

ALEXANDER POPE [1688–1744]

The Rape of the Lock^o

Born in London to a successful textile merchant, Alexander Pope (1688–1744) spent his childhood in the country, stunted by tuberculosis of the spine (his height never exceeded four and a half feet). Pope was also limited by his Catholicism, which prevented him from going to university, voting, or holding public office. He turned to writing and gained considerable fame for his satire “The Rape of the Lock” and for his translations of Homer. Fame also brought ridicule and vehement attacks from critics holding different political views, and Pope struck back with nasty satires of his detractors. Later in his career, he wrote a good deal of ethical and philosophical verse.

CANTO I

What dire offence from amorous causes springs,
What mighty quarrels rise from trivial things,
I sing—This verse to Caryl, Muse, is due:
This, even Belinda may vouchsafe to view:
Slight is the subject, but not so the praise, 5
If she inspire, and he approve my lays.
Say what strange motive, Goddess, could compel
A well-bred lord to assault a gentle belle?
Oh, say what stranger cause, yet unexplored,
Could make a gentle belle reject a lord? 10
And dwells such rage in softest bosoms then?
And lodge such daring souls in little men?
Sol^o through white curtains did his beams display, *the sun*
And oped those eyes which brighter shine than they.

The Rape of the Lock: The poem is based on an actual incident: Lord Petre had cut a lock of hair from the head of Arabella Fermor, which led to an estrangement between the two prominent families. Pope’s friend John Caryl, to whom the poem is addressed (I.3), suggested that Pope write a humorous poem about the incident that might lead to a reconciliation. The poem printed here is the original version in two cantos, which Pope said was written in less than two weeks. It was widely admired and praised when it appeared in 1712. Two years later Pope published an expanded version in five cantos.

Shock° just had given himself the rowzing shake, 15
 And nymphs° prepared their chocolate to take. *beautiful young women*
 Thrice the wrought slipper knocked against the ground,°
 And striking watches the tenth hour resound.
 Belinda rose, and 'midst attending dames,
 Launched on the bosom of the silver Thames. 20
 A train of well-dressed youths around her shone,
 And every eye was fixed on her alone;
 On her white breast a sparkling cross she wore,
 Which Jews might kiss, and infidels adore.
 Her lively looks a sprightly mind disclose, 25
 Quick as her eyes, and as unfixed as those:
 Favors 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. 30
 Yet graceful ease, and sweetness void of pride,
 Might hide her faults, if belles had faults to hide:
 If to her share some female errors fall,
 Look on her face, and you'll forgive 'em all.
 This nymph, to the destruction of mankind, 35
 Nourished two locks which graceful hung behind
 In equal curls, and well conspired to deck
 With shining ringlets her smooth ivory neck.
 Love in these labyrinths his slaves detains,
 And mighty hearts are held in slender chains. 40
 With hairy springes° we the birds betray, *snares*
 Slight lines of hair surprize the finny prey,° *fish*
 Fair tresses man's imperial race ensnare,
 And beauty draws us with a single hair.
 The adventurous baron the bright locks admired, 45
 He saw, he wished, and to the prize aspired.
 Resolved to win, he meditates the way,
 By force to ravish, or by fraud betray;
 For when success a lover's toil attends,
 Few ask if fraud or force attained his ends. 50
 For this, ere Phoebus° rose, he had implored *the sun*
 Propitious heaven, and every power adored,
 But chiefly love—to love an altar built,

I.15. **Shock:** The conventional name for a lapdog with very long hair.

I.17. **slipper . . . ground:** To summon a servant; bells were not introduced until the late 1700s.

Of twelve vast French romances, neatly gilt.
 There lay the sword-knot^o Sylvia's hands had sewn, 55
 With Flavia's busk^o that oft had wrapped his own:
 A fan, a garter, half a pair of gloves,
 And all the trophies of his former loves.
 With tender billet-doux^o he lights the pyre, *love letters*
 And breaths three amorous sighs to raise the fire. 60
 Then prostrate falls, and begs with ardent eyes
 Soon to obtain, and long possess the prize:
 The powers gave ear, and granted half his prayer;
 The rest, the winds dispersed in empty air.
 Close by those meads^o forever crowned with flowers, *meadows* 65
 Where Thames with pride surveys his rising towers,
 There stands a structure of majestic frame,
 Which from the neighboring Hampton^o takes its name.
 Here Britain's statesmen oft the fall foredoom
 Of foreign tyrants, and of nymphs at home; 70
 Here thou, great Anna,^o whom three realms obey,
 Dost sometimes counsel take—and sometimes tea.^o
 Hither our nymphs and heroes did resort,
 To taste awhile the pleasures of a court;
 In various talk the cheerful hours they passed, 75
 Of, who was bit,^o or who capotted last:^o
 This speaks the glory of the British Queen,
 And that describes a charming Indian screen;
 A third interprets motions, looks, and eyes;
 At every word a reputation dies. 80
 Snuff, or the fan, supply each pause of chat,
 With singing, laughing, ogling, and all that.

I.55. sword-knot: A ribbon or tassel tied to the hilt of a sword, sometimes the work of the sword owner's lady.

I.56. busk: Usually a strip of wood, whalebone, steel, or other rigid material used to stiffen the front of a corset. It probably refers here to the whole corset, which the baron often has wrapped around his hand (or waist).

I.68. Hampton: Hampton Court Palace, about fifteen miles up the Thames from central London.

I.71. Anna: Queen Anne (1665–1714) was ruler of Great Britain and Ireland (1702–1714), and the English Crown continued its old claim to rule France as well.

I.72. tea: In seventeenth-century pronunciation, “tea” and “obey” were perfect rhymes, as were “found” and “wound” (II. 102–03) and “hair” and “sphere” (II. 183–84).

I.76. was bit: Taken in, made the butt of a joke, or cheated in a card game;
capotted: Lost all the tricks in the card game Piquet.

Now, when declining from the noon of day, The sun obliquely shoots his burning ray; When hungry judges soon the sentence sign, And wretches hang that jurymen may dine; When merchants from the Exchange return in peace, And the long labors of the toilet ^o cease —	85	
The board's with cups and spoons, alternate, crowned; The berries crackle, and the mill turns round; ^o On shining altars of Japan ^o they raise The silver lamp, and fiery spirits blaze: From silver spouts the grateful liquors glide, And China's earth receives the smoking tide.	90	<i>dressing-table</i>
At once they gratify their smell and taste, While frequent cups prolong the rich repast. Coffee (which makes the politician wise, And see through all things with his half-shut eyes) Sent up in vapors to the Baron's brain New stratagems, the radiant lock to gain.	95	
Ah, cease, rash youth! desist ere 'tis too late, Fear the just Gods, and think of Scylla's fate! ^o Changed to a bird, and sent to flit in air, She dearly pays for Nisus' injured hair!	100	
But when to mischief mortals bend their mind, How soon fit instruments of ill they find. Just then, Clarissa drew with tempting grace A two-edged weapon ^o from her shining case:	105	<i>scissors</i>
So ladies in romance assist their knight, Present the spear, and arm him for the fight. He takes the gift with reverence, and extends The little engine on his fingers' ends; This just behind Belinda's neck he spread, As o'er the fragrant steams she bends her head.	110	
He first expands the glittering forfex ^o wide	115	

I.90. *berries . . . round*: Denotes the roasting and grinding of coffee beans.

I.91. *altars of Japan*: A table work decorated and finished in the Japanese style, with a varnish of exceptional hardness.

I.102. *Scylla's fate!*: This Scylla, daughter of Ninus, cut from his head a lock of hair that protected him to give it to her lover, Minos of Crete, who was laying siege to her father's city of Megara. Minos was shocked and refused to accept it, and Scylla was turned into a seabird (Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, VIII).

I.115. *forfex*: Latin for scissors.

To enclose the lock; then joins it, to divide;
One fatal stroke the sacred hair does sever
From the fair head, forever and forever!

The living fires come flashing from her eyes,
And screams of horror rend the affrighted skies. 120
Not louder shrieks by dames to heaven are cast,
When husbands die, or lapdogs breathe their last,
Or when rich china vessels fallen from high,
In glittering dust and painted fragments lie.

“Let wreaths of triumph now my temples twine,” 125
The victor cried, “The glorious prize is mine!
While fish in streams, or birds delight in air,
Or in a coach and six the British fair,
As long as *Atalantis*° shall be read, 130
Or the small pillow grace a lady’s bed,
While visits shall be paid on solemn days,
When numerous wax-lights in bright order blaze,
While nymphs take treats, or assignations give,
So long my honor, name, and praise shall live!

“What time would spare, from steel receives its date, 135
And monuments, like men, submit to fate!
Steel did the labor of the Gods destroy,
And strike to dust the aspiring towers of Troy;
Steel could the works of mortal pride confound,
And hew triumphal arches to the ground. 140
What wonders then, fair nymph, thy hairs should feel
The conquering force of unresisted steel?”

CANTO II

But anxious cares the pensive nymph oppressed,
And secret passions labored in her breast.
Not youthful kings in battle seized alive,
Not scornful virgins who their charms survive, 5
Not ardent lover robbed of all his bliss,
Not ancient lady when refused a kiss,
Not tyrants fierce that unrepenting die,
Not Cynthia° when her manteau’s pinned awry, *conventional name*
E’er felt such rage, resentment, and despair,
As thou, sad virgin, for thy ravished hair. 10

I.129. *Atalantis*: *New Atlantis* (1709) by Delarivière Manley was popular at the time because of its accounts of court scandal.

While her racked soul repose and peace requires,
 The fierce Thalestris^o fans the rising fires.
 "O wretched maid!" she spreads her hands, and cried,
 And Hampton's echoes, "Wretched maid!" replied,
 "Was it for this you took such constant care, 15
 Combs, bodkins, leads, pomatums to prepare?^o
 For this your locks in paper durance bound,
 For this with torturing irons wreathed around?
 Oh, had the youth but been content to seize
 Hairs less in sight—or any hairs but these! 20
 Gods! shall the ravisher display this hair,
 While the fops envy, and the ladies stare?
 Honor forbid! at whose unrivaled shrine
 Ease, pleasure, virtue, all, our sex resign.
 Methinks already I your tears survey, 25
 Already hear the horrid things they say,
 Already see you a degraded toast,^o
 And all your honor in a whisper lost!
 How shall I, then, your helpless fame defend?
 'Twill then be infamy to seem your friend! 30
 And shall this prize, the inestimable prize,
 Exposed through crystal to the gazing eyes,
 And heightened by the diamond's circling rays,
 On that rapacious hand forever blaze?^o
 Sooner shall grass in Hyde Park Circus^o grow, 35
 And wits take lodgings in the sound of Bow;^o
 Sooner let earth, air, sea, to chaos fall,
 Men, monkeys, lapdogs, parrots, perish all!"
 She said; then raging to Sir Plume repairs,
 And bids her beau demand the precious hairs 40

II.12. Thalestris: A character named for a queen of the Amazons, thus a fierce and militant warrior.

II.16. bodkin: A long pin or pin-shaped ornament used by women to fasten up their hair; **leads:** Black lead combs were used to darken hair.

II.27. toast: "A celebrated woman whose health is often drunk" (from Samuel Johnson's *Dictionary of the English Language* [1755]).

II.33–34. diamond's . . . blaze: The baron intends to encase the lock in crystal and mount it on a ring.

II.35. Hyde Park Circus: A circular drive in Hyde Park, a popular gathering place for the upper classes.

II.36. Bow: Lodgings within hearing distance of the bells of Saint Mary-le-Bow Church would be in an unfashionable part of London.

(Sir Plume, of amber snuffbox justly vain,
 And the nice conduct of a clouded cane).°
 With earnest eyes, and round unthinking face,
 He first the snuffbox opened, then the case,
 And thus broke out — “My Lord, why, what the devil? 45
 Zounds!° 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 rapped his box.
 “It grieves me much,” replied the Peer again,
 “Who speaks so well should ever speak in vain. 50
 But by this lock, this sacred lock, I swear
 (Which never more shall join its parted hair,
 Which never more its honors shall renew,
 Clipped from the lovely head where once it grew),
 That while my nostrils draw the vital air, 55
 This hand, which won it, shall forever wear.”
 He spoke, and speaking, in proud triumph spread
 The long-contended honors of her head.
 But see! the nymph in sorrow’s pomp appears,
 Her eyes half languishing, half drowned in tears; 60
 Now livid pale her cheeks, now glowing red;
 On her heaved bosom hung her drooping head,
 Which, with a sigh, she raised; and thus she said: }
 “Forever cursed be this detested day,
 Which snatched my best, my favorite curl away! 65
 Happy! ah, ten times happy had I been,
 If Hampton Court these eyes had never seen!
 Yet am not I the first mistaken maid,
 By love of courts to numerous ills betrayed.
 Oh, had I rather unadmired remained 70
 In some lone isle, or distant northern land;
 Where the gilt chariot never marked the way,
 Where none learn ombre, none e’er taste bohea!°
 There kept my charms concealed from mortal eye,
 Like roses that in deserts bloom and die. 75
 What moved my mind with youthful lords to roam?

II.42. clouded cane: Canes with heads of mottled or veined stones were considered stylish.

II.46. Zounds!: A euphemistic abbreviation of “by God’s wounds” used in oaths and asseverations.

II.73. ombre: A popular card game played by three persons; **bohea:** In the early 1700s, referred to the finest kinds of black tea.

Oh, had I stayed, and said my prayers at home!
 'Twas this the morning omens did foretell;
 Thrice from my trembling hand the patch box^o fell;
 The tottering china shook without a wind, 80
 Nay, Poll sat mute, and shock was most unkind.
 See the poor remnants of this slighted hair:
 My hands shall rend what ev'n thy own did spare.
 This, in two sable ringlets taught to break,
 Once gave new beauties to the snowy neck. 85
 The sister lock now sits uncouth, alone,
 And in its fellow's fate foresees its own;
 Uncurled it hangs! the fatal shears demands,
 And tempts once more thy sacrilegious hands."
 She said: the pitying audience melt in tears, 90
 But fate and Jove had stopped the baron's ears.
 In vain Thalestris with reproach assails,
 For who can move when fair Belinda fails?
 Not half so fixed the Trojan^o could remain,
 While Anna begged and Dido raged in vain. 95
 "To arms, to arms!" the bold Thalestris cries,
 And swift as lightning to the combat flies.
 All side in parties, and begin the attack;
 Fans clap, silks rustle, and tough whalebones crack;
 Heroes' and heroines' shouts confusedly rise, 100
 And bass and treble voices strike the skies.
 No common weapons in their hands are found,
 Like Gods they fight, nor dread a mortal wound.
 So when bold Homer makes the Gods engage,
 And heavenly breasts with human passions rage; 105
 'Gainst Pallas, Mars; Latona, Hermes arms;^o
 And all Olympus rings with loud alarms.
 Jove's thunder roars, heaven trembles all around;

II.79. patch box: A box for holding patches, the small pieces of black silk or court-plaster worn on the face by men and especially women of fashion in the 1600s and 1700s, either to hide a blemish or to show off the complexion by contrast.

II.94–95. the Trojan: Aeneas, who abandoned Dido at the bidding of the gods, despite Dido's reproaches (*Aeneid* 4.305–92) and the pleadings of her sister Anna that he stay (4.416–49).

II.106. Pallas . . . Hermes: In the *Iliad* 20.91ff, Pallas (Athena) and Hermes sided with the Greeks, Mars and Latona (Leto, mother of Apollo and Diana), with the Trojans.

Blue Neptune storms, the bellowing deeps resound;
 Earth shakes her nodding towers, the ground gives way, 110
 And the pale ghosts start at the flash of day.
 While through the press enraged Thalestris flies,
 And scatters deaths around from both her eyes,^o
 A beau and witling perished in the throng,
 One died in metaphor, and one in song. 115
 "O cruel nymph! a living death I bear,"
 Cried Dapperwit, and sunk beside his chair.
 A mournful glance Sir Fopling^o upwards cast,
 "Those eyes are made so killing"—was his last.
 Thus on Meander's flowery margin lies 120
 The expiring swan, and as he sings he dies.^o
 As bold Sir Plume had drawn Clarissa down,
 Chloe stepped in, and killed him with a frown;
 She smiled to see the doughty hero slain,
 But at her smile, the beau revived again. 125
 Now Jove suspends his golden scales in air,^o
 Weighs the men's wits against the lady's hair;
 The doubtful beam long nods from side to side;
 At length the wits mount up, the hairs subside.
 See, fierce Belinda on the baron flies, 130
 With more than usual lightning in her eyes;
 Nor feared the chief the unequal fight to try,
 Who sought no more than on his foe to die.
 But this bold lord, with manly strength indued,
 She with one finger and a thumb subdued: 135
 Just where the breath of life his nostrils drew,
 A charge of snuff the wily virgin threw;
 Sudden, with starting tears each eye o'erflows,
 And the high dome re-echoes to his nose.
 "Now meet thy fate," the incensed Virago^o cried, *female warrior* 140

II.113. Lines 113–47 include sexual innuendos, particularly the double entendre in which "die" or "kill" can mean orgasm as well as physical death.

II.117–18. **Dapperwit, Fopling:** Names of characters borrowed from recent satiric comedies.

II.120–21. **Meander's flowery margin:** "Thus, at the summons of fate, casting himself down amid the watery grasses by the shallows of Meander, sings the white swan" (Ovid, *Heroides* 7:1–2). **expiring swan:** Legends hold that the mute swan, a royal bird in England since 1462, uses its voice only as it dies.

II.126. **Jove . . . air:** In the *Iliad* (16.783ff, 22.271ff), the *Aeneid* (12.725ff), and *Paradise Lost* (4.996ff), scales are used by the gods to determine the course of future events.

And drew a deadly bodkin^o from her side.
 "Boast not my fall," he said, "insulting foe!
 Thou by some other shalt be laid as low.
 Nor think, to die dejects my lofty mind;
 All that I dread, is leaving you behind! 145
 Rather than so, ah, let me still survive,
 And still burn on, in Cupid's flames, alive."
 "Restore the lock!" she cries; and all around
 "Restore the lock!" the vaulted roofs rebound.
 Not fierce Othello in so loud a strain 150
 Roared for the handkerchief that caused his pain.^o
 But see how oft ambitious aims are crossed,
 And chiefs contend till all the prize is lost.
 The lock, obtained with guilt, and kept with pain,
 In every place is sought, but sought in vain: 155
 With such a prize no mortal must be blessed,
 So heaven decrees! with heaven who can contest?
 Some thought it mounted to the lunar sphere,
 Since all that man e'er lost is treasured there.
 There heroes' wits are kept in ponderous vases, 160
 And beaux' in snuffboxes and tweezer cases.
 There broken vows and deathbed alms are found,
 And lovers' hearts with ends of riband bound;
 The courtiers' promises, and sick man's prayers,
 The smiles of harlots, and the tears of heirs; 165
 Cages for gnats, and chains to yoke a flea,
 Dried butterflies, and tomes of casuistry.
 But trust the Muse—she saw it upward rise,
 Though marked by none but quick, poetic eyes
 (Thus Rome's great founder to the heavens withdrew, 170
 To Proculus alone confessed in view).^o
 A sudden star, it shot through liquid air,
 And drew behind a radiant trail of hair.
 Not Berenice's locks first rose so bright,^o

II.141. bodkin: A short pointed weapon, or dagger, or (as in II.16 above) a long pin or pin-shaped ornament used to fasten up the hair.

II.150–51. Othello . . . pain: *Othello* 3.4.55–98.

II.170–71. (Thus . . . view): Romulus' removal to heaven in a storm cloud was observed only by the senator Proculus.

II.174. Berenice: Wife of Ptolemy III who offered a lock of her hair to Aphrodite to ensure her husband's safe return from war; the hair disappeared from Aphrodite's temple and was turned into a constellation.

The skies bespangling with disheveled light. 175
 This, the beau monde shall from the Mall survey,
 As through the moonlight shade they nightly stray, }
 And hail with music its propitious ray.
 This Partridge soon shall view in cloudless skies,
 When next he looks through Galileo's eyes;° *telescope* 180
 And hence the egregious wizard shall foredoom
 The fate of Louis,° and the fall of Rome.
 Then cease, bright nymph, to mourn the ravished hair,
 Which adds new glory to the shining sphere.
 Not all the tresses that fair head can boast 185
 Shall draw such envy as the lock you lost.
 For, after all the murders of your eye,
 When, after millions slain, yourself shall die;
 When those fair suns shall set, as set they must,
 And all those tresses shall be laid in dust; 190
 This lock the Muse shall consecrate to fame,
 And 'midst the stars inscribe Belinda's name.

[1712]

II.179–82. “John Partridge was a ridiculous Star-gazer, who in his Almanacks every year, never fail'd to predict the downfall of the Pope, and the King of France, then at war with the English” [Pope's note].