

# The Rape of the Lock

By Alexander Pope

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Q. Comment on Pope's treatment of Belinda in *The Rape of the Lock*. (2012) or,

Q. Discuss the ambiguities inherent in Pope's attitude to Belinda in *The Rape of the Lock*. (2006)

Ans: *The Rape of the Lock* was written solely to allay the enmity between the two catholic families after the ill incident of Lord Petre's stealing of a lock of hair from Miss Arabella Fermor's head. As Pope himself records, John Caryll, 'a common acquaintance and a well-wisher' to both of the families, desired him "to write a poem to make a jest of it, and laugh them together again." Therefore, Pope, to make a virtue out of it and to celebrate the triviality of the incident on an epic scale only to heighten the amusement artistically delineated with the subject matter. The portrayal of Belinda in this poem is such an artistic invention going with the conventions of mock-epic trajectory. Though many critics have discarded the possibility of any rounded characterization in *The Rape of the Lock*, for all the characters are the types of the fashionable world of beauty and belles of Pope's time—the embodiments of fashion and follies of London society. However there is character enough in Belinda to make an impression upon the mind. She is the fictional self of Miss Fermor, yet as Pope mentioned in the letter to her: "the character of Belinda... resembles (you) in nothing but in Beauty."

However, Pope presents Belinda as the typical belle of the city—a social butterfly whose whole day is spent in flirting. She is encoded with the fashion of the time. She likes to indulge in all the pleasure and fun of the late night parties, and due to this wakes up very late. Her day begins in the toilet where with the help of Betty, the 'inferior priestess' she improves on her grace, delicacy and beauty. At her dressing table, amid the silver pins and tortoiseshell combs, the powder puff and the Bibles, Belinda worships herself as a goddess in the mirror—the whole process is a kind of ritual. The character of Belinda has been a means to show how the female sex is commoditised in the male world: when she glides down the river on a fragile 'painted vessel' she becomes an object of everyone's gaze; she being a sexual entity is farther imposed by the image of the cross she wears on her breast, as this sacred object is liked by both Jews and heathens alike.

Belinda also participates in the materialistic values of life; the 'moving toyshop' of Belinda's heart shows her affections fixed on wigs and sword-knots instead of whole human beings. Her fellow women dream of stars, garters and coronets rather than the man who wears them. So Belinda's values are epitomized those of her world. For Pope her lively face is the index of her sprightly mind, but she has lack of discrimination. She is as beautiful as the sun, but like the sun she looks graciously on all, offending none, and this might proclaim her a coquette

like figure. But nonetheless, Pope asserts: “Yet graceful Ease, and Sweetness void of Pride,/ Might hide her Faults.../ Look on her Face, and you’ll forget ’em all.”

Pope wittily employed the fact that women are incapable of guarding their own honour, they need a guardian sylph to do that for them; as Belinda has Ariel who warns in her dream of a dire incident befalling her that may jeopardize her honour. However, as Thalestris reveals in the second half of the poem that, Honour for a lady is purely her reputation of chastity than the chastity itself. Belinda enjoys the homage of the young men on boat and also at Hampton Court. Pope clearly presents her as charming woman, and women surrounding her often are attributed with negative characteristics, but not her. However, Belinda’s beauty is actually a danger, for it deludes men’s judgement. Her beauty is like a trap and her two locks which is the sole cause of the poem symbolize the fact: ‘And Beauty draws us with single Hair.’ She deliberately nourishes the two locks of hair that make slaves of men.

The game of ‘Ombre’ also gives her a full authority over men. The game symbolically becomes a battle of the sexes, and here Belinda like a supreme goddess decides the doom of men. She is not to be controlled by others and wants all hearts at her feet that is why the conquering of the Queen of Hearts by the baron’s Knave of Diamonds is a ‘Ruin’ to her and her reputation. Nonetheless Pope makes her victorious at the game before the final catastrophe, i.e., the cutting of her lock. The sylphs, one the other hand, are employed only to heighten the level of sophistication on Belinda’s art of becoming a socially acceptable woman. They are rather her alter ego, as they also share her love of chariots and card-games, and have similar associations with vanity, beauty and order.

However, despite of all these, Pope somehow manages to be sympathetic towards Belinda, and through her is able to raise certain questions that Belinda’s desire to be a social butterfly is created by the norms of the dilettante society for their own satisfaction. Ariel’s finding a male figure lurking in her heart is an extension of that desire which proves to be her downfall at the end. Therefore Belinda represents the class of ladies of the elegant upper-class society of the eighteenth century who were brave enough to survive to counter the male gaze and remained a centre of attraction for all.

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By A. B. Sir