



READING THE FIRST 22 LINES OF ALEXANDER POPE'S *THE RAPE OF THE LOCK*: A STUDY OF THE EPIC CHARACTER AND SOCIAL SATIRE IN THE POEM

MADHUSANKHA B. H. I.

Undergraduate, Faculty of Science, University of Colombo, Colombo



ABSTRACT

Alexander Pope was an eighteenth century British English poet who is best commended for the excellent craftsmanship that he demonstrates in the heroic couplet. The essential social satire that features his poetic disposition has earned him never ending literary appraisal. Pope's "translation of Homer" seems to have achieved a perfection of form in the poem, *The Rape of the Lock* which is perhaps the best and most celebrated of his poetic successes. First published in 1712, the poem, *The Rape of the Lock* reappeared in 1714 as a revised version with five cantos. It is a mock-heroic poem which sarcastically details the subject of a quarrel between two aristocratic families in Pope's contemporary society. Intriguingly, the powerful satirical reasoning and the pulsating epic streak that govern the particular poem have rendered it an epitome of mock-epic poetry. The objective of this article is to critically analyse the first 22 lines of the poem, *The Rape of the Lock*. Thus, the paper discusses the writer's essential fidelity to the epic character and his strong satirical perception in the present poem with special reference to the select lines. Given a careful reading to those lines, it can well be contended that Pope's *The Rape of the Lock* remains unexampled in the mock-heroic genre and hence it can judiciously be hailed as one of the finest works of the whole corpus of English poetry.

Keywords: Alexander Pope, *The Rape of the Lock*, mock-epic poetry, epic streak, social satire

Alexander Pope (1688 – 1744) is one of the most consummate maestros of English poetry who has lavishly been enshrined in the pantheon of world's greatest literary heroes. His popularity as a satirist, lyricist, translator, and a writer of mock-epics and didactic poems still remains unequalled and his literary works, as consolidated by numerous scholarly critics, continue to be read and re-read by countless readers of English literature thereby cherishing his fame more and more. The reception accorded to his poetry by the far-flung literary public seems to have placed him in the pinnacle of the world's literary hierarchy, and endowed him with the great glory of being one of the most frequently quoted of English poets after Shakespeare. Pope's literary spirit is governed by a remarkable "adroitness" and exquisite workmanship that has led to the recognition of the worldwide literary community. Further, his humorous, paradoxical, and enticing writing style seems to have added a lot to his popularity as a writer of distinction because "no one can dress up a commonplace sentiment or humdrum thought in finer clothes than Pope" (Lall 10). Even more striking is the fact that this salient writing style appears to have assumed perfection in the hands of this erudite poet. Also, the spirit of the age in which he lived is inevitably associated with his poetic soul, and thus finds glinting expression from his works of which the elegance shine far and wide.

Pope introduces his poem, *The Rape of the Lock* which is the subject of our scrutiny here as a heroi-



comical poem and it is widely regarded as the finest and most well-known of mock-epic poetry. It bears ample evidence to the fact that Pope is one of the most excellent embodiments of the kind of intelligence which is simply known as "wit". The satirical reasoning and the sarcastic streak emerging from Pope's poetic disposition render his works, particularly the poem under concern, much elegant and vigorous. In commenting on this poem, Ian Jack observes: "This is the poem which Hazlitt described as the most exquisite specimen of filigree work ever invented and which even Housman thought possibly the most perfect long poem in the language." (Lall 45) while J. C. Cunningham writes:

The Rape of the Lock is the achievement of a spirited imaginative intelligence. To marshal a host of literary allusions, at varying levels of suppression, from the blatantly overt to the secretive; to carry the mimicry of epic structure down to niceties of heroic idiom and tone; to maintain a firm discrimination between the admirable and the trashy in contemporary society, unmasking hypocrisy and pretentiousness: such activities engage the intelligence, as well ours as Pope's. (Lall 44)

An epic or a heroic poem is a long narrative poem which is intended to sing the praise of a hero by relating his story with a series of adventures in an impressive manner. Such a poem is written in a highly elevated style in order to suit its theme and attain the objective of adoring the heroism of the figure who serves as the source of inspiration for the particular work. Several best known examples of epic poetry are the *Odyssey* and the *Iliad* by Homer and the *Aeneid* by Virgil, both ancient Greek and Roman poets. Interestingly, the mock-epic or the mock-heroic is a poetic form which is aimed at spoofing the epic structure by treating a trivial subject in a pompous manner. Also, a mock-epic generally conforms to the basic characteristics of the epic style such as the invocation to the Muse, formal statement of the theme, division into cantos and the employment of machinery. The action of an epic is made on a large scale and the length of an epic is very high. In addition, the subject matter of a heroic poem is intensely dramatic and splendid because it celebrates the marvelous moments of gallantry attributed to its hero who takes us into a world of wondrous adventures. On the contrary, the subject of a hero-comical poem is found to be mean, trivial, and almost slight. Nonetheless, the manner in which a mock-epic is written resembles the epic style, and thus the subject is made to look absurd and ridiculous by introducing it to a structure completely inappropriate to its nature and level of importance (Lall 46 – 47).

The Rape of the Lock has received and is still receiving great acclaim from its innumerable fans because its characteristic features as a mock-heroic remain incomparable, and continue to gain high praise just as Thomas Campbell reminds us that "there is no finer gem than this poem in all the lighter treasures of English fancy" (Lall 42). Pope wrote this hero-comic poem in order to bring about a reconciliation between two high society Catholic families who had been harbouring a grudge against each other and aggravating it on account of the mischief committed by Lord Petre by snipping off a lock of hair from the head of Miss Arbella Fermor whom Pope refers to here as Belinda. Thus, the central character of the poem is assumed by Belinda, and so she serves as its inspiration.

"What dire offence from am'rous causes springs,
What mighty contests rise from trivial things," (1 – 2)

The very first couplet of the poem gives us an idea about the eloquence which permeates the poem. The employment of rhetorical questions sounds really striking and efficacious thus signifying the poet's sense of confusion over the matter concerned. Pope here expresses his puzzlement over the situation which he is going to deal with. He wonders what serious hatreds surface from affairs of love, and what terrifying disputes result from petty incidents. Also, the contradiction between "dire offence" and "amorous causes" seems to construct a juxtaposing effect thus adding to the satire of the poem. What is interesting here is the way that Pope begins the poem by giving expression to his wonder, applying rhetorical questions, and thus inviting the immediate attention of the reader.

I sing – This verse to Caryl, Muse! is due:



This, ev'n Belinda may vouchsafe to view:

Slight is the subject, but not so the praise,

If she inspire, and he approve my lays. (3 – 6)

A “slavish fidelity” to the epic character is perceived at the very outset of the poem with the technique of invocation used in the above lines. The invocation can be regarded as a very popular and essential characteristic of epic poetry. The function of this particular technique is to seek the support of Polyhymnia, the Muse of sacred poetry who is one of the nine muses mentioned in Greek mythology, in order to strengthen the effectiveness of the appeal made in a work of poetry. Adhering to the art of epics where the poetic efforts are dedicated to divinities, Pope says the Muse that he authors this poem at the request of John Caryll who is said to have been a close friend of not just the Pope family but of the two opposing families as well. It is this Caryll who had brought the conflict between the Fermor family and the Petre family to the attention of Pope and thus he had suggested Pope to write a poem which would assist in diminishing the consequent animosity that had then been overriding the two families.

Considering the details discussed above, it becomes clear that the poem under examination begins with an introduction to its purpose, its theme, the source of inspiration which induced the poet to write this poem, and a prophecy concerning its success. All these features sound highly workable in keeping with the epic flavour of the work. Here, the poet emphasises that even the high born beautiful Belinda may condescend to go through the poem which sophisticatedly revolves round herself. Moreover, he goes onto proclaim that though the subject of the poem is of very little importance, the poem will receive great reception from the reading community, if Belinda serves as its inspiration and John Caryll advocates it. When the focus is laid on the literary features of the above stanza, the allusion to the “Muse” along with the use of the exclamation mark sounds much significant unveiling the influence that Greek mythology has on mock-epic poetry. The last two lines of the above stanza bring to light a prediction that the writer makes with regard to the future success of the poem which has later come into fulfillment with the never ending fame the poem has been acquiring.

Say what strange motive, Goddess! Could compel

A well-bred lord t' assault a gentle belle?

O say what stranger cause, yet unexplor'd,

Could make a gentle belle reject a lord? (7 – 10)

In the above lines, the poet establishes his puzzlement over the incident of a high-born young man of good breeding cutting off a lock of hair from the head of a beautiful young lady of aristocratic ancestry, and the furious dispute that follows this inconsequential theft. He makes a quick prayer to the Muse of poetry in his attempt to understand the confusing situation concerned. He questions what strange causes could have forced a well-bred aristocrat to attack a gentle lady like Belinda, and what even stranger causes could have compelled a tender lady to rebuff the courtship of an eminent young lord like Petre.

“In tasks so bold, can little men engage,

And in soft bosoms dwells such mighty rage?” (11 – 12)

The poet's sense of bewilderment is further aggravated by the two facts mentioned in the above lines. That “little men” like Lord Petre go to the extent of undertaking such bold tasks as shearing a lock of hair from the head of a society lady, is something really strange. Even more peculiar is the fact that a gentle and soft hearted lady like Belinda is able to descend to the lengths of such a mighty anger. Pope here appears to make a successful attempt of keeping the reader tied to the poem by drawing his attention to a succession of absurdities which both the poet and the reader find to be an ambiguity. The lack of agreement between “tasks so bold” and “little men” as well as between “soft bosoms” and “mighty rage” seem to create a powerful juxtaposition which is an essential characteristic of Pope's poetry. The flavour of juxtaposition so lent to the poem adds greatly to its satirical effect. Moreover, the use of irony gathers prominence in the situation where Pope refers to Lord Petre's rape of a lock of hair from Belinda's head as a “bold task”. When observing this



specific task of Lord Petre out of deference to the social code of morality, it can never be condoned because it clearly goes against the accepted standards of politeness and self-discipline. Thus, there is nothing “bold” in this task, but vulgarity and impertinence.

In addition, as R. Lall explains in his book, *Alexander Pope: The Rape of the Lock*, the epithet, “little” used to describe Lord Petre's appearance can be considered as a “sarcastic reference” to his short stature (Lall 141). Also, a sharp paradox comes out for examination in the same situation where the poet draws out a conflict between the way in which young lords and ladies ought to behave decently according to the established social etiquettes, and how they behave quite contradictorily without paying any heed towards the moral values (Lall 141 – 142). Thus, the “bold task” undertaken by Lord Petre is nothing but a deliberate deviation from the ethics of decent behaviour. Even Belinda's inclination towards a terrible grudge and her nursing of this resentment which is merely the result of a minor case cannot be considered as a sign of good breeding. So, both of them have their own foibles in each character. The writer's puzzlement over these weaknesses essentially accounts for the element of didacticism in the poem because his purpose is clearly the humiliation of the particular attributes.

“Soi thro’ white curtains shot a tim’rous ray,
And op’d those eyes that must eclipse the day;” (13 – 14)

The above couplet can rightly be regarded as two of the most exquisite and poetically rich lines of the poem. “Soi” is a Latin term meaning the sun. To paraphrase these lines, through the white curtains the glinting rays of the sun enter the bed chamber of Belinda who opens her shining eyes as the morning light overcomes her. Here, the poet only wants to convey the fact that Belinda awakes from her deep sleep with the morning light entering her bed room. The heroi-comical streak of the poem again becomes prominent here with the extremely adorable manner in which the poet reveals this simple idea (Lall 142). The epithet, “timorous” which means “timid” makes it clear that the sun is afraid of spreading its rays into Belinda's bed chamber or that the sunlight invades her bed room in a fearful manner. So, an element of personification can also be found to be governing the technical climate of the above lines. Also, it is metaphorically indicated that Belinda's eyes are so brilliant that they could even surpass the scorching sun (Shmoop Editorial Team). The fact that the lustre of Belinda's eyes supersedes even the glitter of the sun is a fine example for the application of hyperbole or overstatement in the poem. Cross lights are thus thrown on the splendour of the physical beauty of Belinda. So, here lies the mock-epic character of the poem. Also, the use of Latin terminology in the lines seems to enrich the verbal diversity of the poem.

“Now lap-dogs give themselves the rousing shake,
And sleepless lovers, just at twelve, awake:” (15 – 16)

The poet here brings to our notice some specific scenes noticeable during the day break. Having got up from sleep, the lap-dogs shake themselves in order to drive the drowsy sleep away from their body. It is important that the portrayal of the “pampered lapdogs owned by the 18th-centry upper classes” (Shmoop Editorial Team) stands as a symbol of the fashionable trends of the contemporary high society. According to the view of R. Lall in his book, *Alexander Pope: The Rape of the Lock*, a “double insinuation” can be found in the second line of the above couplet. The epithet, “sleepless” emphasises that the lovers have not been able to sleep throughout the night most probably owing to the torments of love. As R. Lall substantiates, if the term, “sleepless” is to be considered or the point that the lovers were alive right through the night, the fact of their waking up should not be stated, or else it would be a fact having no definite meaning (Lall 142). Yet, thinking a little deeply, it can be justified and thought of as compromising a powerful element of humour. Thus, it seems possible that the lovers who had a sleepless night have fallen asleep towards the morning and have been sleeping until they get up in the mid-day. Thus, the lap-dogs wake up in the morning whereas the lovers rise from sleep at twelve o' clock in the day. This contrast adds largely to the witticism of the poem thus giving scope for a humorous effect which entertains the reader. Also, the writer skillfully makes use of this situation to



satirise the laziness of the aristocratic people by pointing out their habit of waking up late in the daytime (Lall 62).

“Thrice rung the bell, the slipper knock’d the ground,
And the press’d watch return’d a silver sound.” (17 – 18)

Belinda rings her bell thrice in order to call her maid, but as she doesn't receive a reply she knocks the ground with her slippers. Then, she presses the spring of her repeater to learn the last hour that has struck. Here, according to the details given, it is clear that Belinda's watch is a repeater which can strike the final hour that has struck when needed. So, the writer stresses the great facilities consumed by the high class people like Belinda in their life of luxury. Further, another good instance for the projection of social satire in the poem springs out from the above lines with Pope's sarcastic observation of the propensity of the aristocrats to resort to quick temper even at the face of very slight matters. The above couplet is full of life and vividness because the action expressed in it is very dramatic and interesting. Also, the poet contributes to a series of auditory images through the particular lines in instances such as “rung the bells”, “knocked the ground” and “a silver sound”. They harmonise in effect to enhance the richness and variety of the imagery couched in the poem.

Belinda still her downy pillow press’d,
Her guardian sylph prolong’d the balmy rest:
'Twas he had summon’d to her silent bed
The morning dream that hover’d o'er her head; (19 – 22)

Belinda is still sleeping with her head pressed against her pillow because her guardian sylph has prolonged her comfortable slumber. It is this sylph who has summoned to her bed the morning-dream which is haunting before her closed eyes. The powerful use of descriptive adjectives in the poem is highlighted through the above lines. A “downy” pillow is one that is stuffed with feathers, and it is more comfortable and gives more pleasure to the user than normal pillows. The image evoked here effectively portrays the great comforts and conveniences enjoyed by Belinda in her opulent household. The phrases such as “downy pillow pressed” and “balmy rest” can well be considered as consisting of tactile images which again assist in adding to the variety of imagery in this mock-heroic poem. The portrayal of the “sylph” in the poem is also of prime importance because it belongs to what we may call “epic machinery” in heroic poetry, and it heightens the strength of the epic character of the poem concerned. A sylph is an aerial spirit or a divine agent who is striving for the betterment of mankind. The particular sylph that we come across in this poem is a guardian who protects Belinda from adversity, looks after her, and warns her of the dangers that she will encounter in the future. Even though this supernatural aerial creature is likely to give the poem an intensely classical and an almost unrealistic touch, it enhances the enchanting character of the work thus giving so many vents to the enjoyment of the reader.

Pope's indebtedness to classical poetry appears large in his employment of the epic machinery which has become immensely workable to him in achieving his intention. As Bonamy Dobree argues, the introduction of the classical epic machinery to the poem has resulted in its great length, and notably Pope uses sylphs instead of gods and goddesses influenced by Abbe de Villars' occult text, *Le Comte de Gabalis* which has gifted the poem with a mesmerizing elegance (Lall 43). As a whole, Pope's masterpiece, *The Rape of the Lock* paints out an evocative picture of the fashionable life of the elite society. Also, the pivotal aspect of social satire of the poem lies in Pope's choice of the heroic form to treat an insignificant subject. Thus, the work remains a stark satire on the weaknesses of the aristocratic people in Pope's contemporary society, especially their vanity, shallowness and superiority complex. Further, the sarcastic approach that the poet brings to the descriptions of the incidents and settings in the poem underlines its strong sense of social satire. It is hence noteworthy that the first 22 lines of Alexander Pope's hero-comical poem, *The Rape of the Lock* serve as a credible indication of the excellence of the whole work thus bearing testimony to the fact that it is an archetype of its kind.

REFERENCES



Lall, R. (2011). *"Alexander Pope: The Rape of the Lock"*. (38th edition). Rama Brothers India Pvt. Ltd. New Delhi.

Cunningham. (1971). *"The Rape of the Lock"*. Oxford University Press.

Cummings, M. J. (2005). *"The Rape of the Lock: A Study Guide"*. Retrieved August 12, 2015, from

<<http://www.cummingsstudyguides.net/Guides2/Pope.html>>

Shmoop Editorial Team. (2008). *"The Rape of the Lock"*. Retrieved August 15, 2015 from

<<http://www.shmoop.com/the-rape-of-the-lock/>>

"Alexander Pope". *Wikipedia*. The free encyclopedia. Retrieved August 3, 2015, from

<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Alexander_Pope>

"The Rape of the Lock". *Wikipedia*. The free encyclopedia. Retrieved July 28, 2015, from

<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Rape_of_the_Lock>
