

**POPE'S TWO VIEWS OF BELINDA
IN "THE RAPE OF THE LOCK"**

BY

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POPE'S TWO VIEWS OF BELINDA
IN "THE RAPE OF THE LOCK"

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Betty Jane Clements Martin

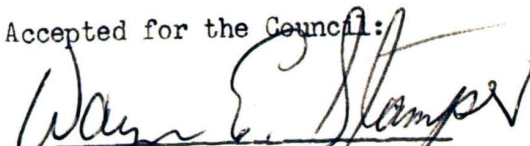
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To the Graduate Council:

I am submitting herewith a Research Paper written by Betty Jane Clements Martin entitled "Pope's Two Views of Belinda in 'The Rape of the Lock.'" I recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in Education, with a major in English.


Major Professor

Accepted for the Council:


Dean of the Graduate School

Throughout the works of Alexander Pope exists a continuing theme of exposing human nature in all its intricacies. "The Rape of the Lock" is no exception. The subject of this poem is woman in the character of Belinda. Because of her diversity of emotions and actions she is an interesting yet enigmatic personality. Because of the puzzling and sometimes seemingly contradictory character of Belinda, a closer scrutiny of her and of Pope's use of her in "The Rape of the Lock" appears inviting. Hopefully, the motive of this scrutiny will reveal some prevailing characteristic of woman.

In a letter to Mrs. Marriott which accompanied the newly published "Rape of the Lock," Pope wrote:

What excuse then, can I offer for the poem that attends this letter, where 'tis a chance but you are diverted from some very good action of useful reflection for more hours than one. I know it is no sin to laugh, but I had rather your laughter should be at the vain ones of your own sex than at me, and therefore would rather have you read my poem than my letter. This whimsical piece of work, as I have now brought it up to my first design, is at once the most a satire, and the most inoffensive, of anything of mine. People who would rather it were let alone laugh at it, and seem heartily merry, at the same time that they are uneasy. 'Tis a sort of writing very like tickling. I am so vain as to fancy a pretty complete picture of the life of our modern ladies in this idle town from which you are so happily, so prudently, and so philosophically retired.¹

This uneasiness of which Pope spoke exists because of the somewhat complicated role of his heroine and because the view of Pope's

¹Alexander Pope, Correspondence, ed. George Sherburn (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1956), I, 211-212.

moral in the poem seems unclear. Although the belittling effect of the mock-heroic is predictably meiotic, the bawdiness in the poem raises questions about the character of Belinda and about Pope's attitude toward the character.

The surface of the poem appears a glittering spoof of a trivial incident, but Pope chose this incident to explore the motivations of woman playing the mating game. As a consequence, an uneasiness occurs because of the seeming lack of an implicit statement about the motive of woman. To clarify his position, he employs the viewpoints of two other women, Thalestris and Clarissa, and the "machinery" of the guardian Sylphs. What begins as a healing of an estrangement of two families turns into an intensive probe of women, all their trappings, social functionings, courting, and flirting with the end result being a rescue for Belinda and a moral for Pope.

The occasion of the poem was the cutting of a lock from the head of Arabella Fermor by Lord Petre. These people were considered to be part of Pope's family and had long been friends. Because of the cutting of the lock, John Caryll suggested to Pope that he write a poem about it to make amends and bring the family together again. Pope says of the incident which brought about the poem that

The stealing of Miss Belle Fermor's hair, was taken too seriously, and caused an estrangement between the two families, though they had lived so long in great friendship before. A common acquaintance and well-wisher to both, desired me to write a poem to make jest of it, and laugh them together again. It was with this view in mind that I wrote the Rape of the Lock.²

²Geoffrey Tillotson, ed., The Rape of the Lock and other Poems, by Alexander Pope, Vol. II, The Twickenham Edition of the Poems of Alexander Pope (London: Yale University Press, 1962), general editor, John Butt, p. 81.

Pope's task seems twofold. He would show both virtue and fault in his character. The reader must then weigh the evidence of virtue against flaw to decide whether Pope has succeeded. Pope begins his presentation of Belinda by showing us something of her beauty. After the parody of the epic invocation we first view Belinda in the lines,

Sol thro' white curtains shot a timorous ray,
And oped those eyes that must eclipse the day:
(I, 13-14)

Sol, or the sun, is being compared with the eyes of Belinda, and the eyes are very special because they must make the day seem small in comparison to her beauty. The sun fails to wake Belinda completely, for

Belinda still her downy pillow prest
Her guardian SYLPH prolonged the balmy rest:
(I, 19-20)

The sylph guards Belinda because she is chaste and honorable and so allows her to continue sleeping while providing a most pleasurable dream of

A Youth more glittering than a Birth-night Beau,
(That even in slumber caused her cheek to glow)
(I, 23-24)

The Sylph, in the form of a handsome young man, whispers to Belinda the merits of womanhood, especially one whose element is air, for she will become a Sylph after death. He says

The light Coquettes in Sylphs aloft repair,
And sport and flutter in the fields of Air,
"Know further yet; whoever fair and chaste
Rejects mankind, is by some Sylph embraced:
(I, 65-68)

The last two lines of this quotation might suggest that the Sylph wants to preserve Belinda for himself. The coupling of the words "chaste," and "embraced," suggests opposite meanings and thereby presents an incongruity.

The beauty of the maiden lying asleep is somewhat changed when she awakes. Before Pope shows us just what makes Belinda beautiful, he shows us what she is thinking and her main interests. As she awakes, the first attention is to a love letter; the second is to her own image

A heavenly image in the glass appears,
To that she bends, to that her eyes she rears;
(I, 125-126)

If Pope intends to "laugh away" the insult to Miss Fermor, this passage, which suggests that she worships her own image or, worse, that she possesses a sinful vanity, is not in keeping with his intention. Martin Price has said of Belinda:

. . . the primary quality of Belinda is spiritual shallowness, an incapacity for moral awareness. She has transformed all spiritual exercises and emblems into a coquette's self-display and self-adoration. All of it is done with a frivolous heedlessness; she is not quite a hypocrite.³

That spiritual shallowness of which Price speaks may be seen in the following lines:

First, robed in white, the Nymph intent adores,
With head uncovered, the Cosmetic powers.
(I, 123-124)

These lines depict Belinda as a priestess; yet her adoration is not to God but to the god of Belinda herself. Belinda's beauty and her character are challenged in the lines,

Now awful Beauty puts on all its arms;
The fair each moment rises in her charms,
Repairs her smiles, awakens every grace,
And calls forth all the wonders of her face;
(I, 139-142)

³Martin Price, "The Problem of Scale: The Game of Art," in Twentieth Century Interpretations of The Rape of the Lock, edited by George Sebastian Rousseau (Prentice Hall, Inc., 1969), p. 237.

The obvious intention of making-up her face and dressing herself parallel the epic pattern of a warrior preparing for battle. These lines also suggest that Belinda's beauty does not exist naturally; instead it comes from the cosmetics of her toilette. If this suggestion is admissible, it would seem that the sweet and sleeping vision in the earlier part of Canto I has become something else in the latter part of the Canto. John Dennis, a literary critic of some talent and much self-esteem, attacks Pope on this subject. He says, " . . . there is no such Thing as a Character in the Rape of the Lock. Belinda, who appears most in it, is a Chimera, and not a Character."⁴ However, near the end of his essay he seems to reverse his judgment when he says that "There is no other Character in this Poem worth taking Notice of . . ."⁵ Dennis continues to challenge Pope's motives and even his intelligence with some specific references to the poem. He says:

She is represented by the Author perfectly beautiful and well-bred, modest and virtuous. Let us now see how he (Pope) sustains these Qualities in her, and then we shall discover what Taste he has of Nature and of Decorum. First he represents her perfectly beautiful: And yet in the latter End of this very Canto (I) he makes her owe the greater part of her Beauty to her Toilette.⁶

Besides Belinda's beauty and character, which appear to Dennis to be false, he continues to dwell on the seeming virtues of Belinda. He ironically states:

⁴John Dennis, "Remarks on the Rape of the Lock," in Critical Works of John Dennis, ed. Edward Niles Hooker (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1943), II, 1711-1729, p. 331.

⁵Dennis, p. 331.

⁶Dennis, p. 335.

But Belinda is not only shewn beautiful and well-bred, she is represented virtuous too:

Favours to none, to all she Smiles extends.

And yet in the latter End of the fourth Canto she talks like an errant Suburbian:

Oh, hast thou, Cruel! been content to seize
Hairs less in Sight, or any Hairs but these!

Thus, Sir, has this Author given his fine Lady Beauty and good Breeding, Modesty and Virtue in Words, but has in Reality and in Fact made her an artificial dawbing Jilt; a Tomrig, a Virago, and a Lady of the Lake.⁷

Of Dennis' harsh charges Samuel Johnson retaliates. He says, "It is therefore without justice that Dennis charges the Rape of the Lock with the want of a moral. . . . The purpose of the poet is, as he tells us, to laugh at 'the little unguarded follies of the female sex.'"⁸ It appears however that Johnson is being kind to Pope, for in Canto II, Belinda is compared to the serpent in the Garden of Eden in these lines.

This Nymph, to the destruction of mankind,
Nourished two Locks, which graceful hung behind
(II, 19-20)

The locks may be compared to the fruit given to Eve in Paradise, but the insinuation appears to be even stronger, for it is suggested that Belinda is aware of her sin and seeks to flaunt it. We might laugh at this conclusion, for if Belinda is truly a fallen angel, Pope has made her one with his own words, not with Belinda's actions. The words "to

⁷Dennis, p. 335.

⁸Samuel Johnson, The Critical Opinions of Samuel Johnson, arranged and compiled with an introduction by Joseph Epes Brown, Ph.D. (New York: Russell and Russell, 1961), p. 444.

the destruction of mankind," are a spoof on the serpent and it seems folly to take it literally. The insinuation is ably balanced with the gracefulness of the locks.

Stanley Edgar Hyman poses the view that the symbol of hair is used by Pope to signify Belinda's sexuality in the lines,

Love in these labyrinths his slaves detains,
And mighty hearts are held in slender chains.
With hairy springes we the birds betray,
Slight lines of hair surprise the finny prey,
(II, 23-26)

Of these lines Hyman suggests that

There is a sense in which Pope is a very knowing Freudian. The poem is one vast comic symbolic defloration, proper to a cruelly deformed poet for whom such ventures were symbolic or nothing. The hair is a fertility, or sex symbol, described in the poem as catching men as it traps birds and hooks fish. "Lock" is a pun on Freud's lock that all keys fit, and it is a pun that Pope makes explicit in the title of his Barnivelt pamphlet. Its rape by the baron is a sex act, and the baron cries triumphantly to Belinda at the end of Canto Three:

What wonder then, fair Nymph! thy hairs should feel
The conquering force of unresisted steel?
(III, 177-178)⁹

Pope's puns are indeed sexual, but they are pointedly so. In these lines,

But now secure the painted vessel glides,
The sun-beams trembling on the floating tides:
While melting music steals upon the sky,
And softened sounds along the waters die;
(II, 47-50)

the painted vessel is obviously Belinda. The sun is a fertility symbol,

⁹ Stanley Edgar Hyman, "The Rape of the Lock," Alexander Pope: The Rape of the Lock, ed., David Lougee and Robert McHenry, Jr. (Columbus, Ohio: Charles E. Merrill Publishing Co., 1969), p. 114.

and the words "melting" and "die" are echoes of Renaissance connotations of sexuality. At the same time, however, the image is one of beauty, which makes the reader forget the sexual insinuations and the fact that

Th' adventurous Baron the bright locks admired;
He saw, he wished, and to the prize aspired.
Resolved to win, he meditates the way,
By force to ravish, or by fraud betray;
(II, 29-32)

Although in the lines the Baron is pictured as a villain with no morals concerning the way he attains the locks, he is not satirized for his motive. Because

For when success a Lover's toil attends,
Few ask, if fraud or force attained his ends.
(II, 33-34)

The whole scene is softened with the gross assertion that

Belinda smiled, and all the world was gay.
(II, 52)

Dennis attacks Pope by commenting on his use of puns. He says,

But there are a great many Lines, which have no
Sentiment at all in them, that is, no reasonable
Meaning. Such are the Puns which are everywhere
spread throughout it. Of this Nature is that Pun
in the 5th Canto.

See fierce Belinda on the Baron flies,
With more than usual Lightning in her Eyes,
Nor fears the Chief th' unequal Fight to try,
Who fought no more than on his Foe to die.
(V, 77-78)

That is to say, He wish'd for nothing more than to
fight with her, because he desired nothing more
than to lie with her.¹⁰

Dennis makes his point, but he is missing Pope's intention. The fight is part of the courting game, and the ultimate end is sexual consummation. This is Belinda's goal, but the surrender must be with "honor."

¹⁰Dennis, p. 335.

Aubrey Williams also recognizes Pope's problem in depicting Belinda. He remarks that

The paradoxical nature of Pope's attitude toward Belinda is thus intimately related to the paradox of Belinda's situation, and to the sexual terms of that situation: if Belinda is to find her role of woman, she must lose the role of virgin, and the more graceful her acceptance of loss the greater victory she achieves through it.¹¹

Near the end of Canto I Belinda prepares herself for battle as does the hero of an epic. The baron, too, prepares himself to attain the prize of the lock of hair. He builds an altar, and in the following lines we watch as he prays the traditional prayer for victory.

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,
(II, 43-45)

These lines reveal some motives of the Baron. He wants the prize permanently, and so he is not just playing a game. He also wants both locks because only half of his prayer is answered; he secures one lock only. An impending war is proposed.

Cleanth Brooks views Belinda as a warrior defending her honor. He says,

If she is an able warrior, she will consent to the young man's taking the lock, though the lock still attached to her head--and on the proper terms, honorable marriage. If she is a weak opponent, she will yield the lock, and herself, without any stipulation of terms, and will thus become a ruined maid indeed.¹²

This is Belinda's dilemma and Pope's.

¹¹Aubrey Williams, "Fall of China and The Rape of the Lock," Philological Quarterly, 41 (April 1962), pp. 412-425.

¹²Cleanth Brooks, "The Case of Miss Arabella Fermor," The Well Wrought Urn: Studies in the Structure of Poetry, by Cleanth Brooks (London: Dennis Dobson, Ltd., 1947), p. 84.

And so explains the paradoxical posture of Pope toward Belinda. All must be exposed; Belinda's aim and her way of achieving it. If Belinda is a flirt and a coquette, these, too, are her weapons. After all, her aim is the attainment of a husband.

It is reasonable to assume, after reading the lines,

Belinda now, whom thirst of fame invites,
Burns to encounter two adventurous Knights,
At Ombre singly to decide their doom;
And swells her breast with conquests yet to come.
(III, 25-28)

that Belinda is truly a tease, but more importantly and unforgivable is the fact that she seeks to compete with men at cards. This action by Belinda prompts harsh assertions by Hugo M. Reichard and Earl R. Wasserman. It appears unreasonable for Reichard to say that "living in the present, she prefers her heady triumphs as a maiden to the dull glories of a virtuous wife. Her motives are those which observers of the species have singled out--'vanity,' 'desire of conquest,' 'self-love.'"¹³

Wasserman states that " . . . it is implicit that Belinda is not fighting off sexual union so much as the humiliation of marriage and its degrading social consequences. As a coquette, Belinda 'rejects Mankind' seeking only 'to win hearts and thro 'em away, regarding nothing but the triumph.'"¹⁴ However much of vanity, self-love, conquests, or playing coquette Belinda appears, and we must remember that in this

¹³Hugo M. Reichard, "The Love Affair in Pope's Rape of the Lock," PMLA, LXIX, iv., pt. 1 (1954), 887-902.

¹⁴E.R. Wasserman, "Limits of Allusion in the Rape of the Lock," Journal of English and Germanic Philology, LXV (July 1966), pp. 425-44.

game 'appearance is all,' one incident refutes all these claims:

Sudden he viewed, in spite of all her art,
An earthly Lover lurking at her heart.
(III, 143-144)

Ariel is the "he" who views the earthly lover, and at this, he

. . . found his power expired,
Resigned to fate, and with a sigh retired.
(III, 145-146)

Murray Krieger says that the lover is

. . . surely the baron, so that Pope is suggesting that on one level--that of flesh-and-blood reality--Belinda is, to say the least, a willing victim, shrewd enough to know the truth of the pronouncement later made by 'grave Clarissa': 'she who scorns a man, must die a maid.' But Belinda also--or at least her painted image--is dedicated to the game and will play it through at all costs. So the show of resistance must be maintained, with the mock-battle of love and its sexually suggestive overtones as its proper consequences.¹⁵

This "show of resistance" is simply that. The best example of this show occurs in lines 174 and 175 in Canto IV. Brooks says of these lines:

. . . a deeper sexual importance is symbolized by the whole incident. These lines indicate, primarily, of course, Belinda's exasperation at the ruining of her coiffure. The principal ironic effect, therefore, is one of bathos; her angry concern for the prominence of the lock deflates a little her protests about honor. (Something of the bathos carries over to the sexual parallel: it is hinted, perhaps, that for the belle the real rape might lose some of its terrors if it could be concealed.) Pope himself, we may be sure, was perfectly aware of it.¹⁶

The primary indication of the lines is of the idealistic nature, but the

¹⁵Murray Krieger, "The 'Frail China Jar' and the Rude Hand of Chaos," Centennial Review of Arts and Science, V, 176-194, in Judith O'Neill, ed., Critics on Pope: Readings in Literary Criticism (Coral Gables, Florida: University of Miami Press, 1968).

¹⁶Brooks, pp. 86-87.

principal effect is the realistic view of Belinda by Pope. Cleanth Brooks states that "Pope has absolutely no illusions about what the game is, and is certainly not to be shocked by any naturalistic interpretation of the elaborate and courtly conventions under which Belinda fulfills her natural function of finding a mate."¹⁷

Concerning the sexual implications toward Belinda, Austin Warren seems to view them as necessary in order to elevate her chastity. He says,

What for religion, is got by parody parallel is,
for sexual mortality, managed by insinuation.
Though it is admitted that nymphs may break Diana's
law, we see none do so; the titular Rape is but of
a lock. A characteristic passage of double-entendre
retails the difficulty of preserving a 'melting maid's'
purity at such a time and place of temptation as the
midnight masquerade, while assuring us that her male
companions' Honour, or her sylph, preserves her
virtue.¹⁸

If the sylph preserves Belinda's virtue, then it does not seem unreasonable to believe that the comparison of Belinda to the sun develops and sustains her character as a heroine. The use of the sun imagery was prevalent in traditional love poems of the day; however, it seems quite appropriate when viewed in context, especially with the lines,

This Lock, the Muse shall consecrate to fame,
And 'midst the stars inscribe Belinda's name.
(V, 149-150)

¹⁷Brooks, p. 84.

¹⁸Austin Warren, "The Rape of the Lock as Burlesque," in Rage for Order: Essays in Criticism, by Austin Warren (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1948), pp. 37-51.

Belinda begins by being compared to the sun and ultimately ends by becoming one. Although in the beginning it seems incongruous to compare Belinda to the sun, especially since it achieves such a belittling effect, it must, however, be weighed in the face of Pope's intended moral. Ian Jack says of this comparison that

There is a paradox about this image which is the paradox about the whole poem. In the simple mock-heroic, of which MacFlecnoe is a good example, the subject of the poem is compared to something great and made ridiculous by the comparison. The comparison of Shadwell to Hannibal is, simply, comic; and the result is denigration. The comparison of Belinda to the sun is different. It is a wild exaggeration, hardly less absurd for being a commonplace image in love poetry; and Pope was fully aware of its absurdity.¹⁹

But Mr. Jack does not leave Pope on a limb for long, for he goes on to explain the reason for this wild comparison:

The moral of The Rape of the Lock must not be forgotten. If he meant to include the poem amongst the early work in which 'pure Description held the Place of Sense,' Pope was being deliberately unfair. The Rape of the Lock is itself the best evidence that 'Sense' may be expressed by means of a 'fable' and made more vivid by narrative and description. For all his delight in the beauty of Belinda's world Pope never allows it to arrogate the place which rightly belongs to the sovereignty of Sense.²⁰

The agent of good sense is a woman named Clarissa. By supplying the instrument which ravishes the lock of hair, she forces Belinda into the situation of choice and reality. Clarissa understands that Belinda

¹⁹ Ian Jack, "A Complex Mock-Heroic: The Rape of the Lock," in Augustan Satire: Intention and Idiom in English Poetry (Oxford: at the Clarendon Press, 1952), p. 92.

²⁰ Jack, p. 94.

may never stop playing her game, nor stop winning, if she is left unadvised. After the rape of the lock in Canto III, Canto IV presents us with a parody of the epic visit to the underworld. The transformation from Belinda the Sun to Belinda the Darkness is found in the lines

And Ariel weeping from Belinda flew,
 Umbriel, a dusky, melancholy sprite,
 As ever sullied the fair face of light,
 Down to the central earth, his proper scene,
 Repaired to search the gloomy Cave of Spleen.
 (IV, 12-16)

Umbriel is a gnome, and gnomes in this poem represent the sprites of women who were prudes, i.e., affectedly virtuous. Belinda takes to bed, and surrounding it are the sprites of these affected virtues. There is Ill-nature and Affectation who act as handmaids to Belinda. Thus we have Thalestris' speech which because of Umbriel's bag represents the speech of an affectedly virtuous lady. She says,

Gods! shall the ravisher display your hair,
 While the Fops envy, and the Ladies stare!
 (IV, 103-104)

Sooner let earth, air, sea, to Chaos fall,
 Men, monkeys, lap-dogs, parrots, perish all!
 (IV, 119-120)

Aubrey Williams says of Thalestris that she represents a kind of empty and vicious principle of female victory and dominance at all costs, and she also gives perfect expression to the prevailing moral chaos of the poem's world:

Honour forbid! at whose unrival'd Shrine
 Ease, Pleasure, Virtue, All, our Sex resign.²¹

Wasserman's insistence that Belinda is a coquette naturally groups Belinda and Thalestris together. He says, "the coquette's ally,

²¹Williams, pp. 412-25.

Amazonia Thalestris, chooses to take it as that of a prude, who, by the poem's definition, seeks suitors only to jilt them successively in an insatiable hope for an ever-more splendid husband."²² Wasserman seems to forget that since Ariel has departed Belinda, who represents honor, he has been replaced with Umbriel, who watches over prudish women; thus the reason for the attitude of both in the Fourth and Fifth Cantos. However, we must remember that it is Belinda who in the end of the poem is immortalized.

Even Clarissa's speech does not prevent battle; however, Wasserman does say that it serves to

. . . open more clearly the Moral of the Poem by calling on Belinda to recognize that the coquette's mastery over men cannot outlast her transient beauty and that if she were to accept with heroic good humor the rape of the prenuptial lock at the inevitable risk of being a seductive and most nubile belle, she would preserve, not lose, her glorious power over men.²³

Through the character "grave Clarissa," Pope tells his moral and thus reveals his motives toward Belinda. In two lines Clarissa (the clarifier) clears the air and speaks the truth. She says,

How vain are all these glories, all our pains,
Unless good sense preserve what beauty gains:
(V, 15-16)

Clarissa perceives that Belinda has won her war if she can but contain her tendency to dramaticism. Murray Krieger demonstrates the value of Clarissa to Pope by viewing the poem as a conception of metonymy:

²²Wasserman, pp. 425-444.

²³Ibid.

The 'toyshop' society that self-importantly mistakes itself for reality is defender, too, of 'honor,' that fashionable word out of Restoration comedy which so befits this world of fashion. Appearance is all. The lock of hair is to this world what the actual body is to the real world . . . Belinda, perhaps unconsciously, acknowledges as much in her lament to the baron, in lines 175 and 176 in the fourth Canto. In honor's world the lock is the woman as the wig is the man and the sword-knot his weapon. Clarissa is the agent whereby this ideal society is exposed.²⁴

Krieger states further:

Of course, it is Clarissa who furnishes the most serious intrusion upon Belinda's world by the alien world of undeluded common-sense reality. It is she, Pope tells us in his note, who is 'to open more clearly the moral of the poem.' In her speech she breaks all the rules, says all that is unmentionable, shatters the mirror in order to replace the painted image with the flesh-and-blood creature of fleeting charms who marries, breeds, ages, and wears, has all sorts of dire consequences--eventually dust and the grave. Of course, she alone speaks the truth.²⁵

If, however, Pope allows Clarissa's speech to be the last word, his heroine is lost, and the reader may view her as a vain and frivolous coquette who submits her virtue to the Baron and to reality. If Pope allows this, an aim is realized and his moral is lost. In reality, Belinda is feminine, and Pope must sustain this fact. She is beautiful, even if more so because of her toilette. She is chaste, even while flaunting her chastity, and she must remain so to sustain heroic patterns.

The lines,

Whether the Nymph shall break Diana's law
Or some frail China Jar receive a Flaw
(II, 105-106)

are commented on by Aubrey Williams, who suggests that through the vessel

²⁴Krieger, pp. 188-89.

²⁵Ibid.

imagery Pope may be referring to the

. . . biblical image of woman as the weaker vessel, and that he is in some sense doing homage to this vessel: though Pope's view of her is laced with irony, Belinda's beauteous virginity is somehow rendered more precious, and our regard for it somehow more tender, by recognition of how easily it can be marred or shattered.²⁶

Williams states of the paradoxical attitude of Pope that it

. . . is very mixed and complicated: mocking and yet tender, admiring and yet critical. This mixed and complicated attitude, however, is at least partly the product of Pope's concern with a 'type' of human experience which simultaneously involves both loss and gain, one in which loss must be suffered if the gain is to be at all achieved.²⁷

As the battle rages the lock is lost, but in these lines it is found:

A sudden Star, it shot thro' liquid air,
And drew behind a radiant trail of hair.
Not Berenice's Locks first rose so bright,
(V, 127-129)

Reuben A. Brower finds these lines to be "elegant spoofing, literary and social."²⁸ He says, "We are amused by the absurdity of the apotheosis and the analogies to Daphnis (Caesar) and to Achilles lying 'in the Dust,' and also by the allusion to the Lock of Berenice, which was itself a spoof. (The effect is a kind of double parody.)."²⁹

²⁶Williams, pp. 412-25.

²⁷Ibid.

²⁸Reuben A. Brower, "Am'rous Causes," in Alexander Pope: The Poetry of Allusion (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1959), p. 157.

²⁹Ibid.

Of the last lines of the poem, Martin Price says:

The metamorphosis at the close, in which the lock rises above the splenetic battle and becomes an enduring source of light, is more than a wry joke. Pope has shown in small scale the ferocities that such an order can mitigate. And if it is not the stain upon honor but upon brocade that is felt like a wound, there is at least a real correspondence between those worlds of transposed scale.³⁰

But Geoffrey Tillotson sums up the situation best:

The social mockery of the Rape of the Lock is not simple, does not make a pat contribution to single-mindedness. The world of the poem is vast and complicated. It draws no line of cleavage between its 'seriousness' and its mockery. Belinda is not closed up in a rigid coterie which Clarissa and the rest of the poem mock at. Pope, fierce and tender by turns, knows no more than Hazlitt, 'whether to laugh or weep' over the poem.³¹

Throughout the poem and through the words of critics we have noted that Pope does, indeed, expose human nature. He does also present a prevailing characteristic of a certain type of woman who might be called "universal woman." In the process of accomplishing these two things he has sought to portray woman accurately. To do this he has attacked her flaws with sexual insinuations and mockeries, but he has praised her virtue of beauty. It appears that he has done it as discreetly as possible while preserving truth. Through this poem, Belinda's name, the name of woman, does shine brightly in the heavens.

³⁰Price, p. 237.

³¹Tillotson, p. 119.

A SELECTIVE BIBLIOGRAPHY OF ALEXANDER POPE

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