The Confluence

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A Tiny Battle: Conflict, Structure, and Satire in "The Rape of the Lock"

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The third canto of Alexander Pope's The Rape of the Lock undoubtedly marks the climax of his mock-heroic masterpiece. Through a clever use of diction, subject matter, and heroic rhyme couplets, Pope achieves a bathetic contrast between the triviality of social conflicts and the significance which members of society place upon them. Many of the conflicts that Pope explores throughout the poem intertwine with one another in this canto, for they dwell on both imaginary and historical events. Particularly, they allude to the emasculation of Catholic men occurring at the time of Pope's writing, as well as his motivation for writing the poem in the first place: the tension between Arabella Fermor and Lord Robert Petre, two influential Catholic individuals in eighteenth century England. Through the formal structure of the poem, Pope manages these various tensions, reflects on the workings of fate, and instills multiple meanings into each line. Ultimately, Pope crafts a richly woven poem that both satirizes and sympathizes with the subjects it chooses to examine, culminating in the dramatic loss of Belinda's hair.

Throughout The Rape of the Lock, Pope presents a comical juxtaposition between majestic, politically important events and trivial, domestic ones. Such a contrast he achieves primarily through rhyming couplets, in which he groups an elevated event or idea with something less important (though nonetheless considered paramount by the subjects in the poem). For example, Queen Anne's residence at Hampton Court, where the dramatic ombre and hair cutting scenes occur, appears as a place for gathering and conversation, where statesmen "oft the fall foredoom / Of foreign tyrants, and of nymphs at home" (Pope 3.5). Since the fall of foreign tyrants indicates great military conquests, its being followed by "nymphs at home" feels particularly bathetic; the idea of something being foreign directly opposes something that not only exists in one's culture but also in their house. Similarly, the next stanza, which continues to describe the palace atmosphere, follows this pattern: "One speaks the glory of the British Queen, / And one describes a charming Indian screen" (3.13-14). While both speak of positive attributes, "glory" takes on a more powerful, significant role, suggesting renown and prestige that the queen has merited. "Charming," on the other hand, has a more superficial connotation and merely implies something pleasant to look at. One likely would not describe an important conquest or historical moment as charming, so the two contrast with each other comically. Lines such as these use their rhyme structure to emphasize the difference between their two components; by doing so, they bring underlying tensions to the surface in a humorous way.

Another significant way the poem maintains this comical contrast appears through its characters, especially the Sylphs. Described as "th' aerial guard," Ariel and the other Sylphs are tiny, airy creatures whose shared mission centers upon guarding and protecting Belinda's chastity (3.31). They serve as a contrast to the traditional gods and goddesses in classical mythology (often referenced in poetry of Pope's time); though Pope references

"the sacred nine" muses at the beginning of the card game, the Sylphs actively participate in the battle. Initially, the mention of the sacred nine muses seems out of place in a scene that primarily depicts a battlefield, but it serves a notable purpose. Mythological muses traditionally serve as goddesses of inspiration, encouraging a heightened striving for beauty, perfection, and goodness. In the card battle, however, the muses look over the players, who ignore their presence and focus instead on their own social hierarchies, acting "wondrous fond of place" (3.36). Thus, while the Sylphs guard Belinda, they comically immerse themselves in the same acts of pettiness that the humans do. By making these figures guard Belinda in the same way that a traditional god would, Pope belittles the classical epic form, both literally and figuratively. This becomes physically apparent when Ariel sits upon Belinda's matador card, providing the image that he precariously balances on the edge of a playing card much larger than himself (3.33). Comically, these creatures do not involve themselves in noble pursuits, but rather, household activities. For instance, they hover around Belinda as she takes her coffee, fanning the "fuming liquor" for her (3.114). Additionally, rather than being powerful god-like figures, the poem emphasizes them as delicate and "airy" throughout Canto Three; one of them even gets cut in two by the Baron's scissors (3.151). The prevalence of the Sylphs throughout adds humor to the climactic events of the card game and the hair cutting, comparing them to a mythological occurrence in a deflated, humorous way.

In addition to its bathetic contrast between noble and trivial events, Canto Three is rife with gender reversals and tensions. These tensions come to life at the commencement of the game of ombre, in which Belinda single-handedly takes on two men in a threefold battle: a tiny battlefield made of playing card characters, a battle between Belinda and her male opponents, and the battle between the Baron and Belinda over her heart (3.27). The third stanza of this canto describes how, at the start of the game, Belinda "Burns to encounter two adventurous knights / At ombre, singly to decide their doom" (3.26-27). By challenging the Baron and the unnamed knight to the round of cards and being the one to name the trumps, Belinda takes on the role of "ombre" and thus acts as the "man" of the game. The description of her male opponents as adventurous knights deliberately emphasizes Pope's satire, especially in comparison with the previous lines, which describe current events happening outside of Hampton Court, such as judges signing sentences (3.21). Whereas some men may be involved in important political activities, these two must stay inside, taking on the trivial challenge of defeating Belinda at cards. This acts, on Pope's part, as a reference to the current emasculation of Catholic men occurring at the time he wrote the poem; the word choice of "knights" touches upon the particularly sensitive point of men not being allowed to bear arms and thus, the only battle in which they can partake is a game of ombre, their only chance at victory a paltry card game.

The mock-heroic form, as discussed, lends itself to satirizing the poem's characters and belittling (or simply acknowledging the littleness of) their antics. On a deeper level, these notes of satire reflect upon the workings of fate and the way the figures in the poem deal with, or ignore, it. If the male figures are satirized as powerless or inconsequential, they are not the only objects of belittlement. The third canto subtly points out flaws with social hierarchies and ambitions, and even Belinda occasionally falls target to a portion of this satire. One of the main examples of this appears in the middle of the card game, when Pam, the knave of clubs, gets overthrown by Belinda's spade: "Ev'n mighty Pam, that kings and queens o'erthrew, / And moved down armies in the fights of Loo, / Sad chance of war! now, destitute of aid, / Falls undistinguished by the victor Spade!" (3.61-64). In other words, the knave (jack) of clubs may have won the victory in the game of Loo, but this power proves inconsequential in the game of ombre—and he does not achieve recognition from the past victories, instead falling undistinguished. Further, the poem does not seem to supply a strong reason for his weakness in this particular game, for it solely springs from a "sad chance of war" (3.63). Perhaps he could have demonstrated strength on a different occasion, but of course, this also negates the knave's true merits and makes him merely an object to whim or chance.

Belinda ends up victorious in the game of ombre, but this does not exempt her from the workings of fate. After her card game, the narrator notes that "Sudden these honours shall be snatched away, / And cursed forever this victorious day" (3.103-104). Just like Pam, she loses her claim to victory after it gets taken from her abruptly, rather than it gradually fading away. The previous lines, which mention that mortals are "thoughtless" and "blind to fate, / Too soon dejected, and too soon elate," suggest that the outcomes of their lives would appear happier if they rose above the littleness of earthly victories and trivialities, such as ombre, and considered a larger picture (3.101-102). Belinda, for example, places urgency and immediacy on her actions, such as when she challenges her opponents to the ombre game; the line reads, "Belinda now, whom thirst of fame invites" (3.25). Pope's choice of the word "now," as well as the use of "thirst," portrays her desire to play, and win, as something physical; like the instinctual desire for thirst to be quenched, her pursuit of victory does not act in accordance with a rational, deliberate calculation. She desires immediate gratification, and this hurry proves that fate too soon dejects or too soon elates her.

In the titular moment when the Baron severs Belinda's lock of hair, he deems himself the true victor of the afternoon's activities. In addition to declaring that he has won "the glorious prize," he declares, "So long my honour, name, and praise shall live!" (3.162; 3.170). Yet, despite these self-accolades, the Baron's speech does little to contradict the existing critique of social customs and dynamics. His time-bound statements, meant to

sound eternal, in fact refer to impermanent cultural patterns that can (and will, as modern readers can see) be broken. The reference to the British riding in a “coach and six,” for instance, does not indicate an imperatively perdurable phenomenon; nor does reading Atlantis (3.164-165). The Baron wants to prove that this event will be acclaimed forever, but—and this illustrates another instance of Pope’s use of bathos—the examples he uses to accentuate this point reveal themselves as rather minimal and insignificant. Additionally, he remarks that it is little wonder that her hair should experience “The conqu’ring force of unresisted steel,” in a sense belittling his own achievement (3.178). If steel (a convenient play on the verb “steal”) can destroy great monuments, it should not surprise or impress anyone that he can conquer an unsuspecting victim’s lock of hair—and he alludes as much.

The third canto clearly minimizes the social antics on which its characters place much importance. Yet, there are subtle ways in which Pope portrays Belinda as a strong individual with agency, so even though he satirizes her in some ways, she does not fall as the primary subject of satire. Belinda exercises a God-like authority, such as when she declares, “Let spades be trumps!” (3.46). In a similar way, she operates more actively than nature, since the sun, near the beginning of the third canto, “obliquely shoots his burning ray” (3.20). Whereas this suggests a passive, indirect motion, Belinda herself “burns” (3.26). Thus, she acts in a more involved manner than nature, taking the initiative to actuate the game. With a mere spread of her hand, her Sylphs surround her with their support (3.31). Belinda’s strength does not negate the fact that she does experience what could be considered weakness, such as a “livid paleness” or trembling (3.90). Rather, this sensitivity motivates her to persevere and win the game. Thus, even though she does fall prey to the Baron’s conquest of her hair, she displays a fortitude of character that is powerful because of its vulnerability.

The formal structure of The Rape of the Lock’s third canto contributes to Pope’s bathetic intention, particularly through its consistent rhyming couplets. These couplets, along with the mock-heroic subject matter of Sylphs, create a humorous, deflationary style, making light of social hierarchies and customs. The poem also points out gender reversals and, by so doing, alludes to the emasculation of Catholic men—and more importantly, it gives precedence to Belinda and portrays her as a compelling, vivacious individual. Through crafting Belinda’s personality in this way, the poem gives honor to Arabella Fermor, restores her lock as well as her dignity as an autonomous woman, and strikes a balance between humorously satirizing its subjects and representing them in a captivating, elevated manner.

Works Cited

Pope, Alexander. “The Rape of the Lock.” The Broadview Anthology of British Literature: Volume 3: The Restoration and the Eighteenth Century, edited by Joseph Black et al., Broadview Press, 2012, pp. 555-563.