The Rape of the Lock

- The Rape of the Lock is a mock-heroic narrative poem written by Alexander Pope. One of the most commonly cited examples of high burlesque (A burlesque is a literary, dramatic or musical work intended to cause laughter by caricaturing the manner or spirit of serious works, or by ludicrous treatment of their subjects. The word derives from the Italian burlesco, which, in turn, is derived from the Italian burla—a joke, ridicule or mockery.), it was first published anonymously in Lintot's Miscellaneous Poems and Translations (May 1712) in two cantos (334 lines); a revised edition "Written by Mr. Pope" followed in March 1714 as a five-canto version (794 lines) accompanied by six engravings. Pope boasted that this sold more than three thousand copies in its first four days. The final form of the poem appeared in 1717.

- The poem of The Rape of the Lock satirises a minor incident of life, by comparing it to the epic world of the gods, and is based on an event recounted to Alexander Pope by his friend John Caryll. That Arabella Fermor and her suitor, Lord Petre, each was member of an aristocratic recusant Catholic families, at a time in England when, under such laws as the Test Act, all denominations except Anglicanism suffered legal restrictions and penalties. (For example, Petre, being a Catholic, could not take the place in the House of Lords that would otherwise have been rightfully his.) Petre had cut off a lock of Arabella's hair without permission, and the consequent argument had created a breach between the two families. The poem's title does not refer to the extreme of sexual rape, but to an earlier definition of the word derived from the Latin rapere (supine stem raptum), "to snatch, to grab, to carry off"—in this case, the theft and carrying away of a lock of hair. In terms of the sensibilities of the age, however, even this non-consensual personal invasion might be interpreted as bringing dishonour.

Pope, also a Catholic, wrote the poem at the request of friends in an attempt to "comically merge the two" worlds, the heroic with the social. He utilised the character Belinda to represent Arabella and introduced an entire system of "sylphs", or guardian spirits of virgins, a parodied version of the gods and goddesses of conventional epic. Pope derived his sylphs from the 17th-century French Rosicrucian novel Comte de Gabalis.

Pope's poem uses the traditional high stature of classical epics to emphasise the triviality of the incident. The abduction of Helen of Troy becomes here the theft of a lock of hair; the gods become minute sylphs; the description of Achilles' shield becomes an excursus (An excursus (from Latin excurrere, 'to run out of') is a short episode or anecdote in a work of literature. Often excursuses have nothing to do with the matter being discussed by the work, and are used to lighten the atmosphere in a tragic story, a similar function to that of satyr plays in Greek theatre. Sometimes they are used to provide backstory to the matter being discussed at hand, as in Pseudo-Apollodorus' Bibliotheca. In the Middle Ages, the excursus is a favourite rhetorical devise to allow the narrator to comment or to suspend the action for reflection. Furthermore, an excursus is often applied to a piece of academic writing to provide digressive information, which does not contribute directly to the line of argument but can still be linked with the overall topic of the text.) on one of Belinda's petticoats. He also uses the epic style of invocations, lamentations, exclamations and similes, and in some cases adds parody to imitation by following the framework of actual speeches in Homer's Iliad. Although the poem is humorous at times, Pope keeps a sense that beauty is fragile, and emphasizes that the loss of a lock of hair touches Belinda deeply.

The humour of the poem comes from the storm in a teacup (Tempest in a teapot (American English), or storm in a teacup (British English), is an idiom meaning a small event that has been exaggerated out of proportion. There are also lesser known or earlier variants, such as tempest in a teacup, storm in a cream bowl, tempest in a glass of water, storm in a wash-hand basin, and storm in a glass of water.) being couched within the elaborate, formal verbal structure of an epic poem. It is a satire on contemporary society which showcases the lifestyle led by some people of that age. Pope arguably satirises it from within rather than looking down judgmentally on the characters. Belinda's legitimate rage is thus alleviated and tempered by her good humour, as directed by the character Clarissa.

- Ombre (from Spanish hombre 'man', pronounced "ombr") or l'Hombre is a fast-moving seventeenth-century trick-taking card game for three players and "the most successful card game ever invented."
Pope's fanciful conclusion to his work, translating the stolen lock into the sky, where "midst the stars [it] inscribes Belinda's name", contributed to the eventual naming of three of the moons of Uranus after characters from *The Rape of the Lock*: Umbriel, Ariel, and Belinda. The first two are major bodies, named in 1852 by John Herschel, a year after their discovery. The inner satellite Belinda was discovered in 1986, and is the only other of the planet's twenty-seven moons taken from Pope's poem rather than Shakespeare's works.

**Moons of Uranus**

Uranus, the seventh planet of the Solar System, has 27 known moons, most of which are named after characters that appear in, or are mentioned in, the works of William Shakespeare and Alexander Pope.

### The Rape of the Lock (a poem by Alexander Pope):

- Ariel, Umbriel, Belinda

### Plays by William Shakespeare:

- *A Midsummer Night's Dream*: Titania, Oberon, Puck
- *The Tempest*: (Ariel), Miranda, Caliban, Sycorax, Prospero, Setebos, Stephano, Trinculo, Francisco, Ferdinand
- *King Lear*: Cordelia
- *Hamlet*: Ophelia
- *The Taming of the Shrew*: Bianca
- *Troilus and Cressida*: Cressida
- *Othello*: Desdemona
- *Romeo and Juliet*: Juliet, Mab
- *The Merchant of Venice*: Portia
- *As You Like It*: Rosalind
- *The Winter’s Tale*: Perdita
- *Much Ado About Nothing*: Margaret
- *Timon of Athens*: Cupid

### The Rape of the Lock

**Overview**

The Rape of the Lock was written by Alexander Pope and first published in 1712, then reworked and published again in 1714. The poem is a mock-epic that satirizes the upper-class in London at the time. The story focuses on the central character, Belinda, whose lock of hair is cut off at a social gathering. Although trivial to most, Belinda is outraged that her lock of hair has been cut by the Baron. In the Rape of the Lock, Pope uses Belinda and the Baron to mock two of his acquaintances, Arabella Fermor, and Lord Petre. The poem follows the events of the night, leading up to Belinda’s “horrific” loss.

### The Story Behind the Story

Pope wrote *The Rape of the Lock* in response to a request made my his friend John Caryll, a prominent Roman Catholic of the time. Caryll explained that his friend, Lord Petre, had cut off a lock of Arabella Fermor’s hair. Ever since the incident, the families had been feuding. In order to make light of the situation, Pope wrote *The Rape of the Lock*. “The stealing of Miss Belle Fermor’s hair, was taken too seriously, and caused an estrangement between the two families, though they had lived so long in great friendship before. A common acquaintance and well-wisher to both, desired me to write a poem to make a jest of it, and laugh them together again. It was with this view that I wrote the Rape of the Lock.”

### Who is Arabella Fermor?

Born into the upper-class, Arabella Fermor was the daughter of Henry Fermor. Known for her beauty, she was the belle of the London society in the early 18th century. After telling her family about the incident involving her lock of hair, they were offended and became estranged from their once good friends, the Petres. In Pope’s poem, Belinda represents the character of Arabella Fermor.
History of the Poem

Although written in 1711 and published in 1712, The Rape of the Lock went through many stages before becoming the poem as we know it today. The first version was only two cantos long, but with each version, the story became progressively longer. A year later, Pope improved upon his work by polishing the piece, as well as adding elements from the supernatural. However, this version was not published until 1714. Finally, in 1717, upon preparing for a publication of a collection of his work, Pope wrote the version that we know today. This version is five cantos long, and includes Clarissa’s speech, which aids in describing the morality behind the poem. However, it is interesting to note that by the time Pope had finished the latest version, Lord Petre had died of smallpox, and Arabella was married, so the feud which the poem was originally written to mend was no longer relevant.

Plot Summary

Pope begins with an overview of the problem at hand; a baron has committed a terrible offense against a young lady, but we do not yet know what this offense is.

A sylph, or spirit, named Ariel warns a young woman named Belinda that an offense will be committed against her, but she does not include where or when

Belinda, clearly a woman from high social standings, prepares herself for a social event by putting on makeup and generally just dolling herself up

She travels to where the social event is being held, and is thought to be more beautiful than anyone else; her hair especially is always the object of envy

A baron, who especially admires Belinda’s beautiful golden locks of hair, has decided to attempt to cut off a lock of her hair, as it would be the finest treasure he could hope to have

He so badly wanted this lock that he even prayed to the gods and lit an altar fire; the ridiculousness of this behavior for just a piece of hair is a good example of the satire that Pope employs

Everyone plays a card game called Ombre, and although it seems clear that the Baron will win, Belinda does not give up hope

This game is described as an almost life-or-death situation; Pope makes the card game seem like an important battle, and by doing so he is in effect mocking high society for equating a card game to war.

The game ends and Belinda wins

Clarissa fetches a pair of scissors for the Baron to cut Belinda’s hair

The Baron cuts a lock from Belinda’s hair and she becomes infuriated

Umbriel, a gnome, travels down to the underworld to get Belinda a bag of sighs and a vial of tears. The gifts were brought to comfort Belinda

Clarissa tries to calm Belinda down but it does not work

Belinda throws a handful of snuff at the Baron and a “battle” begins

The battle ends and the lock of hair is nowhere to be found

The Augustan

Some major characteristics of Augustan literature include:

1. the use of classical Greek and Roman models of poetry.
2. the purpose of poetry was thought to be to instruct and delight the population.
3. the idea that human society should be ordered, balanced, and rational, just as the universe was thought to be; any upset of this careful balance of nature could have catastrophic consequences.
4. the use of satire in order to point out flaws in human behavior/society. (satire was used to mock certain behaviors; by pointing them out and mocking them, authors hoped to get people to correct them)
Pope significantly employs two of these writing styles in Rape of the Lock; the use of classical models and the use of satire in order to correct human flaws.

Classical Models- Pope’s piece is in the style of classical Greek and Roman epics, and more specifically it is a parody of the abduction of Helen of Troy in the classic Greek epic The Iliad, as the theft of Belinda’s lock is compared to the abduction of Helen. Other characteristics of classical epics include:

- **Division of the poem into Cantos or books-** Pope divides his poem into 5 Cantos
- **Presence of spirits or supernatural beings-** Sylphs are present in this poem; they are like miniature gods and goddesses that are present in Greek epics
- **Underworld-** Epics often have scenes taking place in the underworld; in Pope’s poem, we see Umbriel visiting the underworld.
- **Soldiers preparing for battle-** Epics often describe in-depth the armor and weapons that soldiers use for battle, and in Rape of the Lock, Pope uses this method to describe Belinda preparing herself with things such as combs and pins. He writes, “Here files of pins extend their shining rows / puffs, powders, patches, Bibles, billet-doux / now awful Beauty puts on all its arms”(lines 137-139). He is clearly mocking Belinda’s preparation by describing her pins, etc. as though they were arms she would be doing battle with.

Satire- Pope uses satire in this poem to paint a portrait of England at this time and to point out its moral flaws. The main apparent satire is of course the comparison of Belinda’s stolen lock to the abduction of Helen of Troy. By making a huge deal out of such a trivial thing, Pope is mocking his society. He believes that many of England’s faults comes from the fact that British society is too concerned with frivolities and trivialities and is very self-absorbed. If the biggest problem these people have is that a lock of hair is stolen from a girl, then they have it pretty good, and Pope uses this poem in an attempt to hold a mirror up to his own society. He wants them to see that their “woes” are not woes at all, and that they need to start worrying about more important things in life because the life that they currently lead is devoid of any meaning; the people in it exist solely to dress up and engage in petty fights.

Pope’s piece is also special because it was the first mock-epic, which is in fact a sort of combination of the use of classical models and satire. Pope modeled his poem after his own translation of Homer’s The Iliad, a classical Greek epic, yet also employed the use of satire to create a mock-epic. Because the nature of the problem, Belinda’s stolen lock of hair, is in fact quite trivial, Pope’s assertion that it is in fact of the utmost importance creates the satire that forms the “mock” part of the mock-epic.

**Characters**

Belinda: Beautiful young lady with wondrous hair, two locks of which hang gracefully in curls.

The Baron: Young admirer of Belinda who plots to cut off one of her locks.

Ariel: Belinda’s guardian sylph (supernatural creature).

Clarissa: Young lady who gives the Baron scissors to cut off the lock

Umbriel: Sprite who enters the cave of the Queen of Spleen to seek help for Belinda.

Queen of Spleen: Underworld goddess who gives Umbriel gifts for Belinda.

Thalestris: Friend of Belinda. Thalestris urges Sir Plume to defend Belinda’s honor.

Sir Plume: Beau of Thalestris. He scolds the Baron.

**Analysis of Main Characters**

Belinda– A vain, upper class woman who is always seen as the center of attention. Her society puts her on a high pedestal, always giving her praise when possible. The Baron steals a curl of Belinda’s hair when given the scissors by Belinda’s friend, Clarissa. When The Baron cuts the curl from her head, the typically calm, collective Belinda flies into a horrible rage. She asks at once for her hair to be returned to her but when The Baron cannot find the curl, it is said that it traveled up into the stars and is now a constellation for all to admire. It looks as though Pope used this mock-epic work to represent the fascination that society has of the members of the upper class. Belinda’s beauty was admired by all and many were jealous of her (The Baron, Clarissa). The tension between the people in the upper class is illustrated by these characters and the fight to steal another person’s power. Pope compares the trivial event in his poem to the events in epic poems by using satire. The events that occur in this poem show how the society being described has lost all capability of determining which problems are to be treated seriously and which should not.
The Baron—The Baron is a representation of Lord Petre who Pope knew from his social circle.

Clarissa—Clarissa is Belinda’s jealous friend who wishes to hurt Belinda by stealing a lock of her hair. Following the mock-epic trend of the poem, Clarissa believes that cutting a small curl of Belinda’s hair will be devastating although truthfully many worse things could happen.

**Themes**

**Upper Class**

Pope uses the upper class for the basis of his poem; they are mocked because Pope believes they do not care about serious matters, have narrow-minded ideas about the world in which they live, and do not possess the ability to look beyond trivialities. The chaos that ensues when Belinda’s lock is stolen serves to poke fun at the upper class; Average people reading this poem can see how ridiculous it is that they get so upset at the theft of a piece of hair and go to such lengths to retrieve it, and because Pope exaggerates the situation so much, upper class readers will recognize the mockery and feel embarrassed that they act in such a manner. Pope used the upper class primarily to point out their flaws to them through the use of satire/mock-epic. A part that is most heavily laden with sarcasm is the ending in which Pope writes,

“When those fair suns shall set, as set they must,
And all those tresses shall be laid in dust;
This lock, the Muse shall consecrate to fame,
And 'midst the stars inscribe Belinda’s name!"

Pope finishes the poem by claiming that the lock will be immortalized, which is a ridiculous statement and one that is quite clearly sarcastic; Pope’s intent with this is to make one final mark on the upper class reader. He is hoping to shame them into correcting their behaviors and start caring about things besides beauty and status.

**Trivialities**

Pope emphasizes the idea that people should not focus on trivial things such as the loss of a piece of hair, but rather should search for the truly meaningful things in life. He also asserts that being able to laugh at oneself and at life once in a while is a key ingredient in having a successful life. Clarissa explains these ideas in Canto 5, lines 25-32:

“But since, alas! frail beauty must decay,
Curled or uncurled, since locks will turn to grey,
Since painted or unpainted, all shall fade,
And she who scorns a man must die a maid;
What then remains, but well our pow’r to use,
And keep good humor still whate’er we lose?
And trust me, dear! good humor can prevail,
When airs, and flights, and screams, and scolding fail.”

Clarissa claims that beauty always dies, so it is important to care about things deeper than beauty; she also believes that always keeping a sense of humor will enable people to laugh at themselves and their sometimes petty behavior, and ultimately realize that getting upset about something or taking trivial things too seriously will only create further tension and destroy society.

By making fun of a real life situation, Pope is commenting on the vanity and trivialness of high society during his time. Pope suggests that society has no concept of priority, in that they treat the trivial with the same amount of severity as the serious. The Rape of the Lock was written in the fervent hopes that Pope’s fellow members of society, including the Fermors and Petres, would learn from their trivialities and be able to separate that which matters, from that which does not.
Is there a serious message about the world, about human conduct, behind Pope’s mischievous mockery?

Pope’s mockery is used in a playful way to explain a more serious issue that Pope sees. Pope feels that society makes a large deal out of things that are truly trivial. People do not know how to decipher between major catastrophes and unimportant events. Belinda’s lock of hair was such a great example for Pope to use because it was truly unimportant in the scheme of things, and in life, many worse things could have happened to her. Pope used this story to open the eyes of the public to see that society has ridiculous standards set. One must realize what is worth fighting for and what is of minimal importance.

*Pope uses many terms/allusions to Greek and Roman mythology. Why did so many writers of his time—and why do so many writers today—allude to mythology to make comparisons or describe situations and characters?

Pope and many writers of the 18th Century tending to use Greek and Roman mythology for their dramatic effect. Most Greek and Roman myths are over-the-top with exaggeration and have extreme plot lines as their backbones. Over-dramatic works were perfect for writers like Pope who were hoping to make mockery of real-life situations. By using Greek and Roman mythology, writers were able to have a well-known topic to construct their pieces from, playing on the fact that both would be very over-done. The myths could be used as comparisons to the trivial problems of the 18th Century society. Since society’s priorities were mixed up, writers of the time could use myths as examples of just how absurd people were acting.

The Rape of the Lock overview

Alexander Pope’s The Rape of the Lock is a poem of five cantos, written in rhyming couplets.

It is frequently referred to as a mock-heroic or mock-epic poem, on account of its parodic relationship with classical epics such as Homer’s The Iliad, and with the English epic tradition, especially John Milton’s Paradise Lost. Pope borrows much of the apparatus of The Rape of the Lock from the epic world, talking in terms of battles, heroes, gods and nymphs, glory and iniquity, but then applies those terms to a small, domestic, decidedly un-epic scene. The poem’s very first couplet announces that it will deal with:

What dire offence from amorous causes springs,  
What mighty contests rise from trivial things.

The ‘rape of the lock’ to which the poem’s title refers, and the major event of the poem, is the seizing, by force (‘rape’ coming from the Latin rapere, to seize), of a lock of hair from a young lady named Belinda by her suitor, the dastardly Baron. This does not happen until the end of the poem’s third canto, with the delay itself being a parody of the way in which Milton, for instance, makes his reader wait until over halfway through Paradise Lost before narrating the crucial event of the Fall of Mankind.

The rest of Pope’s poem is given over to intricate, comical descriptions of Belinda’s boudoir, the trials of the card table and the activities of the gloomy gnomes and sprites at the court of the Queen of Spleen, who sends Belinda, via Umbriel the gnome, a bag of ‘sighs, sobs, and passions, and the war of tongues’, and a vial filled ‘with fainting fears, / Soft sorrows, melting griefs, and flowing tears’.

Dedication to Arabella Fermor

Pope dedicated the second edition of The Rape of the Lock to a woman named Arabella Fermor, who had once really had a lock of her hair stolen by a suitor. The episode is supposed to have inspired Pope to write his poem. In the dedication Pope teases Fermor that ‘the ancient poets are in one respect like many modern ladies: let an action be never so trivial in itself, they always make it appear of the utmost importance’. This joke is, too, Pope’s way of signalling that his poem is ‘mock-epic’ not only in the sense that it uses the grandeur of the epic to mock the foolishness and triviality of contemporary society, but also perhaps in the sense that it uses these domestic events to bring some of the hyperbole and grandiosity of the epic back down to earth.