

Perception of Power

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Glenn Storey, “Belinda, Thalestris, Clarissa, ... Queen Anne? Failures of Female Agency in The Rape of the Lock.” *Midwest Quarterly: A Journal of Contemporary Thought*, 2017, 203-219. EBSCO.

Problems in femininity and female characterization are both issues that recent critics have explored in various literary works. However, these issues are not always accurately represented, as Glenn Storey claims of Alexander Pope’s *The Rape of the Lock*. As the recipient of an honourable mention for a student graduate paper, it is no surprise that Storey’s combination of fiction and facts make his arguments extremely compelling. His commitment to the validity of his observations leads to accurate verifications or dismantlements of fictional events. Storey provides examples from both Pope’s characters and values to illustrate that while there was potential to showcase the power women had during the eighteenth century, Pope only chose to show it in a negative light.

Storey begins with background information about the time period by explaining the influences and responsibilities that women had. He highlights that any exotic products or luxuries were considered a distraction (204), which implicitly connects to his later topic of Belinda and her modified beauty. Storey also draws upon historical references to better illustrate this. England was under the rule of Queen Anne; she had yet to bring a healthy heir to the throne and a great deal of her power was being diverted to the parliament and cabinet (204). Inclusion of such information evidently shows Storey’s attention to detail and fact.

Each subsequent paragraph of Storey’s article is set up to focus on one of the female characters in Pope’s work and to link their shortcomings to events and beliefs surrounding

women at the time. The first is Belinda, whose undeniable beauty is something that typically had its advantages and disadvantages for the woman herself. Storey defines Belinda's attractiveness as exotic and connects it to the various products that she uses. The article frames this kind of attractiveness as both a symbol of wealth and English colonization. Beauty, both natural and bought with expensive clothing and jewelry, could attract a potential husband and give a woman control in the process (207). However, even if this does work, Storey claims that not only can it backfire, but it can also create a false sense of agency and is "only skin deep" (208). A woman may be able to attract a husband, but the standards of beauty that she is meeting have been set by men, so she ends up following their rules instead of her own. In light of dismantling this façade of power, Storey points out that even when Belinda's hair is cut, it is less a major violation and more a reclaiming of the man's rightful property (208).

The next issue Storey addresses is female speech through the lens of the characters Thalestris and Clarissa. By awakening a temper that had already existed in her, Thalestris's new-found passions justify the time's belief that women were overly emotional and vindictive (209). At the same time, the article addresses how loud women were initially seen as a threat to men, but that the response was "it is noise, not authority" (210). Storey makes a compelling point that men saw women as passionate and spiteful but without power to harm anyone other than themselves. He then points out the similarities and differences between Thalestris and Clarissa through types of female speech. The biggest similarity is "Pitting women against each other allows the men to win" (212). However, Storey's piece on Clarissa has a slightly different approach. In critiquing the failure of the timing and placement of her speech (212), Storey makes it apparent that Clarissa delivers her speech poorly but does not clarify how the speech should have been delivered. Storey's analysis of Pope's parody of the speech by Sarpedon in the *Iliad* is

slightly confusing for those unfamiliar with the allusion. By comparing Clarissa to Sarpedon, Storey presents a backwards analogy of how Clarissa's speech was different from Sarpedon's war rally, but had a similar end result where conflict was heightened. The article proceeds to show that although Pope himself deemed Clarissa to be the moral centre of the poem, Clarissa made her speech not to end the fighting, but to put herself more in the Baron's favour. This harkens back to Thalestris's backstabbing and distancing from Belinda (212), but this time for the sake of a man rather than status. By pulling a phrase from Staffel, "woman is the greatest threat to woman," (210) Storey beautifully executes this point. Despite the lack of evidence, he creates a powerful image that gives the reader a dilemma to contemplate.

Storey's final critique is of Pope's direct and indirect references to Queen Anne through his character the Queen of Spleen. The Queen of Spleen is a representation of femininity as fragile culture, ruled by emotions and hysteria, by both being a female ruler as well as a direct reference to the organ which was thought to control or heighten women's emotions (213). Storey accurately points out the danger of writing a character of this nature by placing the character in realistic historical context: a female monarch ruled at the time and the implications could mean consequences for the author. In referencing other writings of Pope's such as *Windsor Forest*, Storey brings up some discrepancies in the representation of the queen. Pope had previously mentioned her in *Windsor Forest* in a flattering and honourable way, which is a clear contrast to her role in *The Rape of the Lock*. Storey theorizes that both references may have been sarcasm towards Anne's glory, especially her failure to bear any living children (216). In bringing up this double-sided representation of Queen Anne by Pope, Storey shows that Pope clearly had no limits in expressing his beliefs in fallible femininity by making a villain of the reigning monarch.

There are several multifaceted depictions of women and their individual and collective traits in *The Rape of the Lock*, and Storey examines the intricacies of them to produce points that are subversive yet understandable. Even when some of the finer details are lost in the analysis, the most encompassing point remains intact, engaging, and pensive. Throughout the article, Storey does an exceptional job of deciphering the complex issues within Pope's work while simultaneously providing excellent historical context.



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