

## The Rape of the Lock: Reflecting the Satire of the 18<sup>th</sup> Century British Society

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The 18<sup>th</sup> century was one in which exaltation of wit and reason came to the forefront of literature in the form of both Horatian and Juvenalian satires which, through keen observation and sharp nimbleness of thought, exposed the superficial follies and moral corruption of society during the neo classical period in Britain. Underneath the Enlightenment ideals of rationality, order and knowledge, society embraced a pervasive obsession with 'decorum', a facade of established traditions and vanities as well as an innate sense of moral and political supremacy. Satires during this period aimed to point out the shortcomings of society through ridiculing accepted standards of thought, exposing Britain's flaws and chastising the hypocrisy of the time. Enlightenment writers such as Swift and Pope used different mediums of satire, different types of logic and different targets of ridicule in order to focus on different aspects of British society, providing much needed criticism of the profuse moral corruption of a society that sometimes seemed to forget the true ideals of its age.

Pope, in *The Rape of the Lock*, is Horatian in tone, delicately chiding society in a sly but political voice by holding up a mirror to the follies and vanities of the upper class. Pope does not actively attack the self important pomp of the British aristocracy, but rather presents it in such a way that gives the reader a new perspective from which to easily view the actions in the society as foolish and ridiculous. According to Pope, female chastity is something over which man has a rightful claim, then the lock must, by association, be understood at least transiently as the common property of Belinda and the Baron. Pope and Swift, well-known for their sharply perceptive works, both looked to rhetorical masters of the rational, classical past and their separate archetypes for inspiration. The text is a gentle mockery of the upper class, more lyrical and delicate than his brutal counterpart. Pope nonetheless is able to effectively illuminate the moral degradation of the society to the public. Once Dryden said, "The true end of satire is the amendment of vice by correction" and this is what Pope sets out to do in his mock epic. By using the burlesque, mockery and irony Pope ridicules his society.

*The Rape of the Lock* assimilates the masterful qualities of a heroic epic, yet is applied satirically to John Milton's *Paradise Lost* were held in high regard, due to their significant subject matter, compelling heroes and rich text. Pope follows this grand form in *The Rape of the Lock*, ultimately achieving a whimsical mock epic through his melange of the trifling and the timeless. Satire in the poem is not a satire against any individual, but against the follies and vanities of fashionable men and women in general. Through Belinda, Pope satirizes the fashionable women of the time and through the Baron, he satirizes the aristocratic gentlemen of the age. Despite the likeness to historical epic pieces, this work

displays a light and playful tone, which illuminates the idiosyncratic nature of the poem's central conflict; the Baron 'stealing' or 'raping' Belinda's illustrious lock of hair: "The meeting points the sacred hair dissever from the fair head, forever and forever! Then flashed the living lightening from her eyes, and screams of horror rend the affrighted skies"(lines 153-156). This embellished and exaggerated quotation is representative of the fundamental elements of Horatian satire used in this mock epic. Personification is employed to place emphasis on the seemingly transcendent effects of Belinda's terror, as her screams "rend the affrighted skies". This example makes a mockery of the traditional epic, suggesting that the removal of Belinda's lock has detrimental and almost divine implications. Pope uses personification extensively throughout, to add to the heroic colouring of the poem and in general elevating the subject matter.

This epic is, in fact, a satire upon feminine frivolity. Pope introduces the readers with many "female errors". At the very beginning, Pope satirizes the idleness of the late rising of aristocratic women by Belinda: "Now lapdogs give themselves a rowzing shake". He makes fun of the vanities of women. The aristocratic ladies of those days were fond of gilded chariots and of ombre and the poet makes fun of that over fondness: "Think not, when women's transient Breath is fled/ That all her vanities at once are dead". The poet also expresses the weakness of these ladies for entertainment and for marked balls: "With varying vanities from every part/ They shift the moving Toyshop of their Heart". He satirizes them by saying that making love was the greatest pastime of young ladies. They expected attention and gifts from the lovers but they were rather inconsistent in their love. Pope also ridicules the women's excessive attention of self embellishment and self decoration of a famous satirical passage. Belinda is describes as commencing her toilet operations with prayer to the cosmetic power, puffs and powders lie on Belinda's dressing table: "Here Files of Pins extend their shining Rows/ Puffs, Powders, Patches, Bibles and Billet doux." Bible gets importance like the other toilet objects.

Through the mock heroic battle Pope is suggesting that the energy and passion once applied to brave and serious purposes is now expanded on such insignificant trials as game and gambling, which become a mere front for flirtation. The final victory of the King of Hearts, in one way, can be interpreted as the final victory of a male which represents the success of the Baron's attempt. But on the other way, we see that "hearts" possibly echoes with line 144 of Canto 3, when Ariel entered Belinda's brain, that "an earthly lover looks at her heart". Pope had a motive behind composing his compelling yet divergent satirical work. Pope fashioned the characters of Belinda and the Baron as representations of Arabella Fermor and Lord Petre. Catholic British aristocrats possessed an infatuation with decorum during the neoclassical period. These characters represent the facsimile of the 18<sup>th</sup> century British personal ideals and thus take the roles of pseudo heroes in the epic. Pope uses his elaborate mock-epic to serve as a metaphor for the vain and superficial period in the attention of aristocrats and society in general, compelling them to humorously realize their shortcomings and spark a cultural shift.