

The Rape of the Lock as a mock-epic

Heroic or epic poems according to Maynard Meck are “poems like the *Odyssey* and the *Aeneid*, and *Paradise Lost*, dealing with man in his exalted aspects. Their action is weighty, their personages are dignified, and their style is elevated.” Again in all the epic poems, the gods and demons take active part in human affairs and guide the destiny of their chosen participants. Now, following the conventions and devices of a serious epic, a mock epic deals (in a serious manner and style) with situations and personages that are trivial and petty. And as a result it produces a humorous effect. In other words a mock epic or mock- heroic poem parodies the serious epic in a subtle and special way. The intention of the writer of mock epic is not to make fun of the epics or their conventions or devices. He follows instead all the conventions of the epic in order to point out the discrepancy between the heroic form and the triviality of the subject matter.

Now, coming to Pope’s *The Rape of the Lock*, Hazlitt has called the poem- “the perfection of the mock-epic”. Indeed Pope’s poem follows the conventions and devices of the great epics in nearly every way to describe a trivial incident- i.e. the cutting of a proud lady’s lock of hair by a vain-glorious lord, and the mighty contest that follows, which in turn is nothing but a tempest in a tea-cup. The mock-heroic character of the poem is perceived in the very title. Rape is a serious moral offence which means the violation of a woman’s chastity by force. However, Pope has used this term in an amusing manner. The possession of the hair of Belinda by the Baron is described by him in a mock vein. The title evokes nothing but a mock heroic sensation and well indicates the mock heroic character of Pope’s work.

The Rape of the Lock follows the serious epics in the overall structure. The poem is divided into five cantos. At the beginning of the poem is a statement of purpose and the invocation to the Muse as in a serious epic- “What dire offence from am’rous causes springs, /What mighty contests rise from trivial things, / I sing-This verse to Caryll, Muse! ... Say what strange motive, Goddess! Could compel/ A well-bred lord t’ assault a gentle belle? / Oh say, what stranger cause, yet unexplor’d/ could make a gentle belle reject a lord?” Subsequent events of the poem parody the epic structure in a similar way. With Belinda’s dream in her bed –room after sunrise, we have the dream message from Ariel, the guardian-sylph of Belinda. Then follows Belinda’s dressing up for the day’s conquests on the river Thames and at Hampton Court. The dressing-up follows the convention of the arming of the epic hero for the battle. The Baron’s sacrifice of the “trophies of his former lovers” before an altar made of twelve French Romances parodies the sacrifices to the Gods by the epic hero to pray for the victory.

Again the single combat comes in the game of Ombre where Belinda decides to fight with two “mighty adventurers” single-handedly. Her victory over the rivals leads her to shouts and shrieks of joy, which are followed by an Aristotelian reversal of situation as the Baron cuts off her lock of hair, using both “force and fraud.” A little earlier, there is a parody of the epic-feast in the coffee-session after the battle of cards. Then, the gnome Umbriel takes a journey to the underworld. The battle between the sexes is fought along epic lines though the weapons of the ladies are bodkins and fans. The epic convention appears once again in the apotheosis of the snipped lock of hair as it rises to the Lunar Sphere and becomes a star. Thus the whole structure of *The Rape of the Lock* parodies the structure of an epic.

In all epics, gods and demons whether Pagan or Christian, participate in the action side by side with the human agents. In an epic poem, as Le Bossu had emphasized, “the machine crowns the whole work.” Pope therefore gives a mock dignity to the action of *The Rape of the Lock* by the use of machinery of sylphs and gnomes. Taken from the Rosicrucian cult, the sylphs and gnomes reduce the divine and the demonic agents of an epic poem to their diminutive status. Unlike the deities of the epic who act as guardian angels of the epic heroes, Belinda’s guardian sylph Ariel, is an ineffectual airy being who deserts her at the most critical moment. Nevertheless, these airy spirits go through the epic conventions of assisting Belinda at her toilette by accompanying her large on the Thames, by presiding over her trumps in the game of Ombre. When the sylphs withdraw from the scene, another spirit, a gnome takes a journey to the underworld Cave of Spleen to secure bags and vials of sighs and sobs so as to afflict Belinda with the spleen. Again, during the battle of the sexes Umbriel’s gnomes take their position on bodkins and survey the fight. The supernatural machinery of the poem thus provides a gentle mockery of the epic deities and increases the charm of the poem as a mock heroic.

Moreover within its framework, *The Rape of the Lock* contains many allusions to Homer, Virgil, Milton, Shakespeare et al. Belinda's voyage to Hampton court recalls the voyage of Aeneas up the Tiber in Virgil. Then there is Belinda's petticoat which is treated as ye shield of Ajax. Again, Clarissa's pleas for sanity and good will is a parody of Sarpedon's speech to Glaucus in the *Iliad*. Not only this, there are three major parallels between *The Rape of the Lock* and the great English Epic *Paradise Lost*. Firstly, there is a dream of pride and vainglory insinuated into Belinda's ear, which recalls the dream insinuated into Eve's ear in Book V and VI of *Paradise Lost*. Secondly, there is the parody of the ceremony performed by Belinda at her dressing table where Belinda worships herself. Now, this vividly reminds us of the new-born Eve's admiration of herself as mirrored in the pool of Eden in Book IV of *Paradise Lost*. But perhaps the crucial parallel is the third, which occurs just before the cutting of the lock of hair when Ariel searches out the close recesses of the virgin's thought. There he finds earthly lover lurking in her heart, and Pope tells us that Ariel retired with a sigh from his duties of protecting Belinda. This situation echoes the moment in *Paradise Lost* when, after the fall of Adam and Eve the angels of God retire, mute and sad to heaven. The angels could have protected Adam and Eve against any force attempted by Satan, but against man's own free choice they are as helpless as Ariel and his comrades are in the face of Belinda's free choice of an earthly lover.

So to sum up, indeed Pope's *The Rape of the Lock* is a highly subtle and complex heroic poem. It ridicules the fashionable society of Pope's day as well as the lords and ladies of his time. However, the satire in pope's poem is mixed with genuine charm which surrounds Belinda, its central figure. Pope does not deny the charm and glamour that belongs to Belinda and the artificial world she presides over. Therefore, we may conclude with the words of Hazlitt- "No pains are spared, no profusion of ornament, no splendor of poetic diction, to set off the meanest things...the poem is the triumph of insignificance, the apotheosis of foppery and folly. It is the perfection of the mock-heroic."