Alexander Pope

The Rape of the Lock

by Peter Cash

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To Elijah Fenton (1683-1730)

Alexander Pope (1688-1744)
The Rape of the Lock (1712/1714/1717)

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GENERAL INTRODUCTION

In 1759, Oliver Goldsmith contributed to his own periodical magazine *The Bee* an essay entitled 'Account of the Augustan Age in England': in this essay, he reflects that 'the Augustan Age in England' was coterminous with the reign of Queen Anne from 1702 to 1714. Goldsmith is attempting to identify that period in English literary history when writers sought consciously to emulate writing in the reign of the Roman Emperor Caesar Augustus (27 BC-14 AD). The Latin poets on whom English poets sought to model themselves included Virgil, Horace and Ovid.

Margaret Drabble (*The Oxford Companion to English Literature*, 1985) points out that the Italian poet Petrarch (1304-1374) was the first writer to model his work upon classical works and she explains that he did so in the belief that a writer could not otherwise 'produce great literature'. Where Petrarch led other European writers followed, first in the Latin language itself and then in their own native languages; these neo-classical writers set out to imitate the forms – epic, eclogue, elegy, epigram, epistle, ode, satire – in which poets during the reign of the Emperor Augustus had excelled.

Long before Goldsmith wrote his essay, George I, who reigned from 1714 to 1727, had attempted specifically to cultivate for himself a regal identity in the image of Caesar Augustus; he had even gone so far as to christen his eldest son George Augustus (later George II). Historically, it might therefore be safer to argue that the Augustan Age in English literature runs for the first half of the eighteenth century. Culturally, too, there remained a consensus among writers of this time – Addison, Pope, Swift, Steele, Gay – that only classical forms and precepts could adequately and competently express an understanding of human experience.

In the introduction to his edition of **The Rape of the Lock**, John Heath-Stubbs explains that Augustan writers believed implicitly in two kinds of correctness: formal and moral. He writes:

> This ideal of correctness is central to Pope and to his age, and it is a moral as much as an aesthetic ideal. Correctness meant adherence to the rules which criticism had deduced from the practice of the great poets of classical antiquity and which these poets had themselves discovered in nature. Nature was not so much the external nature of landscape (though the concept included that also) as human nature, the root quality of man's mind, everywhere and in all ages the same, modified only by accidental, local and temporal circumstances.

Pope, then, works without any modern notion of relative values. His uniformitarian outlook – his belief in a common human nature, 'everywhere and in all ages the same' – means that he thinks/judges his fellow men only in terms of unforgiving absolutes.

The great meeting place of Augustan writers was the coffee-shop. Daniel Button was the proprietor of Button's Coffee-House, situated in Russell Street, Covent Garden: foremost among his literary customers was Richard Steele who, between 1709 and 1714, edited or co-edited three periodical magazines: *The Tatler*, *The Spectator* and *The Guardian* (this latter from Button's Coffee-House itself). Although it had a print-run of only 3,000 copies, each issue of *The Spectator* (which Steele edited with his fellow Old Carthusian, Joseph Addison) is said to have reached 60,000 Londoners.

The stated aim of *The Spectator* gives a clear idea of the issues which mattered to this readership and which were discussed in the clubs, the houses and the shops; this was "to enliven morality with wit, and to temper wit with morality .... to bring philosophy out of the closets and libraries, schools and colleges, to dwell in clubs and assemblies, at tea-tables and coffee-houses." Pope himself belonged to the Scriblerus Club: founded in 1712 and disbanded only on his death in 1744, this was an informal group of friends which also included Jonathan Swift, John Gay, Thomas Parnell and Dr John Arbuthnot (to whom Pope eventually wrote his great epistle). It met to discuss matters of social importance, including dull writing and flawed character; especially vilified were the scribblers/hack writers of Grub Street, an ancient epithet for the thoroughfare [= Milton Street, Cripplegate] along which journalists were alleged to 'grub' for bits of scandal, 'grub' for a living. According to Heath-Stubbs, the Club's object was 'a concerted attack by means of satire and irony on pedantry and dull and bad writing of all kinds'.

Fundamental to the neo-classical view of the world was the idea that human beings were incapable of further progress/of improvement. In the Golden Age, man had perfected himself; from the standards of Ancient Greece and Ancient Rome, there could be only decline. Writers could do no better than imitate; critics could do no more than monitor vigilantly lest any falling-off became too steep. Encouraged by Leibniz's *Theodicy* of 1710, Pope's own age subscribed complacently to the doctrine of 'cosmic Toryism'. Pope, a Roman Catholic, was a cosmic Tory. There is no stouter defence of the status quo than Epistle I of his **Essay on Man** (1734):

> And, spite of Pride, in erring Reason's spite,
> One truth is clear, 'Whatever is, is RIGHT'.

Of course, such a doctrine provided Pope's class with an excuse for its indifference to the widespread suffering of its fellow human beings, no matter what the causes; furthermore, it fostered a belief that God, in allowing his creatures to suffer cruelties and injustices, had a clear purpose. In Epistle III of his **Essay**, Pope reminds his readers that the structure of eighteenth-century society is hierarchical: that there is a Great Chain of Being in which each sub-division of creature – God, angels, men, animals, insects, plants, minerals – has its divinely appointed place. It is such moral certainty that informs **The Rape of the Lock**.

CANTO I

Pope introduces the poem by means of a letter to Mrs Arabella Fermor (1696-1737). In this prose introduction, he explains that the poem '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'. Pope's vocabulary ('only', 'little') reveals that he owes her an explanation, for he has written the poem – in which she is portrayed as Belinda – without her knowledge.

The occasion for the poem is a party prank which, in the summer of 1711, had caused a rift between two Catholic families of aristocratic rank. Arabella Fermor (sweet sixteen at the time) was a belle of London society, already celebrated in her circle for her conspicuous beauty; one portrait confirms that she had golden hair curling up from her shoulders. Lord Petre (Robert, 7th Baron Petre) was an impulsive twenty-year-old, a 'rash youth' who, out of sheer devilment, had taken a pair of scissors to one of Arabella's 'equal curls' and thereby spoilt the picture. The reason for the Fermors' bitter indignation was that women in Queen Anne's time were valued almost exclusively for their physical appearances.

Lord Petre's cousin John Caryll, 2nd Baron Caryll of Durford, intervened, asking Pope 'to make a jest of it, and laugh them together again' [as told to Joseph Spence]. From the outset, Pope's attitude is that this quarrel is a storm in a tea-cup. From his Letter of Dedication, it is clear that he thinks that the Augustan values of 'good sense and good humour' should prevail: to be exact, that Arabella should be better able to take a practical joke. From his very title, it is clear that he thinks that Arabella is over-reacting: after all, there is something oxymoronic about the 'rape' (a serious offence) of a 'lock' (a trivial adornment). From start to finish, it is this kind of incongruity which accounts for the humour – and the 'good humour' – of the poem.

The Rape of the Lock is a mock-heroic poem: that is, a form of satire in which a trivial event is given an added importance by an incongruous use of epic/heroic devices. Pope writes about the snipping off of Belinda's lock in an elaborate language which is totally out of keeping with the frivolity of the event; he makes her grievance look ridiculous by exaggerating its impact on the world/by ludicrously over-estimating its significance.

Ian Jack observes that this genre had been devised 'for the very purpose' of resolving petty quarrels and that it combines 'the two sorts of writing in which the age was most interested: epic and satire'. Specifically, **The Rape of the Lock** is a satire in that it makes a humorous criticism of Belinda's fit of pique; it *mocks* her behaviour by describing it in a style which elevates it to an inappropriately *heroic* status.

The epic poem – such as Virgil's ***Aeneid*** or Milton's ***Paradise Lost*** (1667) – involves a continuous narrative of heroic action; it is for this reason that such poems are also called 'heroic' poems. Because Pope intends to mock this heroic genre, Canto I begins as follows:

> What dire offence from am'rous causes springs,
> What mighty contests rise from trivial things,
> I sing – This verse to Caryll, Muse! is due:
> This, ev'n Belinda may vouchsafe to view.
> Slight is the subject, but not so the praise,
> If She inspire, and He approve my lays.

Few poems in English depend more heavily for their effects upon a foreground knowledge of earlier literature than **The Rape of the Lock**. Here, Pope is relying upon his readership's familiarity with the first eleven lines of the ***Aeneid*** and the first six lines of ***Paradise Lost***. Where Milton invokes a 'heavenly Muse', Pope substitutes John Caryll (1667-1736) and thereby creates a degree of bathos which puts Arabella's high dudgeon in its place. It takes J. S. Cunningham to point out that, for the effect of the third couplet, Pope requires from his

readers an even more scholarly knowledge of Virgil's ***Georgic*** IV in which that poet justifies his much earlier choice of a 'slight' subject-matter.

To the extent that Pope is relying for his effects upon a variety of classical sources, **The Rape of the Lock** is a pastiche of Latin verse; because he creates his effects for fun, it is a parody. Cunningham acknowledges the contrast between the mighty and the trivial 'to the ironic disparagement of the latter' and notes 'the shift from epic grandeur to mock-epic absurdity'; at the same time, he is quick to interject that Pope's mockery of the heroic mode is not without its own seriousness. If an epic shows how heroes ought to behave in battle, then a mock-epic might show 'how lords and ladies ought' to behave in polite society. In this way, Pope's witty poem can amount to a serious criticism of eighteenth-century social values.

Appropriately for his purpose, Pope composes **The Rape of the Lock** in heroic couplets: pairs of rhymed iambic pentameters in which one sentence concludes after two lines with a monosyllabic snap or thump. For this reason, Pope writes with a consistent panache; what creates such verve is the certainty that the syntactical unit will terminate with a masculine rhyme at the end of the second line. Frequently, the tone of his writing is disingenuous:

> Say what strange motive, Goddess! could compel
> A well-bred Lord t' assault a gentle Belle?
> Oh say what stranger cause, yet unexplored,
> Could make a gentle Belle reject a Lord?
> In tasks so bold, can little men engage,
> And in soft bosoms dwells such mighty Rage?

Here, the intonation is controlled by the confident expectation of the clinching rhyme-sound: when he asks these three questions, his tongue is audibly in his cheek. He is only pretending not to know the answers: on the one hand, he knows that lords, *not* being 'well-bred', are often guilty of sexual 'assault'; on the other, he is aware that ladies, being socially dependent and vulnerable, will therefore be too timid to 'reject' [= resist] them. How, then, can 'little men' such as Pope (only four feet six inches tall) be equal to the mighty task of explaining why Lady Arabella has taken umbrage at Lord Robert?

At the start of the narrative, Pope portrays Belinda ('still her downy pillow prest') as a sluggish adolescent, unable to get herself out of bed in a morning. Her sleepiness supplies him with an immediate opportunity to introduce the neo-classical machinery of the poem: 'the Rosicrucian doctrine of Spirits'. In his Letter of Dedication, Pope explains that an epic poem requires its heroes to act under supernatural supervision; for this device, he has turned to the Rosicrucians, a Masonic society of German mystics who subscribe to the mediaeval belief that 'the four Elements are inhabited by Spirits': air/sylphs, earth/gnomes, water/nymphs, fire/salamanders. From this company, Pope selects Belinda's guardian angel, a sylph named Ariel whose speech occupies the following eighty-eight lines of the poem.

By his choice of language, Pope implies that these sylphs are akin to Milton's angels (as described in ***Paradise Lost*** Book I). The purpose of Ariel's speech is to explain the heroic function of these supernatural agents: specifically, he explains that his precise role in Belinda's post-pubescent life is to protect her against men: 'but most beware of Man!' To this end, Ariel issues a dire warning of a 'dread event' impending that very day.

In ironic juxtaposition with Ariel's noble speech stand the two verse-paragraphs which recount what Belinda did next. Pope punctuates Ariel's speech in heroic manner ('He said') and then proceeds to describe how Belinda manages to drag her lazy bones out of bed:

> He said; when Shock, who thought she slept too long
> Leaped up, and waked his mistress with his tongue.

The effect of this juxtaposition is bathos, created by the incongruous intervention of Belinda's lap-dog. Self-evidently, Shock is not a character of heroic stature: first, the animal's impatience with the heroine is itself out of keeping with heroic convention; second, he slobbers all over her, a transaction conveyed by means of the circumlocution ('with his tongue') which comically completes the rhyme. Here, Pope portrays Belinda as a giddy female. He confirms that, as soon as she awakes, she sets eyes on a love-letter ('a Billet-doux') with the result that Ariel's serious warning flies straight out of her pretty little head.

Now, Pope portrays Belinda as a vain beauty: as soon as she rises, she sits in front of a mirror and applies cosmetics. At the start of the final verse-paragraph, the ironic contrast –

> And now, unveil'd, the Toilet stands display'd,
> Each silver Vase in mystic order laid.
> First, rob'd in white, the nymph intent adores,
> With head uncover'd, the Cosmetic powers.
> A heav'nly Image in the glass appears,
> To that she bends, to that her eyes she rears;
> Th' inferior Priestess, at her altar's side,
> Trembling, begins the sacred rites of Pride

– is between a holy shrine and a dressing table. Belinda idolizes herself: 'in the description of the toilet-table Pope shows Belinda lavishing on her own beauty the adoration which should be reserved for a higher object' (Ian Jack). The verb 'adores' betrays the close relationship which she enjoys with the 'treasures' (perfumes and powders, pins and combs) upon her table. Because these 'Cosmetic powers' augment her looks, she prostrates herself before them; upon seeing her own enhanced 'Image in the glass', she worships it with a religious reverence which becomes narcissistic. The chiastic movement of Pope's line – 'To that ..., to that' – captures her rhythmical ritual of genuflection and supplication. Because it mocks an ego of epic proportions, the passage is a satire of female vanity; as such, it is a humorous criticism of a serious character-flaw. Before her altar-like table, Belinda is a 'priestess' who enacts 'the sacred rites of Pride'. J. S Cunningham observes that this paragraph owes a general debt to a poem written to his wife by Charles Montagu, 1st Earl of Halifax: *On the Countess Dowager of [Manchester].*

Finally, Pope's strategy is to write about Belinda's boudoir as if it is Achilles' tent (in which 'glitt'ring spoil' refers not to shining armour, but to powder compacts and jewelry boxes). Continually informing the poem is Pope's Letter of Dedication in which he likens 'the ancient Poets' to 'many modern Ladies': 'let an action be never so trivial in itself, they [both Poets and Ladies] always make it appear of the utmost importance'. By describing a coquettish female putting on her make-up as if she is a great warrior arming himself for battle, Pope makes fun of 'the utmost importance' which gentle belles attach to their personal appearances. The ironic parallel –

> Now awful Beauty puts on all its arms;
> The fair each moment rises in her charms,
> Repairs her smiles, awakens ev'ry grace,
> And calls forth all the wonders of her face

– is between two kinds of conquest, one military, one sexual; it is between a man dressing to kill literally and a woman dressing to kill metaphorically. In order to conquer, Belinda makes an effort: first, the verb 'repairs' implies that she is filling in her facial cracks with an eighteenth-century polyfilla; second, the genitive phrase 'wonders of her face' suggests that her good points are seven in number and 'Ancient'. Pope's final touch is especially playful. Because the invisible sylphs are 'busy' doing Belinda's hair and arranging her dress, Betty (her maid) finds herself 'prais'd for labours not her own'. By its careful placing, the noun 'labours' mischievously insinuates that creating Belinda's look is a Herculean task.

CANTO II

Pope has an incorrigible sense of fun. Nowhere is the tone of his writing more disingenuous than in the tortuous sentence which describes the progress of Belinda's barge up the River Thames. The epic echo is of Aeneas' voyage up the River Tiber (***Aeneid*** VII):

> Not with more glories, in th' etherial plain,
> The sun first rises o'er the purpled main,
> Than issuing forth, the rival of his beams
> Launched on the bosom of the silver Thames.

By means of circumlocution, Pope suggests that Belinda's voyage is just as grand and stately; by means of a classical hyperbole, he suggests moreover that her 'rival' is not Aeneas, not even Queen Elizabeth I, but 'the sun' itself. His elaborate syntax parodies the heroic idiom; his epithet for Belinda ('the rival of his beams') both complicates and elevates a simple figure. As her launch progresses, the Virgin Nymph is presented as acknowledging her people with her own queenly air:

> Favours to none, to all she smiles extends,
> Oft she rejects, but never once offends.
> Bright as the sun, her eyes the gazers strike,
> And, like the sun, they shine on all alike.
> Yet graceful ease, and sweetness void of pride,
> Might hide her faults, if Belles had faults to hide.

Here, Pope's style is based closely upon Bishop Thomas Sprat's model of an English style. The grammatical correspondences, the syntactical parallels, are active in 'bringing all things as near the mathematical plainness as they can' (1667). By writing with such formal ease, Pope is suggesting that Belinda's progress towards Hampton Court is serene. Within his closed couplets, his lines maintain a chiastic balance. In the first couplet, the words are equally weighted: 'favours' (plural noun) with 'smiles' (plural noun); 'to none' (dative phrase) with 'to all' (dative phrase); 'oft' (adverb) with 'never once' (adverb); 'rejects' (verb) with 'offends' (verb). Unfortunately, Belinda's serene appearance is deceptive. With his tongue in his cheek, Pope says that, 'if Belles had faults to hide', then the sunshine of Belinda's smile would blind beholders to hers. The implication is that Arabella's/Belinda's beautiful smile – 'Belinda smil'd, and all the world was gay' – does exactly that: in particular, it blinds Lord Petre/the Baron to her intense pride in her appearance/to her vanity.

At this stage of the narrative, Pope mentions that Belinda 'nourish'd two Locks': that is, that she took a hubristic pride in the 'equal curls' on each side of her 'smooth iv'ry neck'. It is in keeping with his mock-heroic purpose that hair styled in such a coquettish way should be 'to the destruction of mankind'. At the next stage of the narrative, Pope paints his portrait of Belinda's nemesis, Lord Petre. He introduces 'the Baron':

> Th' advent'rous Baron the bright locks admir'd;
> He saw, he wish'd, and to the prize aspir'd.
> Resolv'd to win, he meditates the way
> By force to ravish, or by fraud betray.

Pope's tri-colonic arrangement of his verbs suggests that the Baron's achievement will be in some way commensurate with Julius Caesar's conquest of Britain: 'Veni, vidi, vici' (55 BC). At the same time as he mocks the scale of the Baron's adventure, he gives us the *beau monde* portrayed in Pierre Choderlos de Laclos' epistolary novel ***Les Liaisons Dangereuses*** (1782); here, his Virgilian antithesis ('By force .... by fraud') predicts the ruthless ways in which both the innocent Cécile de Volanges (ravished) and the virtuous Madame de Tourvel (betrayed) find themselves used in that decadent world. This realistic undercurrent puts Belinda's

subsequent ire in perspective; such epigrammatic couplets stress that 'the rape' is not a rape as it so easily could have been and sometimes was.

Meanwhile, Pope proceeds to make fun of the Baron's own self-image. To assist him in his pursuit of women, the Baron – as if he were a hero in an epic poem – wishes to enlist the aid of the gods; to win their favours, he has raised an unlikely 'altar'. By this comparison, Pope lampoons the lengths to which the young lothario has gone; in doing so, he captures the extent to which this mere youth fancies himself in the role of a great lover. What this romantic warrior stacks religiously in his tent are the spoils of his previous conquests:

> – to Love an altar built,
> Of twelve vast French romances, neatly gilt.
> There lay three garters, half a pair of gloves;
> And all the trophies of his former loves.

Compared with a true warrior, this philanderer appears more than faintly ridiculous – an effect achieved by the comical use to which he has put his pile of novels. The Baron is a serial seducer who keeps 'trophies' (a garter, a glove) of his intimate encounters, finding for each item a place upon his DIY 'altar' of tomes. This hero is not so much a killer as a lady-killer. In his effort to propitiate the gods, he is portrayed as regarding relics of his earlier affairs with a pious reverence which such accoutrements obviously do not merit.

At this stage of the narrative, Pope reminds us that Ariel is overseeing developments. Pope's language ('with careful thoughts opprest') aligns 'the Sylph' with Agamemnon (***Iliad*** X); conscious of the 'impending woe', Ariel – like a great general – calls together his fellow sylphs and reminds them of their responsibilities. Pope's description of these fairy figures is both colourful and resourceful, suggesting that such creatures ('transparent forms, too fine for mortal sight') may well inhabit a parallel dimension outside common knowledge. As Ariel prepares to address his 'militia', Pope's Homeric turn of phrase ('Superior by the head') once more mocks the seriousness with which the eponymous event will be taken.

Once more, it is incongruous that Ariel's address ('and thus begun') should begin in a grand manner. Ariel assigns his 'lucid squadrons' to 'various tasks': whereas some are responsible for the elements themselves, others go about 'humbler' business. Ariel charges his home guard with ensuring that no harm comes to Belinda, 'the brightest Fair'; his difficulty is in predicting 'where' this 'threat' will come from. Given that epic poetry requires the treatment of national/universal catastrophe, it is fitting and proper that he should consider the 'dire disasters' which might befall his heroine. The three couplets in which he speculates –

> 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 her masquerade,
> Or lose her heart, or necklace, at a ball;
> Or whether Heav'n has doom'd that Shock must fall

– are scathingly ironic at the expense of Belinda's character. In his Letter of Dedication, Pope – remember – has assured Lady Arabella that 'the character of Belinda, as it is now manag'd, resembles you in nothing but in Beauty'; here, however, his self-contained couplets encapsulate juxtapositions which imply a serious criticism of her values. In the first couplet, Ariel makes a nonchalant use of 'or'; by his disingenuous use of this co-ordinate conjunction, he suggests that Belinda would make no emotional/moral distinction between losing her virginity ('break Diana's law') and discovering a crack in her favourite vase.

In the second and the third couplets, Ariel makes an accomplished use of zeugma. Grammatically, syllepsis occurs where one verb applies equally [= both literally OR both metaphorically] to two direct objects; what typifies Pope's wit are his sylleptic statements in

which a single verb works both literally and metaphorically according to the object which it is given. In the second couplet, the grammatical construction is not sylleptic, but zeugmatic. Here, the verb 'stains' applies first metaphorically to 'honour' and then literally to 'brocade': as the grammar gives equal weight to both kinds of staining, so (again) it makes no emotional/moral distinction between lost virginity and soiled fabric. In the third couplet, Ariel makes a zeugmatic handling of 'lose': as the grammar gives equal weight to 'heart' and 'necklace', so it makes no emotional distinction between falling in love and misplacing a material possession. Such usage points directly to the topsy-turviness of Belinda's values. The final rhyme serves to indict the broader scale of female values. Deeply to upset a young woman of this world, it would take not the loss of a trinket, but the death of her lap-dog. For this reason, 'Ariel himself shall be the guard of Shock'.

In effect, Ariel is recognising that, in Queen Anne society, a sullied reputation is the moral equivalent of a mark on a 'new' dress. Given the promiscuous climate, Ariel details no fewer than 'fifty chosen sylphs' to look after Belinda's petticoat: in such a society, even 'that seven-fold fence' [= the woman's farthingale skirt, an earlier form of crinoline] has been 'known ... to fail'. The locution 'known to fail' is a form of litotes: knowingly, Ariel is understating the frequency with which belles would find themselves pushed into ante-rooms and their skirts lifted. The innuendo is that they were accosted not unwillingly.

In 1754, Samuel Johnson (***Preface to Shakespeare***) wrote that 'the end of writing is to instruct; the end of poetry is to instruct by pleasing'. Nothing is more 'pleasing' than the range of exquisite punishments which Ariel then imagines for the sylph who fails to discharge her duty and protect Belinda. The negligent sylph may find herself 'wedg'd whole ages in a bodkin's eye' or dangled over a cup of hot liquid where she will glow 'in fumes of burning Chocolate'

> And tremble at the sea that froths below!

Pope delights in scaling down the physical torments so that they become poetically compatible with the social milieu in which Belinda moves. The epic poet treats his readers to lists of the tortures which treacherous allies and vanquished foes can expect to suffer; because of its light-hearted mode, **The Rape of the Lock** is a poem in which the mock-epic poet can parody this convention: not boiling oil, but steaming cocoa! In the process, this poet puts the preoccupations of eighteenth-century London into perspective.

Throughout the poem, one satirical effect follows another. Once more, Pope punctuates Ariel's speech with an epic device ('He spoke') which is out of keeping with the speaker's stature: that is, no bigger than a bodkin's eye. At the end of Canto II, Pope heralds the imminence of the 'dire event' and describes it in lofty, portentous terms ('the birth of Fate') which become comical because it does not live up to them.

CANTO III

Up the River Thames, Belinda makes her way to the social gathering where her fate awaits her. For Virgil's Carthage, Pope substitutes Hampton Court which ironically has its own 'rising tow'rs':

> Close by those meads, for ever crown'd with flow'rs,
> Where Thames with pride surveys his rising tow'rs,
> There stands a structure of majestic frame,
> Which from the neighb'ring Hampton takes its name.

This passage is a classic example of epic *descriptio*. Pope sets the scene of the heroic action – except that this 'structure of majestic frame' is not the setting for the kind of event that

Aeneid IV depicts. Consistently, this poetry has the effect of 'pleasing' because Pope affords to his reader 'the sophisticated pleasure of recognizing ironical parallels to familiar passages in Homer and Virgil' (Ian Jack). With his active sense of humour and his keen sense of artistic purpose, he transmutes this pastoral description into a satirical account of eighteenth-century manners:

> Here Britain's statesmen oft the fall foredoom
> Of foreign tyrants, and of nymphs at home;
> Here thou, great Anna! whom three realms obey,
> Dost sometimes counsel take – and sometimes Tea.

Once again, he creates bathos by means of his sylleptic statements. In each couplet, there is an ellipsis in which one word ('fall'/'take') is understood differently in relation to two other words ('tyrants', 'nymphs'/'counsel', 'Tea') which it governs or modifies. Whereas we might rightly and properly expect Queen Anne's venerable ministers to be plotting the downfall of foreign adversaries, we might not expect them to be spending an equal amount of time thinking of ways to get young girls ('nymphs') into bed. Whereas it is right and proper that Queen Anne, 'whom three realms obey', should be meeting her Privy Councillors, it is less becoming that she should spend so much time drinking tea (pronounced 'tay'). It is Pope's zeugmatic handling of the verb 'take' which audibly deflates the pretensions of the Court. 'Three realms': The Act of Union between England and Scotland had been signed only in 1707; improbably, the third realm is France – to which England still lay claim!

Ian Jack emphasises that Pope is not concerned to 'ridicule' the major mode of epic poetry; as a mock-heroic poet, Pope's aim is to belittle the causes of the quarrel between the Fermors and the Petres and 'laugh them together again' [as told to Joseph Spence]. To this end, he depicts courtiers concerned less with the serious business of governing in the Queen's name, more with an uninterrupted life of leisure:

> Snuff, or the fan, supply each pause of chat,
> With singing, laughing, ogling, and all that.

The characters who populate Hampton Court are distracted by light entertainments to the point of obsession; they are portrayed as preoccupied with 'snuff', stuff and nonsense/with tittle-tattle. Whilst the ladies fan themselves and chatter, the gentlemen eye every bosom which heaves into view. If the colloquial cadence of 'ogling and all that' is out of keeping with heroic idiom, then this is because the flirtatious exchange of glances is a prelude to conduct unbecoming any hero or heroine. Pope flouts stylistic decorum ('and all that') in order to mock not the heroic mode, but the social frivolity and sexual promiscuity of Queen Anne's court.

In Appendix I, J. S. Cunningham (1966) reproduces **The Rape of the Lock** as the text first appeared in *Lintot's Miscellany* in 1712. In this original, there is Canto I (142 lines) and Canto II (192 lines); these, however, are not the same Canto I and Canto II as appear in Pope's revised version of 1714 – to which he adds Canto III, Canto IV and Canto V to give a grand total of 794 lines. Into his second version, Pope introduces the entire machinery of Ariel and his fellow sylphs; in addition, he inserts passages which allude to episodes in epic poetry – with the result that verse-paragraphs from his original Canto I and Canto II (1712) find themselves redistributed to Canto II and Canto III (1714). Into Canto I, Pope inserted that passage in which Belinda adorning herself paralleled Achilles arming himself in Virgil's ***Aeneid***. In Canto III, he stages a dramatic card game and inserts a commentary upon its development which could easily be of the heroic games in Homer's ***Iliad***. The card game is Ombre which, in spite of its complexities, had come into vogue in the 1660s and continued to sweep Europe throughout the eighteenth-century; at this time, it was a three-handed game, played one against two. It says something for Belinda's spiritedness (if not also for her sexual proclivities) that she is the one prepared to take on the 'two advent'rous Knights'. In Canto III, the game of Ombre uses a Rouen deck of 40 cards from which each of the three players has been dealt a nine-card hand.

In Canto III, Pope transforms this fast-moving game of Ombre into 'an allegory of the sex war' (as Cunningham puts it); it becomes a metaphor for the battle of the sexes. In extending this metaphor, it helps that Ombre (a precursor of Whist) is played upon a table of green baize; as a direct result, Pope is able to refer with aplomb to 'the velvet plain', 'the verdant field' and 'the level green'.

Scholars (including Cunningham) have attempted to reconstruct the course of this particular card game: that is, to follow Pope's running commentary on the action. It is not easy to do so and – fortunately – not necessary to do so. It is helpful to know that 'Spadillio', 'Manillio', 'Basto', 'Pam' and 'Codille' belong not to Pope's mock-heroic nomenclature, but to the poetic terminology of the game itself. It is only essential to know that this particular game comes to 'depend' upon the ninth and final trick and that Belinda wins it, trumping the Baron's Ace of Hearts [low] with her own King of Hearts! [Spadillio = Ace of Spades, Manillio = Deuce of Spades, Basto = Ace of Clubs, Pam = Knave of Clubs, Codille = the term which signifies Victory]

Hubris infects Belinda's elated reaction to this triumph. As Pope observes, she exults at her own peril:

> Oh thoughtless mortals! ever blind to fate,
> Too soon dejected, and too soon elate!
> Sudden, these honours shall be snatch'd away,
> And curs'd for ever this victorious day.

Pope interrupts his narrative in order to deliver a Virgilian verdict upon this turn of events. He resorts to epic *sententiae* which echo Turnus' speech in ***Aeneid*** X, forewarning in these sententious statements that Belinda's joyous celebrations are premature. These two sentences pass a solemn comment on the action; at the same time, they effect a transition to the next stage of the narrative at which the Baron peevishly seeks revenge.

The Rape of the Lock relies for its effects upon sustained foregrounding. The rhetorical model for the next stage is the Homeric feast at which a military victory was celebrated: for this grand occasion, Pope substitutes a coffee-break. He treats this interlude ironically. His figures of speech – 'shining Altars of Japan' for polished coffee-tables, 'China's earth' for porcelain crockery, 'smoking tide' and 'fuming liquor' for the coffee itself – endow this trivial pursuit with an incongruous splendour. By these fulsome metonyms, Pope suggests that coffee is an exotic and heady brew; structurally, it is important because it has an intoxicating effect on the Baron. Literally, it goes to his head and gives him ideas; the worse for coffee, he thinks up 'new stratagems' to get even with Belinda. To his description of this hedonistic 'repaste', Pope adds a delightful touch: so that Belinda does not burn her tongue, some sylphs waft air over her coffee; in this line, the alliteration is on **s** when she **s**ips her drink and on **f** when they **f**an it.

Once more, the poet's sententious voice makes itself heard, this time telling the 'rash youth' Ovid's cautionary tale of Scylla who likewise stole a lock of hair and lived to regret it; his magniloquent tone thereby parodies the youth's juvenile obsession. In his great chapter, Ian Jack quotes Pope's postscript to his own translation of Homer's ***Odyssey***: that 'the use of pompous expression for low actions ... is ... the perfection of the Mock Epick'; to this extent, **The Rape of the Lock** is perfect, not least in the passage which describes the 'rape' of the lock itself. To satirise this climactic moment of his narrative, Pope resorts repeatedly to the classical device of periphrasis. It is a circumlocutory device which enables him to treat the Baron's weapon of choice as if it is exactly that: a heroic weapon, not an ordinary pair of scissors. On the one hand, Pope's periphrastic expressions excuse him from using a word – 'scissors' – which does not accord with eighteenth-century poetic diction; on the other hand, they are metonyms which (as R. P. C. Mutter puts it) give a 'ludicrous dignity' to the things. The opportunity arises when

> Clarissa drew with tempting grace
> A two-edg'd weapon from her shining case.

Clarissa (Martha Blount 1690-1762) hands her knight not a 'spear', but a puny pair of clippers. The Baron takes up 'the little engine' and prepares to snip. At first, 'a thousand sprites' [= sylphs] leap to Belinda's defence, but to no avail .... Ariel, reposing upon a locket at Belinda's cleavage, where her 'ideas' are said mischievously to rise and fall, detects to his amazement 'an earthly Lover lurking at her heart'; by extra-sensory perception, he gathers that Belinda does indeed harbour sexual fantasies which involve the Baron and duly retires from the fray 'with a sigh'. Immediately, the 'rape' takes place:

> The Peer now spreads the glitt'ring Forfex wide,
> T' inclose the lock; now joins it, to divide.
> Ev'n then, before the fatal engine clos'd,
> A wretched Sylph too fondly interpos'd;
> Fate urg'd the shears, and cut the sylph in twain,
> (But airy substance soon unites again)
> The meeting points the sacred hair dissever
> From the fair head, for ever, and for ever!

Belinda's hubris meets its nemesis. Pope's vocabulary – 'Two edg'd weapon', 'little engine', 'glitt'ring Forfex', 'fatal engine', 'shears', 'meeting points' – pretends that the prank is of vast importance: of these periphrases, 'fatal engine' is most humorous at the expense of the Fermor-Petre altercation because it is Virgil's metonym for the Trojan horse in ***Aeneid*** II and it thereby elevates the clipping off of Belinda's lock to a scale at some variance with the cataclysm of the Trojan War. In the first couplet, Pope is aiming at a sort of onomatopoeia, asking the very structure of the second line – or, rather, its last six syllables – to do the paradoxical work of the scissors. By coming together, the two scissor-blades cut apart the trained strand of Belinda's hair; in this manoeuvre, the comma ('it, to') enacts the part of the scissor-pin. At the end of the fourth couplet, Pope's exclamation ('for ever, and for ever!') echoes Belinda's melodramatic cry that she has suffered irreparable damage – as if, in fact, she *has* lost her virginity to rape.

Disingenuously, Pope writes as if the Baron's 'sacrilegious' severing of Belinda's lock has cosmic repercussions. The rhetorical model for this response –

> Not louder shrieks to pitying Heav'n are cast
> When husbands or when lap-dogs breathe their last;
> Or when rich China vessels fall'n from high
> In glitt'ring dust and painted fragments lie!

– is from Homer's ***Iliad*** XIV. By dint of its triviality, the Fermor-Petre kerfuffle is expressly symptomatic of the society in which it occurs; in these couplets, Pope uses classical hyperbole in order gently to mock its upside-down scale of values. Imagining Belinda's 'screams' at the loss of her lock, he remarks that we do not hear any 'louder shrieks' from young ladies when their husbands or their dogs die or when a valuable vase crashes to the floor and lies in smithereens. By reference to these accidents, Pope registers the degree of Belinda's distress: in her little world, husbands matter no more than animals and minerals – and personal appearances are more important than any of them. Instructively, the convoluted construction ends with an exclamation-mark: here, Pope is not so much recording a reaction to the broken vase as gasping at the muddled values of the female who dropped it.

There are more things in heaven and earth than are dreamt of in the Baron's philosophy, for he measures his own 'triumph' exclusively in terms of his society's petty values. He is confident that his 'triumph' will live as long as Mrs Manley's scandalous *Atalantis* (1709) is read and as long as young ladies consent to 'assignations'; without knowing it, he is counting on a time-scale which should be embarrassed by the brevity of fashion, but isn't. Of course, the insinuation ('the glorious Prize is mine') is that the Baron, in seizing Belinda's lock of hair, has seized not a spoil of war, but her virginity – or, if not, then the right to it.

The final verse-paragraph of Canto III is not inconsistent with this idea. Pope composes a meditation, not upon the power of Time, but upon the power of Steel; he reflects that empires fall, not when they fail to withstand the power of time, but when they are put to the sword. For Belinda, the consequence is logical. Pope concludes Canto III with a rhetorical question which he borrows from Catullus and asks in Catullus' voice:

> What wonder then, fair nymph! thy hairs should feel
> The conqu'ring force of unresisted steel?

On the one hand, he may be referring only to the 'force' of Clarissa's scissors; on the other hand, he may be alluding to the hardness of the Baron's erection which Belinda, 'nymph' that she is, would be unable to resist. On the one hand, he may be referring only to Belinda's lopped lock/her severed 'hairs'; on the other hand, he may be alluding to her pubic 'hairs'. Lest this reading seem indelicate, it is necessary only to recall the title of the poem and to hear this final question in conjunction with the final question of Canto IV: there, Belinda, speaking in her own voice, wonders openly whether conquest in private would not be preferable to humiliation in public.

CANTO IV

At the start of Canto IV, Pope's description of Belinda echoes Virgil's depiction of Dido in ***Aeneid*** IV: in the first couplet, he portrays Belinda as having had her 'secret passions' stirred and implies that she is mistaking an infatuation with the Baron for Dido's deep love for Aeneas. This portrayal seems to confirm that she would much rather that the Baron had cut off her maidenhead than her lock. The Baron ('rash youth') was impetuous: if only he had paused to proposition her, then her lock, if not her hymen, might still be intact. Accordingly, the anaphoric opening of Canto IV [= not + adjective + noun] concludes with two couplets –

> Not tyrants fierce that unrepenting die,
> Not Cynthia when her manteau's pinn'd awry,
> E'er felt such rage, resentment, and despair,
> As thou, sad Virgin! for thy ravish'd Hair

– which point again at 'the topsy-turvy chaos of values in Belinda's world' (Jack): in this light, the 'Virgin' is 'sad' not only because she has lost her hair, but also because she is envious of it: that is, she is still herself unravished and a virgin. Her 'rage' at this frustrating turn of events is – as we shall see – a splenetic rage.

From the age of 12, Pope had been educating himself in classical literature. Since first looking into George Chapman's translation of Homer, his head had become filled with its narratives and its expressions: for instance, he knew Dryden's translation of Virgil's ***Aeneid*** (1697) intimately. In 1714, he proposed his own translation of Homer's ***Iliad*** which went through serial publication between 1715 and 1720. Consequently, Pope, in crafting **The Rape of the Lock**, never had to reach far for his classical allusions. The third of these allusions – introduced into the 1714 revision of the poem – is Umbriel's journey to the Underworld which both parallels and parodies the journeys to the Underworld in epic poetry.

Umbriel is another Rosicrucian spirit: not a Sylph, a creature of Air, but a Gnome, a creature of Earth. In Canto III, Ariel, upon perceiving Belinda's silly susceptibility to the Baron, gave up trying to protect her from a welcome ravishing at his hands and left the field. Into this breach flies Umbriel: 'a dusky, melancholy sprite', he is temperamentally equipped to exploit the rancorous situation which he has inherited and he wastes no time at all in descending to Pope's imagined version of the Underworld/Hades – 'the gloomy Cave of Spleen'.

For this subterranean location, Pope turns for inspiration to Robert Burton's ***The Anatomy of Melancholy*** (1621). Burton (1577-1640) was a Jacobean scholar who had categorised the humours on which contemporary anatomy and psychology were based. Burton's compendious treatise examines in encyclopaedic detail the malady of Melancholy [= Spleen/morose self-absorption/clinical depression] supposedly caused by an excess in the human system of one of the four humours, black bile. Dominating the Cave of Spleen is the Queen of Spleen: viz. the Queen of Bad Temper.

According to Burton's ***Anatomy***, Melancholy or Spleen was a mental affliction; at the same time, its physical symptoms were pain – 'Pain' – in the left side of the body (where the spleen is located) and migraines – 'Megrim' – supposedly caused by the vapours which an enlarged spleen sent up to the brain: for this reason, people spoke commonly of an attack of 'the Vapours' (in which hallucinations can occur). Pope conducts his own autopsy of this condition. When Umbriel arrives at his 'dismal' destination, he discovers that attendant upon the Queen are 'two handmaids', one on each side of her 'throne':

> Here stood Ill-Nature like an ancient maid,
> Her wrinkled form in black and white array'd.

One personification – Ill-Nature – is an old maid: according to Burton, the common source of an ill nature is sexual denial/frustration (of the very kind from which Belinda is suffering). The other figure – Affectation – is no more than two years older than Belinda herself and is quickly recognisable. Affectation lisps, tilts her head coquettishly and practises hypochondria: for instance, she feigns an illness simply so that she can lie abed in a 'new night-dress'. The proper names announce how heavily symbolic this setting is. The point of this scene in the 'grotto' is to show that Ill-Nature and Affectation are both literally and metaphorically attendant on Spleen/Bad Temper. Although Pope never indicates which lock was raped, Burton's theory suggests that it must have been the lock on Belinda's left-hand side.

As he approaches the throne, Umbriel makes his way past countless 'bodies chang'd to various forms by Spleen': that is, past personalities disfigured and made to look ridiculous ('Here living Tea-pots stand') by Bad Temper. Just as Aeneas carried a golden bough in Hades, so Umbriel – as he prepares to petition the Queen of Spleen – has 'a branch of healing Spleenwort in his hand': in this guise, he salutes the 'wayward Queen' and presents her with his credentials as a trouble-maker. Although he can sound like Shakespeare's Puck, Umbriel ('raise a pimple on a beauteous face') is more malevolent. The basis on which he asks her to supply him with the wherewithal to keep Belinda in a bad mood –

> Hear me, and touch Belinda with chagrin:
> That single act gives half the world the spleen

– is the collateral damage which her tantrum would then cause; his plea, of course, is entirely consistent with the earlier vaunt that Belinda has only to smile and 'all the world' is 'gay' [= in a good mood]. Exuding an ill will, the Queen of Spleen ('Goddess') grants him permission and, as if he were an epic adventurer, such as Ulysses, equips him with both 'a wondrous Bag' (of 'sighs, sobs, and passions') and 'a Vial' (a small bottle of 'fainting fears, soft sorrows, melting griefs, and flowing tears'). Umbriel's plan is to exploit Belinda's misfortune and turn her against the world: that is, goad her into a petulant reaction to her mishap and ensure that she goes on reacting bitterly (just as Lady Arabella did).

At the next stage of the narrative, Umbriel returns from Hades to Hampton Court where he discovers that Thalestris (Lady Browne) is ministering to Belinda, attempting to comfort her in her distress. He empties 'the swelling bag' over their heads and rouses Thalestris to rhetorical anger. Under the influence of the contents, she becomes an *agent provocateur*. By means of anaphora, Thalestris, living up to the name that Pope has given her, constructs a furious diatribe which echoes with a classical indignation:

> Was it ***for this*** you took such constant care

The bodkin, comb, and essence to prepare?
For this your locks in paper durance bound
For this with tort'ring irons wreath'd around?
For this with fillets strain'd your tender head,
And bravely bore the double loads of lead?

Here, Pope uses his knowledge of eighteenth-century hair-dressing, writing about Belinda as if she were a Greek or Roman captive who, having 'bravely' suffered a series of tortures, escapes only to be defeated and dishonoured on the battlefield. As if she really were Queen of the Amazons, the Thalestris-figure urges her girl not to stand for such mistreatment and exhorts her instead to react with rancour/with splenetic rage to the perpetrator of the dastardly deed. By the cumulative forcefulness of her rhetorical questions, amplified by their syntactical parallels, she winds Belinda up.

The model for this tirade is not Homer, not Virgil, but both of them. Not for the first time, Pope puts into his speaker's mouth an address which catches the tone of the epic poet; because he is being disingenuous, he writes with a complete nonchalance. By means of anaphora, Thalestris echoes Hecuba's voice in ***Iliad*** XXII and Aeneas' voice in ***Aeneid*** II:

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!
How shall I, then, your helpless fame defend?
'Twill then be infamy to seem your friend!

Here, the ironic comparison is between two visions of the future, one rather less horrific than the other: Hecuba foreseeing Hector's death, Lady Browne foreseeing Arabella's discomfiture. For the fourth time in the poem, Pope catalogues a series of trivial events or eventualities by which Augustan high society (the *beau monde*) takes its moral bearings: 'sooner', rants Thalestris, 'let men, monkeys, lap-dogs and parrots perish' than suffer such humiliation in silence. As we know from Canto II, the Baron, a builder of altars, is a bright young spark, an ostentatious character: just as Belinda takes pride in showing off her looks, so he takes pride in showing off his 'trophies'. What is feared is that he will now wear Belinda's lock in a 'crystal' ring which he can flash. Such an outcome is not to be tolerated ....

It is not necessary to keep imagining the scene for oneself. In 1856, Charles Robert Leslie (1794-1859) painted an oil on a canvas entitled ***Sir Plume Demands the Restoration of the Lock***: approximately 4 feet by 6 feet in size, it pictures the populous drawing room at Hampton Court, sumptuous with period detail. The portrayed episode arises when Lady Browne (Thalestris) entreats her husband Sir George Browne (Sir Plume) to demand the return of the lopped lock. In Leslie's painting, Belinda is a brunette; this colouring is at variance with the contemporary portraits of Lady Arabella Fermor, but complies with Pope's description in Canto V of a 'sable ringlet'. At the same time, Leslie's portrait ***does*** show that the ringlet on her right-hand side remains intact.

J. S. Cunningham considers that this brief episode is 'the broadest burlesque of heroic ire'. These couplets –

"My Lord, why, what the devil?
Z—ds! damn the lock! 'fore Gad, you must be civil!
Plague on't! 'tis past a jest – nay prithee, pox!
Give her the hair" – he spoke, and rapp'd his box.
It grieves me much (reply'd the Peer again)
Who speaks so well should ever speak in vain

– are ironic at the expense of Sir Plume's idiocy and inarticulacy: by pleading Belinda's case in an incoherent series of fashionable expletives, he makes a mockery of its heroic pretensions. Pope's mimicry of Sir Plume's snuff-fuelled speech-style is a satire of Belinda's

disproportionate reaction; it is 'not the ridicule of a literary form but the setting of a lovers' tiff in true perspective' (Jack). The Baron's/the Peer's calm retort adds to the criticism of the Fermors' histrionics; by his disingenuous reference to Sir Plume's eloquence, he rejects the demand, but then explains himself in an oath which tries to dignify his own petulant position partly by its solemn accents and partly by the Homeric felicity of its diction: 'by this Lock, this sacred Lock'/'long-contended honours'. At every turn, **The Rape of the Lock** is a humorous criticism [= a satire] of the *beau monde*'s grandiose idea of itself.

At this point, Umbriel empties the vial over Belinda's breast with the result that she responds in the same elegiac key. In Part IV of his chapter, Ian Jack refers to 'the dignified march of the verse': here, the movement of the verse *sounds* exactly as if it is a funeral lament. What is more, the word-order casts Belinda as Achilles (***Iliad*** XVIII) bewailing the death of Patroclus:

> For ever curs'd be this detested day,
> Which snatch'd my best, my fav'rite curl away!

For fifteen couplets, her grave cadences mourn a ravished 'curl' of hair/a lost lock. No fewer than eight exclamation-marks punctuate the sentences in which she bewails her own hamartic complacency and sheer bad luck. Belinda's self-recriminations are such as might inspire pity for any tragic heroine, any vanquished queen. The ironic conflict, however, is between the dramatic/'mighty' tone of her utterances and the 'trivial' situation that they describe. From Canto I, we know that Ariel forewarned her of impending doom: here, Pope attunes the heroic conception of an 'ill omen' (her parrot 'Poll' did not talk and her lap-dog Shock 'was most unkind') to the small scale of her world. Throughout the poem, Pope has been politely endeavouring to suggest that splenetic rage is an inadequate and undignified response to an act of puerile horse-play and that a sense of proportion must always be kept. The closing couplets of Belinda's lament –

> The sister-lock now sits uncouth, alone,
> And in its fellow's fate foresees its own;
> Uncurl'd it hangs, the fatal sheers demands,
> And tempts once more thy sacrilegious hands.
> Oh hadst thou, cruel! been content to seize
> Hairs less in sight, or any hairs but these!

– confirm and emphasise the extent to which this common sense has been lost. Decorum requires a balanced, symmetrical appearance; to preserve a couth and comely exterior, it will now be necessary to take 'the fatal sheers' (a seventh metonym) to the remaining ringlet. In all seriousness, Belinda is declaring that, if the Baron were going to 'seize any' of her hairs, then he should have seized her pubic hairs simply because they are 'less in sight' (as she puts it). Her ringlets are among her public parts: given a choice, she would therefore have opted for a sexual assault, a fondling of her private parts. To the 'rape' of a lock, rape itself is preferable because the 'rape' of a lock is there for all the world to see!

CANTO V

Pope completed **The Rape of the Lock** in 1714 – with one exception. In 1717, he felt impelled to insert Clarissa's speech which occupies Lines 9–34: at the time, he said that it was a 'Parody of the Speech of Sarpedon to Glaucus in Homer'. In effect, the speech is not so much a parody as a pastiche in that it takes very seriously the two related virtues of Augustan life which he extols in his Letter of Dedication: 'good sense and good humour'. When William Warburton came to edit **The Rape of the Lock** in 1751, he quoted Pope as having said that Clarissa's speech to her fellow women was added 'to open out more clearly the moral of the poem'. It does so explicitly:

How vain are all these glories, all our pains,
Unless ***good sense*** preserve what beauty gains ....

What then remains but well our pow'r to use,
And keep ***good humour*** still whate'er we lose?
And trust me, dear! ***good humour*** can prevail,
When airs, and flights, and screams, and scolding fail.

The moral of the poem is that beaux and belles, boys and girls, should always show 'good sense' and 'keep good humour' no matter what else it costs them. Anticipating Dr Johnson's precept, Pope's poetry aims to 'instruct' his readership in an alternative attitude to life: that it should be lived not in a mood of seething resentment, but with 'good humour'. Consequently, Clarissa issues a stern reminder that outward appearances matter less than good character. At the start of **Epistle to a Lady**, Pope famously quotes Martha Blount's assertion that 'Most Women have no Characters at all' (1734).

As a result, Pope's tone is didactic: in Clarissa's speech, he is telling his readership (including Robert and Arabella) how to behave. Informing Clarissa's advice is a dark awareness of the transience of beauty and the consequent vanity of human wishes; unfortunately, her wise counsel does nothing to prevent the fracas ('airs, and flights, and screams') which ensues. For the remainder of Canto V, Pope follows the course of the mock-epic battle between the Fermors and the Petres – in which everything is scaled down to the dimensions of the baroque drawing room. In this context, Pope bestows upon Lady Browne (Thalestris) Virgil's epithet for the warrior princess Camilla: virago – derived from 'vir', the Latin noun for 'man'. Combat [= a frantic series of quarrels and tussles] commences when this 'fierce Virago' calls her family 'to arms':

All side in parties, and begin th' attack;
Fans clap, silks russle and tough whalebones crack ....

When bold Sir Plume had drawn Clarissa down,
Chloe stepp'd in, and kill'd him with a frown.

In such a caper, looks *can* kill. Cunningham observes that 'the language of combat' – wounding, killing, perishing, dying – has an 'epic grandeur', but that it descends here and becomes a coded means by which to describe a low comedy of manners. As befits this attenuated theatre of war, Belinda's weapon of choice is a bodkin [= an instrument used in needle-work]. Eyes flashing, she heads towards the Baron in search of satisfaction. After first subduing him with 'a charge of snuff', she draws her 'deadly bodkin' and jabs him in the side. As the innuendo reveals, the Peer – 'who sought no more than on his foe to die' – wants nothing more than to sleep with Belinda: that is, ejaculate inside her/'die' on her. Accordingly, his response is gallant:

Nor think, to die dejects my lofty mind:
All that I dread is leaving you behind!
Rather than so, ah let me still survive,
And burn in Cupid's flames – but burn alive.*

Still under the influence of the vial, Belinda issues her own demand for the restoration of her shorn lock; her sorrowful cry "Restore the Lock!" reverberates to the rooftops. At this epic imperative, events – in keeping with the mode of the poem – take a comic turn:

The Lock, obtain'd with guilt, and kept with pain,
In ev'ry place is sought, but sought in vain.

The contentious curl is nowhere to be found! It transpires that it has been magically transported to the heavens above and there transformed into a star:

A sudden Star, it shot thro' liquid air,
And drew behind a radiant trail of hair.

As Pope indicates, the comparison is with Berenice of Cyrene, Queen of King Ptolemy III of Egypt (c. 246 BC) who dedicated her hair to the Goddess Venus and then had a constellation – *Coma Berenices* – named after her. Such a fantastic resolution to the dispute pays an extravagant and tactful compliment to Arabella/Belinda. Given the heroi-comical mode, it makes sense that the lock might undergo an Ovidian metamorphosis: if it has become a comet (trailing hair) or a sun, then 'the Beau-monde' can behold it enviously 'from the Mall'. How about that? For a female with Belinda's sense of priorities, what better consolation could there be? Consequently, Pope's coda –

Then cease, bright Nymph! to mourn thy ravish'd hair,
Which adds new glory to the shining sphere!

– appeals to her vanity, appearing (as it does) to guarantee her a kind of immortality: 'fame'. Not least by its literal application of the adjective 'bright', Pope's peroration keeps the grace and the wit [= the exemplary 'good humour'] which characterises the whole poem.

*Lord Robert Petre died of smallpox on 22nd March, 1713.

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Elijah Fenton, Pope's co-translator, was born in the Shelton area of Stoke-on-Trent.
At Newcastle-under-Lyme School, there is a bas-relief of his face on the wall of Room A28, known nowadays as The Fenton Room.

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