

Use of Machinery in *The Rape of the Lock*

In the dedication to the poem, Pope explains that machinery is a term invented by the critics to signify the part which deities, angels, or demons play in a poem. He goes on to say that the machinery in his poem is based on the Rosicrucian doctrine of spirits.

According to this doctrine the four elements are inhabited by sylphs, nymphs, gnomes, and salamanders. The sylphs, whose habitation is in the air, are supposed to be the best-conditioned creatures imaginable. In *The Rape of the Lock*, Pope tells us that beautiful women return, after their death, to the elements from which they were derived. Termagants, or violent tempered women become salamanders or spirits of the fire. Women of gentle and pleasing disposition pass into nymphs or water-spirits. Prudish women become gnomes or earth-spirits. Light-hearted coquettes are changed into sylphs or spirits of the air. Pope attributes to the mischievous influence of the gnomes, many unguarded follies of the female sex which he holds up to ridicule.

The first and perhaps the foremost occupation of the sylphs is the protection of fair and chaste ladies who reject the male sex. It is they who guard and save the chastity of maidens who are on the point of yielding to their lovers. They save the chastity of maidens from falling victims to the allurements of "treacherous friends" and dashing young men whose music softens their minds and dancing inflames their passions. The gnomes or earth-spirits fill the minds of proud maidens with foolish ideas which make them indulge in vain dreams of being married to lords and peers. These gnomes teach young coquettes to ogle and pretend blushing at the sight of fashionable young men who cause their hearts to flutter. It is the sylphs, however, who safely guide the maidens through all dangers. It is most amusing to note how these sylphs do this. Whenever a maiden is about to yield to the seduction of a particular young man, another who is more attractive and tempting appears on the scene and the fashionable maiden at once transfers her favor to the newcomer. This may be called levity of fickleness in women, but it is all contrived by the sylphs. The sylphs are led by Ariel (named after Shakespeare's immortal creation in *The Tempest*). Ariel tells us in the poem that to him and his followers have been assigned the humble but pleasant duty of serving fashionable young ladies. The functions of these sylphs are described humorously and include saving the powder from being blown off from the cheeks of ladies, preventing scents from evaporating, preparing cosmetics, teaching the ladies to blush and to put on enchanting airs, suggesting new ideas about dress. The sylphs show a delightful down-scaling of the epic machines. They are "light" by any heroic standards. They feel scared when a crisis approaches. Yet they are in every detail Belinda's intimates and counselors. They explain the various complicated conventions and anxieties that make up Belinda's day.

The sylphs in this poem are both a mirror and mock-apotheosis of the customs and conventions of the society of the time. Belinda is told in a dream that sylphs guide and protect her through the dangers of life. Ariel's account of the predicament of the "tender mind" in a circle of rakes reduces his use of noble words such as "innocent", "honour", and "purity" to the level of a muddle and a sham. He is there, he tells her, to protect her purity according to sylphic theology. Defended by sylphs, the "melting maids" are safe, for what we call "honour" is really no more than Providence. Reassuring Belinda in this way, Ariel is in effect undermining her moral position, taking away with one hand the credit he gives with the other. What we call "levity" in women, says Ariel, is the effect of the same driving guidance as determined their "honour". The concealed implication, that the two qualities are roughly on a par, is very cruel. But Ariel merrily goes on to warn Belinda in the epic style of the danger

that threatens her. He concludes with a plea for caution, and the words of caution come from the lips that have just encouraged flirtatiousness.

Thus Pope has provided the myth of the sylphs in order to symbolize the polite conventions which govern the conduct of maidens. We miss the whole point if we regard the sylphs as merely supernatural machinery. In general, we may say that Pope's use of this myth represents his attempt to do justice to the intricacies of the feminine mind. His treatment of the sylphs allows him to develop his whole attitude toward Belinda and the special world which she graces.