



A Coquettish Battle of False Ideals in Alexander Pope's *The Rape of the Lock*

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Abstract

In its mock-epic treatment of social values of the 18th century, Alexander Pope's *The Rape of the Lock* satirizes trivial ideals of society. In doing this, the poem subverts the heroic ideals of epic tradition such as honour, good reputation and virtue into vanity. The aim of this paper is to examine this subversion through the roles of men and women in the poem. In accordance with this aim, it is discussed that the passion of traditional epic heroes for victory becomes passion of lords and barons pursuing ladies for individual satisfaction. In achieving this satisfaction, baron is drawn as a figure of levity while his aim Belinda is conditioned within male force and rape.

Alexander Pope's *The Rape of the Lock* establishes its mock-epic treatment of 18th century social condition by diminishing the high seriousness of the traditional epic through the trivialization of heroic ideals and heroic emotion exemplified in the manners of men and women in the poem. The "am'rous causes" of lords and barons replace the passionate love of the noble Greek heroes. These causes create a world where so called "mighty" quarrels take place for trivial matters and it is a world of "little men" whose "daring souls" challenge for flirtatious contests in card plays, which draws a contrary image to that of the great battles of epic heroes who are men of honor fighting for the name of their family and their country. Instead it is a battle of worthless ambitions "Where Wigs with Wigs, with Sword-knots Sword-knots strive" and "Beaus banish beaus and Coaches Coaches drive" not for a heroic ideal but for levity.

In *The Rape of the Lock*, quarrels of barons are not examples to a heroic quest which includes the search for moral virtue that brings good reputation and honour; but it is a search for an opportunity that will satisfy the trivial desire of a foolish mentality. Strive among the lords and barons is for the attention of young ladies who become the object of male desire. Besides, men are depicted as "Birth-night Beau"s who seek to seem fashionable just like a lady does. In its mock-epic form, *The Rape of the Lock* draws male role models in a subverted way through which roles of virtuous noble heroes of epic tradition are converted into manners of dandies who pursue women in "Courtly Balls and Midnight Masquerades" (Canto I, 72). *The Rape of the Lock* attacks the misguided values of a society in which

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women may easily become symbols of vanity and victims of violence and rape. It also satirizes people who seek false ideals instead of considering genuinely important issues.

The women in the poem are depicted in a “coquette”ish manner that leads them to “joy in gilded Chariots” which brings nothing but frivolity. Nicholas Hudson says that “In the rape of the lock, then, Pope cannot have been plausibly mocking guardian angels or prayers to the dead. Rather, his point was that fashionable Catholic society had replaced these angels with a quasi-metaphysical realm of vanity and material greed. *Their* guardian angles protect an expensive wardrobe; *their* departed souls are women who perpetuate their vanity” (2016: 101). Belinda is accompanied by many supernatural powers like Sylphs and Nymphs. They are Belinda’s guardians like those of the ancient warriors, yet not in a high valued heroic behavior. Pope’s mock-epic, mock-heroic motifs are signified within the reversal of roles in men and women in the poem. However women are still at the target of male violence and force at the end of the poem, it is women who are described within epic warriors’ attitudes. The image of Belinda before her toilet is represented like a mirror image of a heroic warrior who gets ready for the battle, yet the notions are very different: Belinda wearing her white robe, like the warrior wears his armour, is characterized with her cosmetic power unlike the warrior who is bestowed inherited strength both physically and intellectually. The ritualized arming of the hero is replaced by a woman’s arming beauty and charm by means of combs, pins, puffs and powders. Cosmetics take the place of weapons. In Belinda’s portrayal of greatness, Pope creates irony and satirizes the false public values such as beauty, and outward appearance.

The Baron, admiring the locks of Belinda, is represented very much like Satan in Milton’s *Paradise Lost*. He is adamant in getting the locks and, like Satan, he will have it “by force” and “by fraud” which does not draw a heroic image. Mimicking the epic tradition of sacrificial rituals before the great battles, Baron leaves “all the trophies of his former Loves” behind, and Belinda’s grooming ritual is also like a military action of getting readiness for a battle. Belinda is depicted as a woman who has the attention of all and also described as lady enchanting everyone with her beauty. She is like a Goddess who has power over all:

Bright as the Sun, her Eyes the Gazers strike,

And, like the sun, they shine on all alike. (Canto II, 14-15)

Belinda’s locks, which are the center of attention in the poem are like the labyrinths enslaving men, making them captive and subordinate:

Love in these Labyrinths his Slaves detains,

And mighty Hearts are held in slender Chains (CantoII, 23-24)

Belinda’s locks are at the target of male desire. Watchful spirits are careful and ready for the approaching battle which will bring “some dire disaster” that “stain her [Belinda’s] honour” evidently. So the rape of the lock is a kind of threat to her chastity and honour, representing the rape of woman body enchanting male desire, which later turns into male aggression and violence.

Pope’s description of the Hampton Court palace also contributes to the mock-epic style. He represents the palace as a place where both serious and trivial matters take place. It is not like the Hereot hall in *Beowulf* or Arthur’s Camelot where great deeds of faithful

soldiers are rewarded, patriotic promises are made and great celebrations are held in the name of honourable men. Hampton Court is a palace where tea parties are held, gossips are made, and frivolity reaches its peak level. The card game played in the Court is rendered as a battle by parodying the heroic bravery and heroic challenge. Belinda is depicted like a lady in a romance genre, yet it is she who is in “thirst of fame”, not any one of the male guests. Besides, Belinda “burns to encounter two adventurous Knights” (Canto III, 25). It has an ironical meaning: Belinda needs two knights to win the play but in its deeper meaning Belinda, like a lady of a romance, seeks opportunity to tempt the “adventurous knights” among the players of the card game, which refers the courtly love tradition that includes the seduction of the lady by the heroic knight. The game of Ombre is rendered to a war where the “armies” of Belinda and Baron encounter. In this battle women are the dominant figures. Ralph Cohen states that

“While endowing all the men with such ‘feminine’ qualities as weakness, cowardice, vanity, and romantic sentimentality, Pope reverses the process by attributing to the women traits commonly associated with men. Both Thalestris- whose name is an allusion to the man-like Amazons- and Belinda are characterized as ‘fierce’ ” (1972: 56).

This reversal of the sexual roles is also evident in the phases of game of Ombre. When it is Belinda’s turn, she attacks by using “her Sable Matadores” and gets victory with her King whereas Baron defences with “his warlike Amazon” and becomes a loser. The deals of both players are represented like a military maneuver:

His warlike Amazon her host invades

Th’ Imperial Consort of the Crown of Spades (Canto III, 67,68).

King and Queen cards are like the generals of these armies who lead the armies according to military tactics:

Th’ embroidered King who shows but half his face,

And his refulgent Queen, with Pow’rs combined,

Of broken Troops an easy Conquest find (Canto III, 76-78).

Pope attributes the militaristic characteristics to the cards so well that the reader is able to imagine the “Clubs, Diamonds” and “Hearts” are like the proud, powerful soldiers, willing to conquer, spread on the battlefield, but unlike great battles in which heroes struggle for the honour of their country, these “soldiers” are the tools of a flirtatious love game.

Pope’s allusion to Nisus and Scylla also helps to develop the reversed gender roles:

Ah cease rash Youth! desist ere ‘tis too late,

Fear the just Gods, and think of Scylla’s Fate!

Changed to a Bird and sent to flit in Air,

She dearly pays for Nisus’ injured Hair! (Canto III, 121-124).

In Greek mythology Scylla cuts her father Nisus’ purple lock which has a magic power that would guarantee him life after death. Cohen suggests that “Pope has not only managed to diminish the gravity of the Baron’s ‘theft’ by comparing it to

patricide, but he has obviously switched genders in his poem by having the man clip the lock and be raged after by the woman” (59).

The way the Baron gets the lock is alluded to a heroic challenge. Like a knight, the Baron is assisted by a lady, Clarissa, who arms him with scissors, “the two-edged weapon”. Baron makes several attacks to get the lock and just as his power was about to expire, he gets the lock with his last effort. After losing the lock, Belinda is represented like a God-like image whose power could destroy everything whereas the men are described and categorized with monkeys:

Then flashed the living Lightning from her Eyes,

And Screams of Horror rend th’ affrighted Skies.

Not louder Shrieks by Dames to Heav’n are cast,

When husbands or when monkeys breathe their last (Canto III, 155-158).

Men’s power is rendered to that of a monkey. They are associated with monkey, not with the boastful, brave warriors that contribute to the foundation of the great history of a nation. An epic should have a founding myth that includes the importance of family heritage as a cultural value by representing the characters as the sons of their fathers who carry a moral code in their natures that include courage, loyalty, reputation and generosity. As to the Baron, he is deprived of genuine heroic virtue which he inherited from his family and his “deed” does not help to establish a sound identity that constructs a model behaviour for future generations. His “Honour, Name and Praise shall live!” in the name of vanity led by a meaningless pride. The oaths are not made by the symbols of national identity like a flag, a sword, or a shield:

But by this Lock, this sacred Lock I swear (Canto IV, 134).

It is the “rape of the lock”, not any heroic virtue, which establishes baron’s triumph. Having lost the lock, Belinda also lost her virtue and honour the existences of which are suspicious anyway. Pope criticizes the wrong ideals of a society. Christa Knellwolf argues that “the poem, hence, relies on the logic that her beauty (or rather, her carefully fabricated attractiveness) implies guilt, and not truth, because she used artificial (cosmetic) means to present herself in public as beauty” (1999: 141). Pope is understood suggesting that people seek fame and virtue by means of physical appearance. They pay attention to pretentious looks in the public, which is obvious in Belinda’s words:

Oh hadst thou, Cruel! Been content to seize

Hairs less in sight, or any Hairs but these! (Canto IV, 174,175)

Although Belinda favours the beauty and outward appearance, she becomes aware of the importance of having a virtuous soul in Canto V:

Beauties in vain their pretty Eyes may roll;

Charms strike the Sight, but Merit wins the Soul (Canto V, 33, 34).

The last battle between Belinda and the Baron is a parody of long descriptions of weapons, Baron’s defeat by snuff, and his diminished achievement. Baron becomes the target of ridicule obviously when he sneezes under the effect of the snuff. He is very far away of a heroic image.

Mock-heroic style is also obvious in description of the bodkin that Belinda received from her mother like a legacy. Pope adds a history to the hairpin like the sword of a hero in an epic would have a history of its own:

Then in a Bodkin grac'd her Mother's Hairs,

Which long she wore, and now Belinda wears (Canto V, 95, 96).

The poem does not offer any solution to the situation. Rather it is a critique of the false ideals and of the people who support the continuity of those false ideals. Pope trivializes the matter under the mock-epic style. He parodies the falsity that takes its origin from the vain desires for the sake of self-satisfaction. The challenge for a moral virtue is reversed to a challenge for vanity and frivolity in *The Rape of the Lock*. In that challenge women, even if represented in contradictory images of Belinda, have manly traits and are described as "fierce" characters, whereas men are categorized with the monkeys, lap-dogs and parrots that are condemned to perish all together. Pope satirizes the ethos of the characters and that of the society. He becomes the critique of the false ideals that guide not to genuine moral virtue that would keep society in its ideal state, but to the vanity that would deprave the society and bring nothing but frivolity.

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