

Pope's attitude to Belinda in *The Rape of the Lock*

Pope's delineation of Belinda's character in *The Rape of the Lock* has provoked much controversy since the publication of this mock-heroic poem. One of Pope's contemporaries John Dennis tried to dismiss Belinda's character by saying that she is a "chimera and not a character". Many later critics have seen her as an object of Pope's satire against the female sex. Cleanth Brooks however sees Belinda quite in another light in his well known essay- "The Case of Miss Arabella Fermor". Brooks has tried to see Belinda's conduct in the poem in the context of the courtship-game in which a beautiful belle and a handsome gallant try to assert their supremacy over each other. Her position in the beau-monde is precarious and she must preserve her honour while pursuing her objective of looking for a suitable husband.

More recently, Hugo M Richard has asserted that all of Belinda's actions in the poem show that she is really a coquette whose chief delight is to flirt with men's affections and not to find a suitable husband. The truth however seems to lie somewhere in between these two extreme positions, for Belinda appears to be simultaneously a bride to be and a coquette who plays with the admiration and affection of young gallants. This complexity in the delineation of Belinda's character is attributable to Pope's own ambivalent attitude towards her.

Pope's attitude towards Belinda was governed largely by his desire to reconcile two Roman Catholic families, the Peters and Fermors, who had been estranged by the unfortunate incident of the snipping of Miss Arabella Fermor's lock of hair by Lord Petre. John Caryll, whom Pope mentions as one source of his inspiration at the beginning of his poem, asked Pope to write a poem which might rebuild a harmonious relationship between the two families. Therefore Pope's *The Rape of the Lock* may be read as his genuine attempt to seek reconciliation between the two families.

Moreover, Pope himself loved the charm and the ceremony which governed the world of beaux and belles. He could understand Belinda sympathetically because of her plight in a male dominated society in which a woman who 'scorned' a man must die a maid, but if she made herself easily accessible, she might be degraded. So in this society a woman of exquisite beauty and youth had to trade on a precarious path. Thus to a certain extent Pope's sympathies are listed on Belinda's side. But the moralist in him was also aware of the decadence of values in the fashionable society and so he is critical of Belinda as she tries to follow all the decadent values of the 18th century society despite her natural beauty, youth and charm. Thus *The Rape of the Lock* as a mock-heroic poem simultaneously exalts and subverts the pseudo-heroics of the fashionable society.

The only thing true about the character of Belinda, as Pope assures Miss Arabella Fermor in the dedicatory epistle is her unsurpassable beauty. And in the poem he gives complete evidence to suggest that Belinda did indeed possess ineffable beauty and charms because of which she is the cynosure of her fashionable society. Boat-loads of admirers throng her boat when she takes pleasure ride on the river Thames- "Fair nymph and well-dressed youth around her shone,/ but ev'ry eye was fix'd on her alone..." However Belinda's beauty is artificial and the product of an elaborate ritual of her toilette- "Now awfully 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..." similarly, in describing the effect of Belinda's beauty on the beholders, Pope presents her as consciously proud and flirtatious- "Favours to none, to all she smiles extends,/Oft she rejects, but never once offends." Here the praise for Belinda's beauty and criticism of her coquetry are simultaneously present. In the sky of the fashionable world of beaux and belles, Belinda does indeed appear as the brightest sun surrounded by a constellation of stars. But Pope's

attitude towards Belinda becomes clear from the lines- "If to her share, some female errors fall, / Look on her face, and you'll forget them all." In the first version of the poem 'forgive' was used in the place of 'forget'. In the revision, Pope changed his opinion as the kind of coquetry that Belinda displays can make one forget (but not forgive) her female faults of coquetry.

In the presentation of the battle of wits, which is also implicitly a battle of sexes, between the Baron and Belinda, Pope displays a similar ambivalence. We know that Belinda is the challenger in the game of Ombre and she desired to defeat two 'adventurous knights'. She wins the game of cards but suffers a reversal of the situation when the Baron succeeds in snipping off her lock of hair. She definitely enjoys the Baron's company as he enjoys hers. But the assault on her hair is a public outrage and the Baron has clearly violated the norm of the courtship game. In a world where the public reputation is of utmost value, a woman should be ready to sacrifice everything- ease, pleasure, virtue etc. - at the altar of 'honour'. Belinda therefore cannot accept the Baron's act as a compliment to her beauty. So Belinda makes a show of grief as well as anger and wages a 'battle' against the Baron. Pope's depiction of the battle between the sexes is ambivalent because there is ambivalence in Belinda's own attitude towards the Baron. She likes him as an admirer and lover but must express her public disapproval of his outrageous conduct. Far from confusing the issue, Pope has captured the attitude of Belinda quite clearly and expressed it with clarity as well.

This is not to say however that Pope does not criticize the vanities and frivolities of Belinda and her world. Both in the description of her toilette and her pleasure ride on Thames, Pope criticizes the false glamour and the inversion of values that govern Belinda. She is awfully vain heartless and flirtatious. Her conquests, after all, are no more than the shallow hearts of fops and rakes, and to achieve them, she not only engages herself in the 'sacred rites of pride' but even adores herself before the looking glass. Her games of cards, ride in the Thames and visit to the court, and in short, her participation in the meaningless rituals of the hollow society make her as hollow as the society of which she is the cynosure. Pope offers his criticism of the values of her world by juxtaposing the trivial with the great: "Whether the nymph shall break Diana's law/ Or some frail China jar receive a flaw..." Such juxtaposition helps the reader to understand that in Belinda's scheme of things, it is the outwards glitter and reputation, not virtue and genuine honour that matter. But since she is a part of the society which takes them as of equal value, her fault is the fault of society.

Thus to conclude Pope presents Belinda in her beauty, charm and social glory. Again, her precarious position in the male dominated society creates sympathy for her. Simultaneously however we also know that Belinda herself belongs to this hollow society. Belinda is thus both "a bride-to-be", but she is also guilty of the charge of coquetry if not in the absolute sense of the term, at least in her playing with the heart of men, however temporarily and with whatever secret motive.