

## **Beyond the Lock: The Portrayal of Women in Pope's *The Rape of the Lock***

By Nina M

Today, the clipping of a woman's hair—even against her will—would probably barely excite the interest of those present, much less inspire a mock epic of five cantos. Alexander Pope's *The Rape of the Lock* sprung from a real-life event in which a man dubbed "the Baron" in the poem stole a lock of hair from a woman re-named "Belinda." The incident incited a feud between the two families, and a friend of Pope's advised him to write the poem in order to make both families laugh about it (Marlowe [written at e alamance hs in 06] 5474). Though serving a peaceful cause, the poem is not entirely benign. "The Rape of the Lock is usually described as a 'satire' on the affected manners and unreal sorrows of fashionable young ladies" (Wain 313). The poem portrays women in an almost entirely negative light. Pope sees the women in his poem as frivolous, inconstant, and as one-dimensional symbols.

The portrayal of women as shallow and unconcerned with weighty matters begins in the dedication of the poem. Pope mentions a book about the Rosicrucian machinery he uses [written at eastern alamance hs in 06] in his story, which "in its Title and Size is so like a Novel, that many of the Fair Sex have read it for one by Mistake" (Pope Dedication ll.18-19). This statement insinuates that a woman would be much more likely to be deceived by the superficial aspects of the book than

a man would. It may also mean that a woman would not read a serious book unless she thought it was entertaining fiction. In Canto I, Belinda thinks of her toilet as "...a 'holy ritual'... in which Belinda is both priestess and goddess, a priestess in her own worship" (Hyman 311). Additionally, the items she employs in creating her [written at eastern alamance hs in 06] image are listed, and "Bibles" are included in the list. A Bible should not be used in improving one's appearance towards others, nor would one need multiple Bibles from which to study. This shows that Belinda views the Bible, and by extension religion itself, as an accessory rather than as a serious matter (Jones 281-282). When Hampton Court, the setting for most of the action, is described, it is said to be where Queen Anne "dost sometimes Counsel take—and sometimes Tea" (Pope III l. 8). It seems the Queen is just as concerned with socializing as she is with affairs of state. After the lock is stolen, Pope says the screams of the women are equal to those lamenting the deaths of their most beloved companions: husbands and lap dogs. Not only do women overvalue [written at eastern alamance hs in 06] Belinda's hair, but they also place pets on the level of people. Re-emphasizing this point, Belinda's friend Thalestris cries, "Men, Monkeys, Lap-dogs, Parrots, perish all!" in bewailing Belinda's loss (Pope IV l. 120).

Not only do women have a disproportional view of what is important, but they are also shown to be inconstant to the point of duplicity. Belinda's eyes are

described as “‘unfix’d,’ presumably flashing from man to man” (Jones 282).

When Ariel, the leader of the magical sylphs charged with protecting Belinda’s hair, looks in her mind, he finds the Baron inside her heart. Thus, though Belinda acts upset that the Baron cut her hair, she must be at least somewhat pleased with his attentions (Jones 284). This is made even more evident when she says to the Baron, “O hadst thou, [written at eastern alamance hs in 06] cruel! been content to seize / Hairs less in sight, or any hairs but these!” (Pope IV ll. 175-176) Though critics disagree on whether the innuendo is made intentionally or not, it no doubt reflects her innermost desires, which are quite contrary to her public behavior (Hyman 311). Belinda is not the only changeable female in the poem. The Baron gets the scissors with which to cut the lock from a woman named Clarissa, who provides them without even being asked (Jones 284). Later, Clarissa is actually the character who scolds the other women for their foolishness, saying, “Charms strike the Sight, but Merit wins the Soul” (Pope V l. 34). However, Clarissa’s providing the Baron with [written at eastern alamance hs in 06] her scissors in order to cut Belinda’s hair was hardly an act of merit! So, not only is Clarissa unfaithful to her gender, but she is also hypocritical, another form of inconstancy.

To Pope, women are easily cast into categories and are generally seen as objects rather than people. In explaining the Rosicrucian supernatural beings, he explains his “division of women into four comparable types; coquettes, prudes,

termagants, and acquiescents” (Hyman 312). Women’s personalities seem to amount to little beyond their views on sexual conduct. In the “Cave of Spleen” there are women turned into bottles that cry out for corks. These women are empty beyond their need for a male to complete them. Additionally, instead of the Baron seeing Belinda as [written at eastern alamance hs in 06] a person he wants to love, he sees only the Lock as a prize to be stolen. “Th' Advent'rous Baron the bright Locks admir'd, / He saw, he wish'd, and to the Prize aspir'd /Resolv'd to win, he meditates the way, / By Force to ravish, or by Fraud betray” (Pope II ll. 29-32). Pope views Belinda only in the light of her physical appearance as well. He says of her, “If to her share some Female Errors fall, / Look on her Face, and you’ll forget ’em all” (Pope II ll.16-17). It is not her good character or her pleasant disposition that would earn her forgiveness. All that seems to matter is her physical appearance; she seems almost a shell of a person.

Pope is extremely uncomplimentary toward women in his *The Rape of the Lock*. The women of [written at eastern alamance hs in 06] this poem are shallow, changeable, and are regarded as objects that are easily categorized. After the poem was published, Pope realized he had offended the woman on whom “Belinda” is based, and so he added a dedication appeasing her to his next edition. It makes one wonder if the female population in general was also insulted by Pope’s words. No,

come to think of it, it is probably far too serious of a text for a woman of his time to pick up unless she misjudged it as a novel.

### Works Cited

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