

“The Rape of the Lock”

By Alexander Pope

“The Rape of the Lock” is a mock epic, so described because it makes fun of the epic tradition. Whereas the traditional epic concerns itself with sweeping, global issues like the Trojan War or the Fall of Man, the theme of Pope’s mock epic is a random clipping of a single lock of hair off the back of a girl’s head by a friend during a boating party. Every little thing in the mock epic is treated as if it’s “epic.” For example, read the following lines that describe Belinda (“the Nymph”) getting dressed and putting on her makeup in the morning:

And now, unveil'd, the *Toilet* stands display'd,
Each Silver Vase in mystic Order laid.
First, rob'd in White, the Nymph intent adores
With Head uncover'd, the *cosmetic* Pow'rs.
A heav'nly Image in the Glass appears,
To that she bends, to that her Eyes she rears;
Th' inferior Priestess, at her Altar's side,
Trembling, begins the sacred Rites of Pride.
Unnumber'd Treasures ope at once, and here
The various Off'rings of the World appear;
From each she nicely culls with curious Toil,
And decks the Goddess with the glitt'ring Spoil.
This Casket *India's* glowing Gems unlocks,
And all *Arabia* breathes from yonder Box.
The Tortoise here and Elephant unite,
Transform'd 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;
The Fair each moment rises in her Charms,
Repairs her Smiles, awakens ev'ry Grace,
And calls forth all the Wonders of her Face;
Sees by Degrees a purer Blush arise,
And keener Lightnings quicken in her Eyes.
The busy *Sylphs* surround their darling Care;
These set the Head, and those divide the Hair,
Some fold the Sleeve, while others plait the Gown;
And *Betty's* prais'd for Labours not her own.

The girl, Belinda, is referred to in the poem as “the nymph” which makes her seem like a character from classical mythology rather than just a normal person. Here is how Pope sets up the conflict:

This Nymph, to the Destruction of Mankind,
Nourish'd two Locks, which graceful hung behind
In equal Curls, and well conspir'd to deck
With shining Ringlets her smooth Iv'ry Neck.
Love in these Labyrinths his Slaves detains,
And mighty Hearts are held in slender Chains.
With hairy Sprindges we the Birds betray,
Slight Lines of Hair surprize the Finny Prey,
Fair Tresses Man's Imperial Race insnare,
And Beauty draws us with a single Hair.

Th' Adventrous *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;
For when Success a Lover's Toil attends,
Few ask, if Fraud or Force attain'd his Ends.

The Baron (Belinda's friend who is also referred to as "The Peer") has a friend who is sewing who sits near him. He randomly picks up her scissors and snips a little lock from the back of Belinda's head, but this is described in five long cantos of heroic-sounding poetry. Here is the description of the "final battle."

The Peer now spreads the glitt'ring *Forfex* wide,
T'inclose the Lock; now joins it, to divide.
Ev'n then, before the fatal Engine clos'd,
A wretched *Sylph* too fondly interpos'd;
Fate urg'd the Sheers, and cut the *Sylph* in twain,
(But Airy Substance soon unites again)
The meeting Points that sacred Hair dissever
From the fair Head, for ever and for ever!

Then flash'd the living Lightnings from her Eyes,
And Screams of Horror rend th' affrighted Skies.
Not louder Shrieks to pitying Heav'n are cast,
When Husbands or when Lap-dogs breath their last,
Or when rich *China* Vessels, fal'n from high,
In glittering Dust and painted Fragments lie!

Let Wreaths of Triumph now my Temples twine,
(The Victor cry'd) the glorious Prize is mine!
While Fish in Streams, or Birds delight in Air,
Or in a Coach and Six the *British* Fair,
As long as *Atalantis* shall be read,
Or the small Pillow grace a Lady's Bed,
While *Visits* shall be paid on solemn Days,
When numerous Wax-lights in bright Order blaze,
While Nymphs take Treats, or Assignations give,
So long my Honour, Name, and Praise shall live!

Throughout the poem, Pope uses numerous allusions to former epics and famous poetry. In the above battle scene, he describes a sylph (a type of mini-angel that guards Belinda) getting "cut in twain." In Milton's *Paradise Lost*, there is a great battle between the angels where the angels try to kill each other with swords, but their bodies are made of an airy substance that simply comes back together after being sliced in two. Pope is alluding to that when the sylph gets cut in two above. Here's another example of a literary allusion you might recognize:

Restore the Lock! she cries; and all around
Restore the Lock! the vaulted Roofs rebound.
Not fierce *Othello* in so loud a Strain
Roar'd for the Handkerchief that caus'd his Pain.
But see how oft Ambitious Aims are cross'd,
And Chiefs contend 'till all the Prize is lost!
The Lock, obtain'd with Guilt, and kept with Pain,
In ev'ry place is sought, but sought in vain:
With such a Prize no Mortal must be blest,
So Heav'n decrees! with Heav'n who can contest?

In the end, no one can find the lock that was snapped off, so the poet describes it as becoming a comet in the sky. (Again, this is like many greek myths where one thing is changed into another like when Diana turns Daphne into a tree to help her escape being raped by Apollo.)

But trust the Muse---she saw it upward rise,
Tho' mark'd by none but quick Poetic Eyes:
(So *Rome's* great Founder to the Heav'ns withdrew,
To *Proculus* alone confess'd in view.)
A sudden Star, it shot thro' liquid Air,
And drew behind a radiant *Trail of Hair*.
Not *Berenice's* Locks first rose so bright,
The heav'ns bespangling with dishevel'd light.
The *Sylphs* behold it kindling as it flies,
And pleas'd pursue its Progress thro' the Skies.

“The Rape of the Lock” is a great example of the use of the heroic couplet. Notice that every two lines rhyme and complete a full thought.