of Belinda -- do the talking, as it were, on his behalf, while yet denying Clarissa a normative status, as the 1751 gloss on Clarissa's speech would have us believe. The formal ambiguity noted by Brooks is here interpreted ideologically as Pope's "double

perspective" on Belinda, heroic and ridiculous at the same time (163) <sup>11</sup>. Moreover, Pope in one stroke makes Belinda both the aggressor and the victim, who resists the 'rape' after being shown to have invited it. This ambivalence surrounding Belinda's status as an aggressor/victim is, according to this reading, an ideologically engineered paradox, which "reifies" 18<sup>th</sup> century mores on femininity and the ideal of "passive womanhood".

*The Rape of the Lock*  
(Drawing, 1831)

by

Lady Georgina North

<http://people.umass.edu/sconstan/test6.jpeg>



This ideal and myth is firmly inscribed in the text, through the deployment of certain rhetorical strategies and distinct narrative construction, some facets of which have been described here. The idea of reification, as mentioned earlier, is suggestive of the objectification of Belinda (the woman) as a "prize" (line 30) and sexual object or commodity over which the Baron (the man) has a 'natural' claim. However, this according

to Pollak, emerges as the key contradiction in the authorial logic of the poem. Belinda is censured and satirized for being the veritable flag bearer of the glittering and shallow social setting of Hampton Court, where moral confusion abounds in the indiscriminate mixing and merging of suitors and sword-knots, honour and brocades, virginity and china jars. In what amounts to a contradiction, Pope reduces Belinda herself to the status of an object- depriving her of subjecthood and agency, and driving her to the 'rape' by the force of narrative logic and construction. (176)

As is evident, Belinda, her real-life counterpart Ms Fermor, and the significance of the loss of the lock, can be salvaged by breaking away from straight and author-centric especially “tempest in a teapot” readings of the text. A critical intervention, as stated earlier, is to highlight how the loss of the lock becomes loaded in a context like Hampton Court. The description of the milieu in Canto 3 is noteworthy for placing Belinda's anxieties about the cutting of the lock:

In various Talk th' instructive hours they past,  
Who gave the *Ball*, or paid the *Visit* last:  
(Canto III. lines 11-12)

And again,

A third interprets Motions, Looks, and Eyes;  
At ev'ry Word a Reputation dies.  
(Canto III. lines 15-16)

Consider Thalestris's impassioned lament in Canto 4:

Gods! shall the Ravisher display your Hair,  
While the Fops envy, and the Ladies stare!  
[...]  
Methinks already I your Tears survey,  
Already hear the horrid things they say,  
Already see you a degraded Toast,  
And all your Honour in a Whisper lost! (Canto IV. lines 103-104, 107-110)

The poem might have been written with the publicly-acknowledged claim of restoring a sense of proportion and good sense to Ms Fermor. It could also successfully highlight the shallowness of Hampton Court, its *beau monde*, and Belinda as an epitome of its values. But it can be asked as to how completely the dynamics of Hampton Court could have been constitutive of women's “follies”. To conflate the woman in the 18<sup>th</sup> century with the excesses of a public space seems unjustified, given the negligible presence and influence they had there. Their visibility as *belles* in public space did not translate into a real public presence, a claim based on historical accounts detailing their real invisibility and powerlessness.<sup>12</sup> Moreover, the implications of social embarrassment were different for men and women participants of this milieu. Accounts of Ms.

Fermor's life after the incident are revealing in this regard. Henry Moore of the [Blount circle](#) described Arabella Fermor facing the fallout of the public discussion of the event following the publication of the *The Rape*:

The only lean beauty I descry about town is Mrs. Belinda, whose charms and Gallants desert her so fast that I wonder despair and the spleen have not quite eaten her up. (qtd. in Rumbold 73)

This chimes in with Pope's own observation in a letter to Caryll dated 21st December, 1712:

More men's reputations, I believe, are whispered away, than any other ways destroyed. ( qtd. in Erskine-Hill 62)

Belinda's anguished admission at the end of Canto 4,

Oh hadst thou, Cruel! been content to seize  
Hairs less in sight, or any Hairs but these! (Canto IV. lines 175-176)

might be the veritable final nail on the coffin in terms of a satiric and unsympathetic reading of her. However, evidence culled from within and without the text, as described earlier, can be used to mount a defense for Belinda, and also suggest an alternative reading of the text, less dependant on authorial perspective and construction. Reading Clarissa's speech in Canto 5 is another exercise in oppositional reading, whereby the author's appraisal of it as "illustrating the moral of the poem", can be problematised.<sup>13</sup>

The ending of the poem exalts the lost lock in a mock-heroic fashion by the claim that it has ascended to the skies and become a star. The poem itself seeks to become a memorial to the lost article:

*This Lock*, the Muse shall consecrate to Fame,  
And mid'st the Stars inscribe *Belinda's* Name!

(lines 149-150)

It is debatable as to whether this was meant to please or further rail Ms Fermor; it also in Pollak's reading seems to celebrate the woman's mutilation in the service of 18th century social mores which affirmed the validity of chastening and subjugation as a rite of passage to socialization and social acceptance.



*The New Star* (1896)  
by Aubrey Beardsley  
<http://people.umass.edu/sconstan/steve9.jpeg>

In another oppositional reading it can also be argued that this milieu is marked, for all its urbanity and social ease, by deep gender fault lines, where encroachment on masculine prerogative is met by a disciplinary reaction in the form of the 'rape'. Interestingly, while for satire, the zeugmas crowding the depiction of Belinda are similar to those that describe Hampton Court, as well as the superficiality of the Baron and Sir Plume, the text displays unease with the blurring of gendered codes of behavior. Satiric censure falls more swiftly and severely on Belinda's "moving toyshop"- like engagement with her suitors under the tutelage of the sylphs, although it can be argued that women like her were trapped and doomed in shimmering triviality, with an accompanying genuine emotional and psycho-sexual impoverishment.<sup>14</sup> When "coquettes" and "prudes" "reject mankind" (line 68) in their respective ways, they are termed guilty of frivolity ("levity" in line 103). Canto 3 literally and symbolically allows Belinda to wrest the title of "Ombre" or "the man", only to have it snatched away immediately thereafter in the violence committed on her person in the form of the cutting of the lock.<sup>15</sup>

Although the moral ambiguities underpinning the world of elegance and manners have been recognized in much criticism till the 1980s, the new emphases in 18th century studies (particularly poetry) and literary criticism, falls on issues like gender roles and hierarchies, class divides, the consolidation of empire, and the institutionalization of racism and slavery which marked the age. Laura Brown's analysis of the poem is another example of this paradigmatic and methodological shift away from readings solely within the contexts of Neoclassicism (reading the text in aesthetic terms for order, balance, symmetry), Augustan Humanism (privileging the moral corrective vision of the artist/satirist), as well as 20th century Formalist approaches with their emphasis on formal coherence or complexity. Brown's critique situates the poem in the context of mercantile capitalism, and incipient imperial expansion.<sup>16</sup> The description of Belinda at her toilette, surrounded by combs of tortoise shell and ivory, and perfumes from Arabia, is a picture both admiring and critical, reminiscent of authorial ambivalence on Belinda noted by Brooks. However, Brown places this ambivalence within the period's tenuous relationship with the discourses of mercantile capitalism and fledgling imperialism. Brown describes how the trope of female dressing and adornment appeared across various discourses in a celebratory as well as critical strain, to rationalize or express anxiety about England's mercantile and imperialistic project overseas. She deploys Felicity Nussbaum's work *The Brink of All We Hate: English Satires on Women 1660-1750* (1984) for its study of the tradition of anti-feminist satire in the Restoration period. Brown notes how in these satirical portraits the upper-class woman is presented as vain and acquisitive in her need for the commodities and spoils of mercantile activity. Among the several instances given is one from the 1709 issue of *The Tatler* where Addison constructs this typical picture of the 'covetous' woman:

I consider Woman as a beautiful Romantick Animal that may be adorned With Furs and Feathers, Pearls and Diamonds, Ores and Silks. The Lynx shall cast its Skin at her Feet to make her a Tippet; the Peacock, Parrot, and the Swan, shall pay contributions to her Muff; the Sea shall be searched for

Shells and the Rocks for Gems; and every part of Nature furnish out its share towards the Embellishment of a Creature that is the most consummate Work of it. (116)

Any indictment of the moral and emotional vacuity of this world where women covet commodities and men reduce women to decorated artifacts, must take into account the nexus of power and perspective in gender roles in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Descriptions, such as the one noted above, effectively silence the woman who is ostensibly the *Subject* of such commentaries, or use her silence, to put her into the service of the male enterprise of overseas trade and expansion. The ideological underpinnings of these depictions are highlighted by Brown:

Mercantile capitalism itself, with all its attractions as well as ambiguous consequences, is attributed to women, whose marginality allows them to serve, in the writings of celebrants and satirists alike, as a perfect proxy or scapegoat. (119)

The construction of Belinda as narcissistic is achieved among other ways through the metaphorical construction of the ritual of adornment at the dressing table as a religious rite, with her 'worship' of her own image in the mirror:

Th' inferior Priestess, at her Altar's side,  
Trembling, begins the sacred Rites of Pride.  
Unnumber'd Treasures ope at once, and here  
The various Offerings of the World appear;  
From each she nicely culls with curious Toil,  
And decks the Goddess with the glitt'ring Spoil.  
This Casket *India's* glowing Gems unlocks,  
And all *Arabia* breathes from yonder Box

(Canto I. lines 127-134)

In Brown's analysis this portrait is clearly fed by the tradition of projecting the upper-class woman as the arch consumer of luxury goods. Pope seems to draw on the misogyny of this tradition in associating the woman with unbridled covetousness which becomes the motive force behind capitalist acquisition and imperialist excesses. Given this kind of construction of Belinda, it is not surprising that poetic justice should take the form of a punishment, the 'rape', a chastening of the kind similar to the painful rite of socialization and subordination identified by Pollak - the author's inscription of "the myth of passive womanhood" in the trajectory of Belinda.



*The Battle of the Beaux and the Belles* (1896) by Aubrey Beardsley  
<http://people.umass.edu/sconstan/steve8.jpeg>

#### 5b.4. Summary

The essay is essentially pedagogical in its orientation. It attempts a critical understanding of Pope's poem, *The Rape of the Lock*- the meanings it has carried, or has been interpreted as carrying, at the time it was written, and in times more contemporary. The historical 'background' of the text intrudes from time to time. It finds description in the discussion on the period-nomenclature of "Augustan", aesthetic concepts of "Neoclassicism", and literary forms like the "mock-epic", "satire" and the "Heroic Couplet". Its social structures and material character are explored through the analysis of women's identities, their education and social profile. The growth of mercantile activity and commercial expeditions to foreign lands is another facet of the period, which finds discussion in one of the critical perspectives highlighted in the essay.

The organization and structure of the essay allow a chronological charting out of literary criticism produced over time on the text. The objective is to demonstrate how new, and still newer areas of enquiry related to the text have been marked out and focused on. The shift highlighted, broadly representative as it is of the shift in emphasis and accent within western literary criticism and methodology, would also hopefully lead to the student to more detailed and nuanced explorations of the subject.

The essay has been conceptualized and given a form which allows the student easy access to it via the internet. The exercise aims to integrate the web's academic resources with traditional humanities scholarship, to allow a greater outreach and democratized access to critical resources as well as primary texts. All this could potentially change the way the text is perceived and read, as it finds a new reading environment and context, and hopefully more readers. Pope's own issues with print culture and mass publishing, as well as with the increasingly powerful claims of science defining his historical moment, thus make this essay one which goes against the grain several times over. It is, in terms of its content and form, as much of its times as the text it attempts to critique.

### Notes

*Unless indicated otherwise, line references to the text of the poem are to the Oxford edition of **The Rape of the Lock** edited by Herbert Davis. (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1978).*

1. For an understanding of the 18<sup>th</sup> century practice of publishing anonymously, see Pat Rogers, "Nameless Names: Pope, Curll, and the Uses of Anonymity." *New Literary History*. 33.2 (2002): 26 July 2009  
<[http://muse.jhu.edu/login?uri=/journals/new\\_literary\\_history/v033/33.2rogers.html](http://muse.jhu.edu/login?uri=/journals/new_literary_history/v033/33.2rogers.html)> .
2. For a sketch of Arabella Fermor's life, see "Arabella Fermor (1696-1737)". *David Nash Ford's Royal Berkshire History*. Nash Ford Publishing. 26 July 2009  
<<http://www.berkshirehistory.com/bios/afermor.html>> .
3. See a discussion of the paradoxes and contradictions of the age by Pat Rogers *The Augustan Vision*. (London: Methuen, 1974).
4. A discussion of the debate around the issues of periodization and nomenclature describing the Augustan Age is available in Thomas Kaminsky. "Rehabilitating "Augustanism": On the Roots of "Polite Letters" in England". *Eighteenth Century Life*. 20.3 (1996): 26 July 2009 <

[http://muse.jhu.edu/login?uri=/journals/eighteenth-century\\_life/v020/20.3kaminski.html](http://muse.jhu.edu/login?uri=/journals/eighteenth-century_life/v020/20.3kaminski.html)>.

5. For a description of the formal features of neoclassical writing refer to the introduction by Pat Rogers ed. *The Eighteenth Century*. (London: Methuen, 1978) 9.
6. See Pat Rogers, *The Augustan Vision* (London: Methuen, 1974) 29-31, for a perspective on concepts of “planned growth” and divisible experience in 18<sup>th</sup> century aesthetics. For an overview of Palladian architecture, see Humphreys 427-36, and Rogers *The Eighteenth Century*. (London : Methuen, 1978).
7. This understanding of a clear divide and a sharp epistemological rupture between the Augustan and the Romantic Age is a much debated one. Just as there were native countercurrents like the interventions of Dryden and Johnson within Neoclassicism, the dominant mode of satire coexisted with the poetry of reflection and rural meditation which was practiced by many including Gray, Thomson, Pope (before 1717) and Goldsmith (See Norman Callan, “Augustan Reflective Poetry”. *The Pelican Guide to English Literature (From Dryden to Johnson)*. Ed. Boris Ford. Penguin, 1957. 346-47). The Romantic emphasis on personal solitude and a return to a pastoral- agrarian social experience was, in turn, accompanied by a spirit of egalitarianism and a sense of human beings as “significant moral agents” instead of dehumanized units in an increasingly rationalist, commercial and industrial society (See Donald H. Reiman. “The Romantic Critical Tradition”. *Encyclopedia of Literature and Criticism*. Eds. Martin Coyle, Peter Garside, Malcolm Kelsall, and John Peck. Routledge, 1990. 682-83). Poets were still the visionary “legislators of the world” for **Shelley** in *Defence of Poetry*, albeit “unacknowledged” in a changed social order.
8. See Johnson’s definition of ‘decorum’ in his dictionary: “Decency, behaviour contrary to licentiousness [or] levity; seemliness”, quoted in Rogers, *The Augustan Vision* (London: Methuen, 1974) 52.
9. The prose dedication to Arabella Fermor which was written for the 1714 edition of *The Rape*, along with the poem *To Belinda on the Rape of the Lock* (eventually rejected by her in favour of the former), was part of Pope's acknowledged attempt to undo the damage caused to her public image by the poem's circulation since 1712. Writing to Caryll he reveals his plan to name Fermor as the model for Belinda:

I have some thoughts of dedicating that poem to Mrs Fermor by name, as a piece of justice in return to the wrong interpretation she has suffered under on the score of that piece. (qtd. in Rumbold 74)

However, both the intention as well as the execution of Pope's seemingly gallant gesture did little to salvage Arabella Fermor's name. In fact such interventions could

only have fed damaging social gossip or "wrong interpretation(s)" of the kind described by Henry Moore.

10. See for an analysis of the poem as a mock-epic Ian Mackean "Alexander Pope's Portrayal of Belinda and her Society in *The Rape of the Lock*". The London School of Journalism. 27 July 2009 < <http://www.english-literature.org/essays/alexander-pope.html>>.
11. After declaring that the poem was "intended to divert a few young ladies, who have good sense and good humour enough, to laugh not only at their sex's little unguarded follies, but at their own", Pope goes on to establish a mock-gallant and tongue-in-cheek tenor to the dedication. Assuming a pose halfway between chivalry and paternalism, Pope explains to Fermor the use of the Rosicrucian system as the epic machinery in the poem:

I know how disagreeable it is to make use of hard words before a lady [...] you must give me leave to explain two to three difficult terms.

(lines 19-22)

There is clearly much mirth under a polite veneer at the expense of the contemporaneous woman reader who owing to the lack of a classical education, would have been hard put to recognize or appreciate the generic attributes of epics/mock epics.

12. Thomas Gisborne in *An Enquiry into the Duties of the Female Sex* .1797. 27 July 2009  
<[http://books.google.co.in/books?id=oDMEAAAAYAAJ&dq=%22thomas+gisborne%22&printsec=frontcover&source=bl&ots=25678RvxQz&sig=gK5NEnL5tgiyLnHoRdUKAaRpm6w&hl=en&ei=9w5sSrr2IY2U6wPO18WHCA&sa=X&oi=book\\_result&ct=result&resnum=2](http://books.google.co.in/books?id=oDMEAAAAYAAJ&dq=%22thomas+gisborne%22&printsec=frontcover&source=bl&ots=25678RvxQz&sig=gK5NEnL5tgiyLnHoRdUKAaRpm6w&hl=en&ei=9w5sSrr2IY2U6wPO18WHCA&sa=X&oi=book_result&ct=result&resnum=2)> asserted, like his contemporaries, that women were unsuited to the demands and needs of the public realm and its discourses:

The science of legislation, or jurisprudence, of political economy; the conduct of government in all its executive function; the abstruse researches of erudition; the inexhaustible depths of philosophy; the acquirements subordinate to navigation [...] demand the efforts of a mind endued with the powers of close and comprehensive reasoning, and of intense and continued application, in a degree to which they are not requisite for the discharge of the customary offices of female duty. It would seem natural to expect [...] that the Giver of all good, after

bestowing those powers on men [...], would impart them to the female sex with a more sparing hand [...]

(21-22)

13. For an analysis of the representation of Clarissa as yet another deviant and caricatured type of womanhood see Ellen Pollak "The Rape of the Lock: A Reification of the Myth of Passive Womanhood". *The Poetics of Sexual Myth: Gender and Ideology in the Verse of Swift and Pope*. 1985. Rpt in *The Rape of the Lock*. Ed. Harriet Raghunathan. (Delhi: Worldview, 2001).
14. Historically and sociologically Belinda's "frivolous" pursuits can be seen as shaped by the education and socialization of women in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Gisborne's *An Enquiry* is useful again in this regard (78-79). Also see *Essays on Practical Education* (1798), by Maria Edgeworth of the **Bluestocking circle**, on "female accomplishments."
15. See Pollak's essay on how authorial censure of Belinda and her ilk leads to viewing the cutting of the lock as chastisement and a disciplining of Belinda's transgressive energies.
16. For a description of the growth of trade, commercial ventures and expeditions to foreign lands in the period, see "The Social Setting" by A.R. Humphreys "The Social Setting". *The Pelican Guide to English Literature (From Dryden to Johnson)*. Ed. Boris Ford. (Penguin, 1957) 21-25.

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