

# *The Rape of The Lock* and Its Understanding of Modern-Day Feminism

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The eighteenth century marks an important change for the public sphere of London; the culture of coffee house reading not only gave birth to a public sphere, but it also began the inclusion of women within political and literary discourse. Pope theorizes themes that become realized years later; he proves his intellect to be way ahead of everyone else. Pope's impression of the interplay between gender dynamics and capitalism in *The Rape of the Lock* interprets aristocratic ideals as the highest form of patriarchal oppression. As Deborah C. Payne remarks, "Just as modern women have been divided in their reactions to *The Rape of the Lock*, so their eighteenth-century predecessors internalized a bifurcating response to Pope's Satires" (4). This produces a moment of hesitation that a female reader experiences, in response to the poem's conclusion in which Belinda's identity is confined to a lock of hair. Pope incorporates central tenets of eighteenth-century aesthetics in his characterization of Belinda and Clarissa as members of London's social sphere, and thus Pope's social world. The subject of the poem, Belinda, demonstrates Pope's gender analysis and subversive discourse on women and their social roles. Pope then creates Clarissa, whose stance against Belinda prepares the ground for a feminist reading of *The Rape of the Lock*, insofar as to reveal Pope's sympathetic view of the Clarissas of eighteenth-century London. Clarissa is Pope's sympathetic persona, emerging from his struggles with binary oppositions, and they both are speaking voices of the text; meanwhile, Belinda is the object that is seen and admired. Pope's authorial voice in *The Rape of The Lock* is liminal, in that Pope criticizes patriarchy through Clarissa's subjective voice and capitalism through Belinda's

marginalized voice. This poem was extremely popular amongst female readership because Pope lightheartedly voices the fragmented narratives of the lives of real women encompassing his social sphere. At the same time, this mock-epic uplifts the aristocratic culture that coerces women into viewing themselves as objects of voyeurism, which is unsettling.

A historical contextualization of the poem articulates social tensions of eighteenth-century England that influence Pope's concept of the female gender, i.e. Belinda and Clarissa in *The Rape of the Lock*. C. E. Nicholson observes "a wide range of Pope's work had been examined for the light it sheds upon shifting patterns of social, personal, and political behavior during the period in which he lived" (183). Similarly, this essay is concerned with such historical context to explain his multilayered portrayal of the social roles occupied by these female characters. Belinda's characterization expresses economic exploitation of female beauty, Clarissa's characterization expresses Pope's condemnation of patriarchy, and finally, the form of the poem compromises female authority, while the content of this poem celebrates subjugation of the female gender.

Ariel in "Canto I" directs our first impression of Belinda, which in turn provides a general insight into Pope's perception of the female gender. Pope's elaborate description of Belinda's toilet stand that unveils her "cosmetic powers" (l. 124), shows Pope's familiarity with the economic events of his time. He describes the toilet stand:

This casket India's glowing gems unlocks,  
 And all Arabia breathes from yonder box.  
 The tortoise here and elephant unite,  
 Transformed to combs, the speckled, and the white.  
 Here files of pins extend their shining rows,

Puffs, powders, patches, bibles, billet-doux,

Now awful beauty puts on all its arms. (I. 133-138)

Pope draws on imagery of exotic goods brought to England from all around the world; these luxuries were mostly possessed by wealthy aristocratic families, such as the “glowing gems” from India. The material properties of beauty Pope describes allude to the consumer revolution, the growing importance of physical objects in determining an individual’s social status.

Consequently, Pope employs Belinda’s possessions as means to identify her social status as an aristocrat and idealize her beauty by Pope’s perceived aristocratic standards. The alliteration of the “p” sound in line 137 draws the readers’ attention to a list of objects that elevate Belinda’s beauty. Subsequently, “awful beauty puts on all its arms” equates dressing up to arming for battle: beauty for Belinda is as crucial as a soldier’s weapons. Although Pope’s burlesque style ridicules the misplaced value of beauty in material objects, his mock-epic provides female readers, who were not literate in Latin, access to the experience of reading literary classics.

Barring some exceptions, middle- and lower-class women generally did not receive a formal education in eighteenth-century London; therefore, Pope’s direct address to a female audience suggests the possibility that he is sympathetic toward the female experience within his social world. However, the way Pope introduces us to Belinda makes her an object of voyeurism for the male reader as well as the female. First, Ariel approaches Belinda as the object of “Canto I,” and our first impression of Belinda happens without her uttering a word. Second, Pope describes Belinda as a “heavenly image in the glass,” (I. 125) which extends Belinda’s position as an object of voyeurism for the male gaze. The mirror is a symbol of London’s capitalistic economy that recognizes social status based on material possessions. As a result, not only is Belinda

judged by her material possessions by the world surrounding her, but also by her own self as views her reflection in the mirror.

The parallel between *The Rape of The Lock's* narrative effectiveness and feminist values is deeply rooted in Pope's choice of a mock-epic. Glenn Clever describes the poem's narrative as a progression of "the three aspects of [a] mock-heroic: the ideal, mockery of the ideal, and the real" (125). The ideal Belinda is rooted in economic social relations: she embodies "the pristine innocence of a maid" (Clever, 128). "Canto II" describes that "On [Belinda's] white Breast a sparkling Cross she wore" (II. 8). The symbol "white breast" elevates Belinda's innocence to the heavenly ideal embodied by the Virgin Mary. Pope adds the quality "sparkling" to the cross, which characterizes Belinda's presence as witty and lively. Belinda "favors to none, to all she smiles extends" (II. 11); this characterization is significant because it mocks the ideal Belinda. While Belinda is "all innocent in her illusionary world," the implied reader would recognize her lively behavior as flirtatious and identify her as a coquette (Clever, 128). This proposition is supported by a historical study conducted by Robert Gosselink; he traced names ending with *-inda* and discovered "the name signifies flirt, coquette, or some morally questionable lady" (219). Following the mockery of the ideal, Pope achieves the third narrative aspect of a mock-epic Clever identifies by depicting the real Belinda in Canto III. Pope positions Belinda within the social setting of eighteenth-century London by situating her at Hampton court: "There stands a structure of Majestick Frame,/ Which from the neighb'ring Hampton takes its Name" (3-6). This "Majestick Frame" alludes to the cultural narratives that "imply the underlying reality of the London world" (Clever, 128). The narrative progression of the poem parallels with feminist critical theory through the strategy of gender fragmentation as theorized by Deborah Payne. The narrative progression of Belinda (the ideal, the mockery of ideal, and the real), is parallel to the

patriarchal structure of gender dynamics. The ideal heroic Belinda depicts the uplifted aristocracy. The coquette Belinda of Canto II represents “women from the upper fraction of the gentrified or mercantile classes who aped aristocratic airs” (Payne, 8). Finally, the real Belinda represents a regressive aristocracy that serves to “pit women with social aspirations against each other” (Payne, 8). In eighteenth-century London, the female gender was not only fragmented but also alienated and confined by patriarchal ideologies. Pope’s choice of a mock-epic identifies middle-class women, town women, and recalcitrant coquettes as the fragmented social identities that define what it meant to be a woman in the eighteenth century.

To understand Pope’s interest in women’s social role during his lifetime, it is important to consider the relationship between the form and content of *The Rape of The Lock*. The effect of employing a mock-heroic narrative “gives [the poem] a structural unity and helps in the expansion of a trivial incident into an extended narrative” (Clever, 123). Pope’s mock-epic includes a battle, metaphorically in the form of a card game and then literally: Belinda versus the Baron. This is a significant moment in the poem where the form and context contradict each other. In particular, Belinda’s weapon during the battle is reduced from a sword to a bodkin in terms of both the weapon’s size and its intensity of harm. At a deeper level of analysis, the bodkin is further reduced when Pope uses parenthesis to inform the reader of its origin (V. 89-96). It transforms from a necklace, to a buckle, to a whistle, and finally a bodkin that Belinda’s mother wore and now she possesses. Similar to the poem’s reduction of an epic to a mock-epic (that ridicules not the form of poetry itself but the subject of the poem), the contents of the poem are also reduced. This is a significant rhetorical trope because the history of the weapon represents the history of the female gender. Although the weapon was possessed by Belinda’s “great great grandsire” it was handed over to Belinda’s “grandame” and her “mother,” therefore

alluding to the battle ground which was at one point in history dominated by the male gender: for example, in Homer's *Iliad*, which is a heroic epic where the battle ground is governed by the male gender. Female power in London's social sphere is insignificant because Pope identifies women as a victim of social exploitation based physical appearance; simultaneously, the poem is empowering to the female gender because it acknowledges their presence on the battle ground, which is London's social sphere. This juxtaposition between Belinda's (in)significant weapon and the female gender's (in)significant place in London's social sphere affirms the magnitude of changes that were taking place in London. Since the weapon represents the history of the female gender, Pope emancipates Belinda from the history of patriarchal oppression, but Pope also enslaves Belinda to the literary context of the poem.

Contrary to the reduction of Belinda's weapon, the literary augmentation of Belinda's lock of hair transforms the female gender from the object of voyeurism to the subject of the poem. According to Pope's gender analysis, Belinda is not able to win the battle because she uses a physical object as a weapon to fight the Baron. Belinda, whose voice is not heard but who is seen in Cantos I - III employs a weapon, the scissors, that symbolizes but compromises female authority, but that does not compromise his male authority. This antithetical interplay of the male and female gender in relation to a material object portrays the self-destructive social aspirations eighteenth-century women held. On the one hand, Pope's strategy of reduced objects reflects Belinda's inability to speak against the objectification of her gender. On the other hand, Pope's strategy of augmenting Belinda's lock of hair as the subject of the poem assigns the female gender its missing subjective voice. Even though the speaking voice of Pope's poem is Clarissa, the audience never sees Clarissa in *The Rape of The Lock*; instead they hear her. However, she is not an effective voice in the poem because her speech in "Canto IV" is ignored by Belinda. She,

too, represents a compromised female authority. The augmentation of Belinda's lock of hair at the end of the poem reveals the subject of the poem is actually Belinda's lock of hair: "A sudden star, it shot through liquid air" and is seen from the parks surrounding Rosamonda's lake (V, 127). A *deus ex machina* concludes the event of the rape in the poem, "not [as] Pope's praise of Belinda but his final, patriarchal condemnation of her rebellion" (Canfield, 145). For Pope, Belinda's lock of hair is not destined to depict the Baron's possession of her; rather, it is a symbol of a love affair that will be viewed by lovers walking around the lake. This symbol is a condemnation of patriarchy because even though it frees Belinda from being in the Baron's grasp, her beauty is immortalized within the confines of Pope's poetry.

Pope's celebration of Belinda at the end Canto V conveys his intimate understanding of the female experience. Pope's sympathetic view of the female gender originates from his personal struggles with establishing authority in the public sphere of eighteenth-century London. His struggles with relationships and physical intimacy placed him outside the mainstream male identity, which governed the public sphere. He was marginalized by the dominant ideologies of the male gender, similar to women who were struggling against the ideologies that restrict their existence to child bearers, coquettes, or the materialist reduction of their existence. Pope is able to see the social scene of London from both perspectives, as an insider and an outsider. As Allan Doolittle notes, Pope, too, faced similar struggles due to his physical deformities and his non-traditional educational background: "although Pope may not have had the educational background he requires to compete with the top tier of university-trained scholars, he did have what many noted to be a certain proclivity and a skill in this area" (Doolittle 6). This experience allows him to empathize with Belinda and the female gender as a whole, but, more importantly, Pope uses the form of a mock-epic to highlight the value of intellect, which "situate[s] him as a

participant in the newly emerging public sphere” (Doolittle, 19). Pope compares the importance of beauty placed upon women to that of intellect placed upon men, such as himself. That is why, unlike Clarissa, Pope is able to proclaim a sense of selfhood; he is able to use his poetry to take part in the subjective discourse of gender roles. Pope, as a male, is able to materialize his intellect and pursue a literary career; Meanwhile, the Clarissas of the world are “allowed to function as speaking subjects for the briefest moments” and “the Belindas of the world are only written about” (Payne, 18). Therefore, when the subject of the poem emerges as Belinda’s lock of hair, Pope is condemning the female gender to patriarchal oppression. Which induces a moment of hesitation for Pope’s intended female reader as well as a modern-day reader who is familiar with feminist values.

Pope identifies with the female experiences of eighteenth-century London because he, too, inhabited a world that marginalized physical deformity and idealized beauty in terms of material possessions. Through our awareness of feminist critical thinking, we are able to recognize the conclusion of the poem as a condemnation of patriarchy. It is this deeply exploitative social sphere of eighteenth-century London that Pope was able to survive in by weaponizing intellect to climb the social structure. Nevertheless, the most significant use of this interpretation is to historically trace back the origins of feminist thought before its theoretical existence. Literary works are filled with references to social history and understanding a piece of literary work in its own time period is a critical approach that is necessary in academic discourse. Just like Belinda’s fragmented personhood, there exist many fragmented narratives of female oppression, and Pope’s mock epic is a single account of these cultural narratives. Pope displays a level of sympathy and understanding of eighteenth-century gender norms that is characteristically at the heart of a feminist perspective. It raises larger concerns regarding literary



criticism: is a marginalized position imperative to the accurate representation of gender and power dynamics in literature prior to the feminism movement?

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