



Mock-Heroic Masculinity in Alexander Pope's *The Rape of the Lock*

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Abstract

This paper presents *The Rape of the Lock* by Alexander Pope as a good example of mock-heroic satire and its methodical undermining of aristocratic manhood in eighteenth-century England. Using the high diction and the tropes of classical epic poetry to the minor issue of a stolen strand of hair, Pope indulgently ridicules the lack of parity between heroic style and heroic subject matter and the shallowness of the topic. This sense of intentional inappropriateness reveals the ethical barrenness, vanity and effeteness of the upper class, where looks and civility take the place of true virtue. This critique is manifested through the male characters, especially the Baron and Sir Plume. They are shown to be superficial, non-heroic characters whose activities do not have any substance. When the Baron, a plotter in cutting Belinda's hair, transforms heroic missions into vanity, he turns into an epic hero parodos. Equally, Sir Plume, with his frivolous rhetoric and his worry over style over substance is the quintessential embodiment of a world where masculinity is determined by posture as opposed to courage or ethical prowess. Their description is a direct parody of the honor-driven adventures and heroism of classical heroes such as the ones of Homer and Virgil, and so serves to reveal the erosion of manhood in the culture that is obsessed with superficiality. The paper talks of how the satire of Pope does not focus on individuals alone but generalizes to a larger scale of the aristocratic culture of the eighteenth century. By deemphasizing the fabricated nature of gender roles and the meaningless games that preoccupy elite society, Pope indirectly attacks a social structure that incarcerates both men and women in a world of unnecessarily excessive vanity, politeness and empty gestures.

Keywords: Mock-Heroic, Masculinity, Satire, Alexander Pope, Augustan Age, Gender.

Introduction

The Rape of the Lock by Alexander Pope represents one of the most praised works of English literature and one of the brightest examples of the genre of the mock-heroic story. The poem was inspired by a minor but socially upsetting event that happened in 1711 when Robert, Lord Petre, secretly snatched off a strand of hair on the young aristocratic woman Arabella Fermor, whom he had romantic interests in. What would otherwise have been noted as a childish trick, very soon seemed to turn into a major feud between two leading Catholic families of the era. Trying to bring about peace, a mutual friend of both families, John Caryll, proposed that Pope would cool the situation by writing a comic poem which would turn the event into a laugh instead of letting it boil as resentment.

It was the genius of Pope to decide not only to narrate the event in comic verse, but to re-tell it in the light of epic poetry. He transformed this social small struggle into the big and exaggerated heroic lineage of Homeric and Virgilian epics, thus making a trivial act of vanity and desire a cosmological struggle. The object of Pope, as he himself said, was to unite two opposite worlds: the sublime and the social, so that the insignificant dispute of a fashionable drawing-room could be weighed and gravelled like an epic romance. In this inversion, the snatch of hair stolen was made more important than Helen of Troy and the intrigues of London society had become the matter of heroic fighting.

This mock-heroic manner actually serves to entertain, but it serves also as an effective satire of aristocratic culture, especially of aristocratic manhood in the early eighteenth century. The grandeur of the epic conventions is not used by Pope to hail the magnificence of his characters, but to show their emptiness and vainness. Conventional heroes are courageous, strong, and virtuous; in the *The Rape of the Lock*, the male characters and, in particular, such characters as Baron and Sir Plume are described

as lazy, effete, and shallow. Their fixation on the looks, status and insignificant displays of chivalry shows that they have no real character but only an empty show of manhood.

Through such a satire, Pope exposes the artificiality of the so-called Age of Politeness of the eighteenth century. The men of the aristocracy are not depicted as the models of dignity and honor, but as occupied with meaningless activities, meaningless rituals of being polite to each other, and performing meaningless displays of their power over meaningless issues. By satirizing the epic clichés, Pope is able to reduce the perceived pomp of these male ideals rather cunningly as he demonstrates that they are in fact mere cultural performances, and not actual virtues.

Therefore, *The Rape of the Lock* is much more than a comic work over stolen lock of hair. It has a mock-epic style that makes social comedy a scathing analysis of gender, classes, and cultural pretense. In mocking both the incident and the magnifying reaction to it, Pope uncovers the foams and follies of the high society of the eighteenth century. Not only witty but also incisive, his satire makes *The Rape of the Lock* a classical piece that still shows contradictions and flaws of human pride and social performance.

Literature Review:

The Augustan: 'Age of Politeness':

The satirical project of Pope cannot be understood without the historical background of 18th-century England. This period has been termed as the age of courtesy and trade. Politeness did not just concern good manners; it was a very powerful social ideology that the upper strata of society could employ in order to separate themselves among the emerging middle classes. The development of etiquette handbooks and educational books of this time was a desire of the middle classes to gain social improvement and their dreams to achieve the status of a gentleman.

Such a focus on courtesy formed a performative, and sometimes unnatural, social reality. Politeness was regarded as a perfect factor that controlled every life event including language, gestures, and even voice tone. The emphasis on appearance and mannerism implies that the social status of an individual was judged by outward looks instead of the true morals or real virtuousness. Such a system consciously undervalued real feelings and genuine actions in lieu of superficial, ceremonial contact. The satire of Pope is not, then, the easy satire of personal vanity; but the heavy satire of a social system which encouraged and encouraged shallowness. Masculinity in the poem is not merely the weak spot of individuals of the male gender, but the side effect of a society, in which a gentleman is the one who possesses good manners and stylish clothes and not his bravery, intelligence, and integrity.

The Mock-Heroic vs. The Classical Heroic:

Pope's satire relies on the audience's familiarity with classical epics such as Homer's *Iliad* and Virgil's *Aeneid*. Through these parodies of these holy books, Pope emphasizes the insignificance of the modern world. Classical works are so unlike the concerns of the characters of Pope in the sense of heroic values that are praised. Homeric heroes such as Achilles are motivated by one thing: personal glory, honor, and immortal fame (*kleos*). They shape their identity on the battlefield by heroic acts and readiness to sacrifice themselves to a cause. Conversely, Virgilian heroes, including Aeneas, have a *pietas*, a deep obligation to their families, to their citizens, and to the fate of their nation.

The fact that Pope chooses to echo both Homer and Virgil provides a complicated multi-layered critique. Through this comparison of his 18th century heroes with the two models, Pope presents a dual criticism. The men of his society do not correspond to the Homeric norm of personal glory, because their fights are restricted to playing cards and tea parties. They

are also failing the Virgilian ideal of duty since what they do is all personal and self-serving. The heroic battles that come about as a result of the minutiae are the very opposite of personal glory seeking and the accomplishment of a social cause and serve as a testament of a society who has lost all sense of meaningful ambition, whether one or the other.

The Debate over Pope's Satirical Intent:

There has been a critical debate over the satirical nature of *The Rape of the Lock*. Critics have argued that the satire is very misogynistic and Pope only satirizes the idea of womanly vanity as a whole. This view cites Pope on the slippery letter to Arabella Fermor in the introduction to the poem in which he suggests that her sex necessitates his elucidation on two of three tough words. In this reading, we also find that Pope shifts the blame of the main conflict to Belinda and her vanity as opposed to the aggressive act of violation by Baron.

But a more subtle and modern perspective holds that Pope is in many respects sympathetic to the restricted role of women in a patriarchal society. Such an attitude implies that the poem is a criticism of a society that leaves women with no influence or control other than their physical attractiveness and cosmetic power. The satire of Pope about masculinity and femininity are not independent but two sides of the coin, and they can indicate a system-wide problem of the Augustan social order. Women appear as seductive and superficial, men as feeble, effete, and also fixated on looks. The shortcomings of the men are portrayed as the reversal of the conventional masculine characteristics that make them acquire what is believed to be the feminine qualities. For example, the persons who make men chase women are motivated not by honor but by individual fulfillment, and they are called Birth-night Beaus that are as concerned with fashion as lady is. This conscious indistinction of gender roles implies that the Augustan social order placed the two sexes in a crisis. In the case of

women, they became nothing more than an object. In the case of men, they had been turned into a mere superficial imitation of the female concerns about their aesthetics. It is the satire of the whole social structure, which gives rise to this moral vacuum.

Analysis:

The Devaluation of Male Heroism in The Rape of the Lock:

Baron: An Epic Protagonist Reduced to a Fop:

The leading male character of *the Rape of the Lock* is Baron, who is a direct parody of the classical epic hero. In contrast to Achilles, whose heroic mission was inspired by pride and honor, or Aeneas, whose mission is a method to establish a new home and a new destiny, the so-called heroic mission of Baron is pathetically diminished to the goal of getting one strand of Belinda hair. The first line of satire by Pope opens with the mock-solemn preparation of this quest by Baron. In an epic parody, he puts up his own altar to the god of Love in the pre-battle manner, that is, before the sun rises, and emulates the great sacrifices of warriors. But the things he presents are simply ludicrously trivial: twelve huge french romances, gilded, a pair of gloves neatly, a half-pair of gloves, and other reminders of old amours. These comically desperate presents emphasize not only the pompous theatricality of the scene, but the emptiness of the purpose of Baron. His sacrifices are a testimony to a shallow mind and a hollow mockery of the kind of devotion of a genuine hero.

The character arc of Baron is a sort of miniature allegory about devaluation of heroic principles in the society of Pope. Classical epics love is a love toward noble ideas and noble causes. Baron does not, however, love Belinda as an individual, but rather objectifies her, the fetish of her hair. What ought to be the show of affections and devotion is turned into a shallow, commercialized fascination. His battles, also, are not fought over kingdoms and honor, but over mere trifles. Pope further adds the irony in the

very title of the poem: *The Rape of the Lock*. The term rape is a cognate of the Latin rapere or snatch and carry away, yet the violence and unfairness that it still carries with it give moral seriousness to the fact that Belinda has been violated. The lock stolen by the Baron, the lock becoming petty triviality rather than heroic grandeur, thus turns into a symbol of vanity, injustice, and the ruin of the heroic stature in petty triviality.

Sir Plume and the Effeminate Beau:

One of the minor male characters in Alexander Pope *the Rape of the Lock* is Sir Plume, but he serves a vital role in illustrating another type of unheroic masculinity: ineffectual pomposity with empty rhetoric. As opposed to Baron, who at least demonstrates a kind of active (but misdirected) initiative, Sir Plume is the utterly bewildered male, whose efforts to persuade and command fail miserably becoming grotesque. When Thalestris tells him to demand to have the lock returned, he is so feeble and petty in his answer, that, though this is no invective of his own character, it is really an invective of the inveterate art of the male.

Pope emphasizes the meaninglessness of the masculinity of Sir Plume by contrasting him with the epic tradition. Ulysses in Homer is claimed to be an eloquent man and his words run smoothly and persuasively as sheafs of snow falling gracefully, clearly, and compellingly. Pope is ironically reminding of this image to reveal the extreme difference between the ideals of heroism and the tainted one which Sir Plume is. In place of the noble eloquence, the speech of Sir Plume is awkward and swarmed with heavy, harsh forms of exclamation, like, Plague on't! and prithee, Pox! His oratory is rude, strong, and ungrateful; it stoops down to clamour and hollow rhetoric.

To enhance the satire, Pope emphasizes the insignificance of the performance given by Sir Plume by addressing the vehicle of his rhetoric, the popular snuff-box. Rather than flaunting the scepter of the king or the

commanding voice of the orator, Sir Plume opens and closes this adjunct to the speech. The snuff-box consequently is symbolic of his empty masculinity he is not characterized by words or actions but by empty, surface decorations of style. By so doing Pope brilliantly demeans Sir Plume to the essence of boastful, decorative manhood, and shows the barrenness of masculine performance in his world.

The Subversion of the Epic Battle:

A subversion of the classic epic battle is one of the most successful assaults on masculinity Pope makes in *The Rape of the Lock*. Rather than heroic conflicts with swords and spears, the poem gives two big contests which parody the gravity of a battle. The former is the playing-card game of Ombre, but on the epic scale of a war. The cards themselves are termed as soldiers and the cards move across the table like regiments and the game itself is a simplified form of simulated combat. However, the most pure face-off is later on in Canto V when Pope describes the outburst of a sex war. In this case the weapons are fans, snuff and silks, and the cries of the warriors are not war-shouts, but a comical fugue between bass and treble tones.

This second battle especially is where Pope makes his most radical gender reversal. The poem ascribes to men the feminine properties of vanity, cowardice, weakness and over sentimentalism. Instead, women are made to embody conventional masculine qualities, i.e. their militancy, aggressiveness and a lust to glory. Belinda herself is told, in language which reminds us of the heroic fighter, readying herself to battle by smearing herself with beauty-paste like an armor-plate. The desire to achieve fame is brought out, parodying the longing of the epic hero to have eternal fame.

Such reversal of roles, gender roles, implies not only a satire of an epic form, but the commentary on a society that has become morally and heroically empty. Men have lost the heroism of his vision, and have yielded to the same carelessness which they once went about

censuring in women, and indulged in vain glory and insignificant delights. Even in this corrupted system women are compelled to embrace the masculine aggression in a bid to get empty wins- the only tool that they have in a life that is limited by the social norms.

Conclusion

In conclusion, *The Rape of the Lock* by Alexander Pope is much more than a comic account of a small dispute between two families. Beneath its sparkling wit and playful mock-epic form, the poem functions as a sharp social critique of eighteenth-century culture, particularly its obsession with appearances, gender roles, and the hollow rituals of politeness. Using the lofty style and traditions of heroic epic to tell the story of the small theft of a strand of hair, Pope explicitly diminishes the glory of epic ideals to the ridiculous to demonstrate how the very society that once valued honor, bravery, and virtue have gone instead to adore vanity, style, and superficial social activities.

The poem is ordered in the way it breaks down heroic masculinity. Even Baron, in the manner of epic aspiration, turns out to be an object of mean ambitions, scarcely a warrior, but a dandyish seeker of adornment. The inflammable rhetoric of Sir Plume, with all the pompousness of his well-bred dialect and empty wording, is a travesty of the epic oratory, turned into a and a pathetic effusion of word ineptitude. Through this, the male characters are symbolic of the deterioration of the ideals of masculinity as they become effeminate and helpless in the very realm that epic heroes succeeded in. Simultaneously, the women, especially Belinda, take the positions of authority, agency, and performance, implying the inversion of traditional gender expectations. What appears is a portrait of a society in which boundaries of gender and honor are diffused and all that is left of human activity is triviality and social display.

In a broader sense, the poem reflects the ethical drift of the so-called Age of Politeness. In Pope, the world is that in which virtue is overshadowed by propriety, in which outward appearance is set in place of inner substance, and where real moral or political issues are crowded out by mere superficial rivalries. The strand of hair, which in itself is nothing worth significant, turns into a symbol of a disease in a culture, a culture so sterile that it makes trivial annoyances into grand melodramas. That is why there is something very contemporary in the satire. This why Pope, in its unveiling of the enactment of gender roles, of the commodification of relationships, and of the alleviation of emptiness through the liturgy of social ritual, her mock-heroic masterpiece affirms the timeless efficacy of satire in diagnosing and critiquing cultural vanity.

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