

Fate and the Narrative of *The Rape of the Lock*

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Students of the period well know that the journals of the first years of the eighteenth century had as part of their purpose the reformation of manners and morals of the English public. Richard Steele, with his colleague Joseph Addison, in *The Tatler*, *The Spectator* and to some extent the later *Guardian*, made this purpose into a mission. Many of Steele's papers, in *The Spectator* especially, were directed towards women,¹ admonishing their foibles and vanities with good-humoured satire. Others of his papers, however, are much more serious in tone and content.² Some deal with the evils of prostitution and the sexual exploitation of women, setting forth Steele's belief that modesty and virtue (which he tends to see as part of the moral law of God) are the only real preservers of women's innocence. Many of these serious papers appeared in 1711, in the summer of which year Richard Steele and Alexander Pope first became acquainted; and it was during this same summer that Pope apparently composed the first (two-canto) version of *The Rape of the Locke*. In early August 1711 Pope and Steele were on very friendly terms,³ and Steele, whose views on female morality had been strongly expressed in papers earlier in the year, may easily have discussed these views and papers with Pope. Shortly after the composition of the first version of *The Rape of the Locke* (assuming Professor Tillotson's estimate of somewhere between 2 August and late September to be substantially correct⁴), Steele brought out *Spectator* No. 182 (28 September), in which he published a letter from "Alice Threadneedle" inveighing against male seducers, and followed it up a fortnight later (No. 190, 8 October) with a letter from "Rebecca Nettletop" which told the story of Rebecca's

1 See *Spectator* No. 205 for a very full list.

2 Notably Nos. 182 and 190. See also Nos. 6, 33, 52, 172.

3 Alexander Pope, *Correspondence* ed. George Sherburn, 5 volumes (Oxford 1956), I, 127. In a letter dated 2 August 1711 Pope states he is about to write words for a musical interlude simply to please Steele.

4 Volume II of the Twickenham edition of *The Poems of Alexander Pope* ed. Geoffrey Tillotson, 6 volumes (London 1939-61) 81-87. Further citations appear in the body of the text as *TE* II, followed by page number.

moral downfall.

A month later, in *Spectator* No. 226 (19 November 1711), Steele drew into one of his discourses on morality another of his interests—painting:

... what strong images of virtue and humanity might we not expect would be instilled into the mind from the labours of the pencil? This is a poetry which would be understood with much less capacity, and less expense of time, than what is taught by writings... Who is the better man for beholding the most beautiful Venus, the best-wrought Bacchanal, the images of sleeping Cupids, languishing Nymphs, or any of the representations of Gods, Goddesses, Demigods, Satyrs, Polyphemes, Sphinxes or Fauna?

But if the virtues and vices which are sometimes pretended to be represented under such draughts, were given us by the painter in the Characters of real life, and the persons of men and women whose actions have rendered them laudable or infamous; we should not see a good History-piece without receiving an instructive lecture.

Steele introduces this essay with the significant motto *Mutum est Pictura Poema*, one half of Simonides's paradox "a poem is a speaking picture, a picture is a silent poem", and an indicator that the literary theory *ut pictura poesis* lies, at least partly, in the background of Steele's thinking here. In this passage Steele is arguing for those "modern moral" paintings that Hogarth subsequently created; and it is very likely that with Pope's and Steele's mutual interest in painting the idea of "modern moral" paintings was discussed with Pope either prior to this essay's publication, or very soon after.

A background for the composition of *The Rape of the Lock* might now be established bearing in mind a number of converging strands: Pope's friendship with Steele; Steele's strong opinions on women and morality; Pope's and Steele's interest in painting; the tendency, in such journals as *The Tatler* and *The Spectator*, to adapt general moral teaching to contemporary life. The possibility is opened up that Pope adopted Steele's idea of *Spectator* No. 226 in a more than general way. Steele asked for modern, morally-instructive paintings where "the virtues and vices" are given by the painter "in the Characters of real life"; also, both in his argument that "this is a poetry which would be understood with much less capacity, and less expense of time, than what is taught by writing", and in the epigraph to the essay, *Mutum est Pictura Poema*, laid stress on the close relationship between poetry and painting and on the theory of *ut pictura poesis*.⁵ It is

5 For Pope's knowledge and use of this theory see my "Alexander Pope and *Ut Pictura Poesis*", *Sydney Studies in English*, 9 (1983-4), 61-75.

very likely that Pope, with his own particular interest as poet and painter, saw in his recently-completed poem the two-canto *Rape of the Locke* of 1712, the nucleus of a modern morally-instructive poem, the five-canto *The Rape of the Lock* of 1714-17.

The plot and structure of *The Rape of the Lock* have received little attention from critics, largely because of the implicit acceptance of the idea that the poem reflects the concerns of Arabella Fermor and Lord Petre. However, James L. Jackson has considered the five cantos of the poem as corresponding more or less to the five acts of Elizabethan drama.⁶ Jackson's perception of the poem as a series of dramatic incidents is glanced at also in Jean Hagstrum's discussion of the poem's pictorialism.⁷ Hagstrum views the poem as a series of dramatic tableaux, where "we move from scene to scene, not in narrative progress . . . [but] as though we were in a gallery". But Hagstrum's consideration of the "pictures" in *The Rape of the Lock* links them in no narrative or thematic way; in fact, he denies the existence of narrative progress. If one unites Jackson's concept of an ordered series of dramatic incidents with Hagstrum's gallery of pictures, one is closed to viewing *The Rape of the Lock* as a series of "pictures" linked in temporal sequence to tell a moral story.

It is usual to regard *The Rape of the Lock* as having a relationship to the plot of the classical epic—either as being an epic in its own right, or a reflection of true epic, satiric or otherwise; and to see Belinda as an epic or mock-epic heroine. This classical reference, which does of course exist in the poem, is no bar to seeing as also a "modern, moral" poem. It will be remembered that Steele, in his essay, had asked: "Who is the better man for beholding the most beautiful Venus . . . or any of the representations of Gods [or] Goddesses?" He then went on to argue that if a painter were to give virtue and vice in "the Characters of real life" such a painting would not only be good art but also good moral teaching. In the hands of a poet such as Pope, using a sophisticated set of allusions, a "character of real life" could be just that, and a Venus or Goddess as well. Belinda can be both an epic heroine (and even Venus at her toilet) and a contemporary woman; and *The Rape of the Lock* both an epic and a

6 "Pope's *Rape of the Lock* considered as a 5-act epic", in *PMLA*, LXV (1950), 1283-7.

7 Jean H. Hagstrum, *The Sister Arts: the Tradition of Literary Pictorialism and English Poetry from Dryden to Gray* (Chicago 1958), pp. 220, 222.

modern, moral poem.

In either set of terms, modern moral or epic, the progress of events in *The Rape of the Lock* is determined and inevitable. The inevitability of events is due to the operation of a personified Fate, the cause of that pre-ordained course of human events which in *The Rape's* epic parallel, *The Iliad*, is superior even to the power of the Gods of Olympus. Fate first prevents sufficient foreknowledge of coming events: "Heaven" (standing for the Divine Decree of Fate) refuses to reveal details of the "dread Event" foreseen by Ariel (I, 109-11); "the Fates" again conceal details of the "dire Disaster" (II, 103-4). Fate's more positive action in determining events is foreshadowed after the game of Ombre:

Oh thoughtless Mortals! ever blind to Fate,
Too soon dejected, and too soon elate!
Sudden these Honours shall be snatch'd away,
And curs'd forever this Victorious Day. (III, 101-4)

A little later, just as the lock is about to be cut, Fate acts even more directly:

Ev'n then, before the fatal Engine clos'd,
A wretched *Sylph* too fondly interpos'd;
Fate urg'd the Shears, and cut the *Sylph* in twain.
(But Airy Substance soon unites again)
The meeting Points the sacred Hair dis sever
From the fair Head, for ever and for ever! (III, 149-54)

The lock having been cut, the narrative voice of the poem, which had foreshadowed Fate's active intervention at III, 101-4, returns, after the Baron's exultant speech (III, 161-70), to enforce the moral and the idea that the cutting was *fated*:

What Time wou'd spare, from Steel receives its date,
And Monuments, like Men, submit to Fate! (III, 171-2)

The sorrowing Belinda now recalls, too late, the "Threats of Fate" (IV, 165). Finally, any chance of the lock's being returned is prevented by Fate, for "*Fate* and *Jove* had stopp'd the *Baron's* Ears" (V, 2). *Jove* here acts as an instrument of Fate, preserving the proper classical relationship between Fate and the Gods of Olympus; and *Jove* acts again as instrument when, with his scales, the value of the lock is determined (V, 71-4). Fate, the "Heav'n" which had originally prevented Ariel from clearly foreseeing the coming disaster (I, 109-11), judges the lock to have more than mortal value:

With such a Prize no Mortal must be blest,
So Heav'n decrees! With Heav'n who can contest? (V, 111-2)

Thus Fate plays a significant part in the sequence of events in *The Rape of the Lock*: it prevents any clear foreknowledge of the rape itself; by urging the scissors it ensures that the lock is cut; it effectively prevents the restoration of the lock to its owner; and it ensures that the lock will not become trivialized into an amatory souvenir. The inevitability of the rape is already implicit then, at the beginning of the poem, in Belinda's dream, and the events which ensue follow a determined rather than a fortuitous course.

As Geoffrey Tillotson points out in his introduction (*TE* II, 371-8), "the incident behind the poem has never been authoritatively tracked down to place and time". Characters in the poem have been attributed to real persons, with varying degrees of evidence; but for any detailed account of the event and the characters we must rely entirely on the narrative of the poem itself. Thus, while the narrative has an existence in the poem, it cannot be shown to have a parallel existence in historical reality; and while this may be conjectured, one need not necessarily do so. Nor could continued topicality have induced Pope to bring out his expanded version of the poem in March 1714; Lord Petre had married elsewhere in April 1712, and had subsequently died of smallpox in March 1713. A continued interest in the Fermor-Petre quarrel seems hardly likely.

Many modern discussions of *The Rape of the Lock*, overlooking the role of Fate in the narrative, focus their attention on some of the more ritualistic aspects of flirtation and premarital courtship. In an influential article, Cleanth Brooks⁸ claims that the concerns of the poem are "matters of taste, matters of 'good sense'", and that "matters of morality . . . are never raised". Rebecca Price Parkin⁹ concentrates on the "boudoir" aspects of the poem and, following Brooks, on belles and beaux. Taking a more independent line Hugo M. Reichard¹⁰ detaches the poem from any concern with premarital courtship, and with a wealth of illustration drawn from Steele's lighter *Spectator* papers on the

8 "The Case of Miss Arabella Fermor", in *The Sewanee Review*, LI (1943), 505-24; reprinted in *The Rape of the Lock: A Casebook*, ed. John Dixon Hunt (1968), 135-53. Further citations appear in the body of the text as *Casebook*, followed by page number.

9 *The Poetic Workmanship of Alexander Pope* (1955), especially pp. 51-2.

10 "The Love-Affair in Pope's *Rape of the Lock*" in *PMLA*, LXIX (1954), 887-902, 888. Further citations appear in the text as *Love-Affair*, followed by page number.

foibles of women, views the poem as a "contest of wiles between commanding personalities—an uninhibited philanderer and an invincible flirt".

As Reichard has observed (*Love-Affair*, 888), any interpretation of *The Rape of the Lock* must rely greatly on an interpretation of Belinda's character. Cleanth Brooks thinks she is—or ought to be—out to catch a husband (*Casebook*, 144) and numerous others agree.¹¹ Once the Fermor-Petre background is laid aside, however, Belinda may be seen differently; indeed Reichard sees her as an "invincible flirt" with no thought of marriage at all. But Reichard's view of Belinda as "invincible" makes her too much mistress of her own actions, and this ignores the degree to which she is directed by Fate.

To view the poem as an examination of the manners of a rather artificial segment of society ignores the fact that the poem's scope of reference ranges downward from the Sovereign, Queen Anne herself (III, 7-8), through Ministers of State (III, 5-6), to "hungry Judges" and "Jury-men" (III, 21-2) and thence to hanged "Wretches" (III, 22). It thus ranges through all degrees of moral responsibility and all classes of society—the nobility and makers of the laws, the aristocracy and administrators of laws, the middle classes, and the low and criminal classes. Through the constant use of zeugma Pope indicates a total confusion of values that permeates the whole of society. The poem concentrates on the nobility and the aristocracy, but that part of society is neither "closed" nor artificial, for it constitutes the ruling class, whose prevailing standards tend to set the norm for society as a whole. In *The Rape of the Lock* the considerations are not ones only of "matters of taste, matters of 'good sense'"; the gulf that separates morality from mere taste and manners is sharply demonstrated by the poem.

The society with which the poem deals places highest value on three things—physical beauty, erotic love, and the formal ceremony of life. In the poem altars are erected to all three—to Beauty in Belinda's dressing-table (I, 121-44); to Love, by the Baron (II, 35-40); and to the ceremony of tea- and coffee-drinking, with "shining Altars of Japan" (III, 107-10). But as the poem makes clear in no uncertain manner, these are all false Gods—"Alas! frail Beauty must decay" (V, 25) is the burden of

11 See, e.g., Tillotson, *TE* II, 90: "Belinda is represented in the poem as meditating love, as ready indeed to love the Baron, though she unaccountably rejects him."

Clarissa's argument; the nature and quality of the Love worshipped by the Baron is exposed in the objects (French Romanesques, garters, gloves) used to construct his altar, and in society's sanction of "Fraud or Force" to attain that love (II, 33-4); self-indulgence to the point of abandonment of all moral duty is revealed behind the ceremony of eating and drinking when

The hungry Judges soon the Sentence sign
And Wretches hang, that Jury-men may dine. (III, 19-20)

For the female of society there is a fourth altar, more important even than these three—the "unrival'd Shrine" of "*Honour*" (IV, 105), a God whose false value the poem condemns. In *The Rape of the Lock* Pope concentrates less on society at large and more on one member of that society—Belinda, who is both the victim of society and its representative in the poem.

Unlike the protagonists of Steele's *Spectator* papers, Belinda does not lose her physical chastity; but in as far as Virtue can be considered a state of mental chastity, then that is lost irretrievably. Whether or not Belinda's lock does symbolize her chastity has been a contentious question: Brooks (*Casebook*, 144) sees it as a symbol of Belinda's physical chastity, only rightly to be surrendered in marriage; Reichard (*Love-Affair*, 899) views it more lightly—as a personal adornment whose loss, when long hair was *de rigueur*, could be a panic disfigurement, and as an amatory trophy worthy of contention. More recently Aubrey Williams,¹² amplifying a comment of Brooks, draws attention to the imagery of "broken China" in the poem, and demonstrates the traditional relationship of such imagery to woman's physical chastity and its loss.

Pope, however, implicitly endows the lock itself with a great weight of significance by equating it with the legendary purple lock of Nisus, king of Megara, on whose lock, as Professor Tillotson reminds us with his note on III, 122-4 (*TE* II, 177n.) the safety of Nisus's kingdom depended.¹³ Immediately after the severing of the lock, the narrative voice of the poem recalls the fate of Scylla, daughter of Nisus. Thus the Baron is likened to Scylla and consequently Belinda to Nisus. Further oblique equation of Belinda with Nisus occurs at IV, 10, where the phrase

12 "The 'Fall' of China and *The Rape of the Lock*" in *PQ*, LXI (1962). reprinted in *"The Rape of the Lock": a Casebook*, ed. John Dixon Hunt (1968), 220-31. Further citations appear in the body of the text as *Casebook*, followed by page number.

13 The note briefly recounts the fable without critical comment.

SYDNEY STUDIES

“ravish’d Hair” recalls the same phrase at the conclusion of Sandys’s translation of the tale of Nisus in Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*. It was from this tale also that Pope drew the motto which accompanied the 1714-15 editions of the poem:

A tonso est hoc nomen adepta capillo.

(*Metam.*, viii, 151)

Pope later replaced this motto with one which had preceded the two-canto *Rape of the Locke* of 1712, but it seems fair to say that when working on the expanded poem of 1714 Pope saw a close parallel between the Belinda of the poem and King Nisus; but as Nisus’s purple lock was in itself integral to the safety of his kingdom, it follows that Belinda’s lock must have been felt by Pope to be integral to the safety of hers. Consequently the lock is not something which can be surrendered on the proper terms, as Brooks feels; nor, following Reichard, can it be only a thing of adornment and a trophy in an amatory skirmish. If Belinda’s lock has a value equivalent to that of Nisus, then the lock must surely symbolize something extremely valuable, something which ought never to be surrendered on any terms—not then physical chastity, but rather womanly virtue as a state of mental chastity. “Virtue” in women, and “Honesty” in men, were undervalued in contemporary society according to Steele:

I know no evil under the sun so great as the abuse of the understanding, and yet there is no one vice more common. It has diffused itself through both sexes and all qualities of mankind; and there is hardly that person to be found, who is not more concerned for the reputation of Wit and Sense, than Honesty and Virtue . . .

When Modesty ceases to be the chief ornament of one sex, and Integrity of the other, society is upon a wrong basis, and we shall be ever after without rules to guide our judgement in what is becoming and ornamental. Nature and Reason direct one thing, Passion and Humour another. (*Spectator*, No. 6, 7 March 1711)

The flaw in Belinda’s character which ultimately leads to her downfall is that she, like the society in which she exists, does not distinguish between true and inner virtue and outward appearance, and thus the true virtue symbolized by the lock is not adequately guarded.¹⁴

As the events of the poem show, Belinda values her beauty above all else; she lacks the moral perception and discrimination

14 Williams (*Casebook*, 228) considers Belinda’s “fall” as it parallels the Fall in *Paradise Lost*, and reaches the same conclusion about her character.

to discern, as Steele argued, that true virtue rather than cosmetics is absolutely necessary for true beauty in a woman:

The true art of assisting Beauty consists in embellishing the whole person by the proper ornaments of virtuous and commendable qualities. By this help alone it is, that those who are the favourite work of Nature . . . become animated, and are in a capacity of exerting their charms: and those who seem to have been neglected by her . . . are capable, in a great measure, of finishing what she has left imperfect . . .

When Adam is introduced by Milton describing Eve in Paradise . . . he does not represent her like a Grecian Venus, by her shape or features, but by the lustre of her mind which shone in them, and gave them their power of charming.

"Grace was in all her steps, Heaven in her eye,
In all her gestures Dignity and Love."

(*Spectator* No. 33, 7 April 1711)

Belinda's countenance does not display that "lustre of her mind" denoting "virtuous and commendable qualities". Her eyes do not display "Heaven". Belinda's face is lively, but much more mundane in what it displays:

Her lively Looks a sprightly Mind disclose,
Quick as her Eyes, and as unfix'd as those. (II, 9-10)

The light of "Heaven" shines from Belinda only in the "sparkling *Cross*" which serves as an attention-getter to lure even the eyes of "Jews and Infidels" to her "white Breast" (II, 7-8). Her mind is "sprightly" but not "lustrous" and her eyes shine not with "Heaven" but with cosmetics (I, 144). Undervaluing the morality of Virtue and Heaven, Belinda overvalues Taste. She worships chiefly at the altar of Beauty:

First, rob'd in White, the Nymph intent adores
With Head uncover'd, the *Cosmetic* Pow'rs. (I, 123-4)

One here notices Pope's italicization and reflects that true worship ought to be paid to the "Cosmic" rather than "*Cosmetic*" Powers; etymologically related, the words are poles apart in meaning and reference—but for Belinda the lesser is more important than the greater. This confusion of values is reinforced by the contents of Belinda's dressingtable:

Here Files of Pins extend their shining Rows,
Puffs, Powders, Patches, Bibles, Billet-doux. (I, 137-8)

Here "Bibles" and "Billet-doux", both material for reading, are thrown together by alliteration, to emphasize both their multiplicity and their equality, in Belinda's eyes, as instructive reading material. The Bible is a potent image at any time, seldom need-

ing any elaboration to give it its full value as an image of the Moral Law of God; to juxtapose "Bibles" and "Billet-doux" as Pope does, is to draw a sharp contrast between the value of their contents, and thus to indicate a serious flaw in Belinda's judgement.

Belinda, already aroused to romantic thoughts by her morning dream of Ariel, "A Youth more glitt'ring than a *Birth-night Beau* / (That ev'n in Slumber caus'd her Cheek to glow)" (I, 23-4), receives a letter from an admirer, a *billet-doux* whose effect, banal though its sentiments and expressions are, is sufficient to overthrow all memory of Ariel's warning:

*Wounds, Charms, and Ardors, were no sooner read,
But all the Vision vanish'd from thy Head.* (I, 119-20)

Introduced immediately after Ariel's warning to "Beware of all, but most beware of Man!" (I, 115) this effective *billet-doux*, which must come from a male, assumes significance in the poem's narrative and dramatic structure. From its language it is a love-letter of the most conventional and shallow kind, from a writer of a type well-known to Steele's "Alice Threadneedle":

It is the ordinary practice and business of life with a set of idle fellows about this town, to write letters, send messages, and form appointments with little raw unthinking girls, and leave them after possession of them without any mercy . . . Were you to read the nauseous impertinancies which are written on these occasions, and to see the silly creatures sighing over them, it could not but be matter of mirth as well as pity.

(*Spectator* No. 182, 9 September 1711)

Accepting that Pope's attitude to Belinda is a complex one, her excitement over a missive with such contents as he enumerates, cannot but be intended to evoke in the reader "mirth as well as pity". Nor can there be much doubt that the sender of this letter is the Baron. After Belinda's fortuitous win at Ombre (III, 95-100), the Baron begins to plot "New Stratagems the radiant Lock to gain" (III, 120). Thus the existence of "old" stratagems is implied, and since we know that the Baron was up before sunrise ("ere *Phoebus* rose" II, 35) on this day, while Belinda was late abed (I, 13-20), the sequence of events in the narrative permits us to take the love-letter, and the inferred challenge to a game of Ombre, as part of the "old" stratagems. Thus, even as she sleeps, and before Ariel's warning, Fate already has in train events which will lead to Belinda's undoing.

In discussing pictorial analogues to *The Rape of the Lock* the

critic Wylie Sypher¹⁵ likens the poem to the rococo art of Watteau, and Belinda's boat-party on the Thames in particular to Watteau's *Embarkation from Cythera*; he is thinking of the delicacy and evanescence of life as portrayed by the comparatively slight figures of the Watteau painting, who live their brilliantly-coloured butterfly existence against an expanse of autumnal landscape background. But the relative proportions of "figure" and "background" in Pope's poem are quite different, the "figure" of Belinda especially, dealt with in great detail, is much more substantial, much more commanding:

Not with more Glories, in th' Etherial Plain,
The Sun first rises o'er the purpled Main,
Than issuing forth, the Rival of his Beams
Lanch'd on the Bosom of the Silver Thames.
Fair Nymphs, and well-drest Youths around her shone,
But ev'ry Eye was fix'd on her alone. (II, 1-6)

The words "issuing forth", "Lanch'd", "Bosom" (reinforced by "Breast" a line later), suggest amplitude and great physical "presence". Belinda, it is said, is the "Rival" of the sun, and must therefore manifest an air of command which comes from herself. She does not walk out of her dressing-room, she "issues forth". This sense of strong physical "presence" is carried further to her dress, and she is imaged as a ship in sail, for it is she who "Lanch'd" on the river; the volume of her skirts becomes the volume of the sails, and she appears to move upon the water of her own volition. She is, to all intents, her own ship, an image picked up again in II, 47:

But now secure the painted Vessel glides.

Belinda, as we know from canto I, is certainly "painted", and as Aubrey Williams points out (*Casebook*, 235n.) the pun on "vessel" (Woman as the biblical "weaker vessel") relates readily to the other "China" imagery of the poem. In this line the emphasis also falls on the words "now" and "secure"; Belinda, the worshipper of "paint" and cosmetics, is overconfident of her own beauty here, for a primary eighteenth-century meaning of "secure" was "overconfident". As the OED cites from 1641, "The way to be safe is never to be secure": the inevitability of Belinda's coming "fall" is present in this picture of charm and beauty.

15 *Rococo to Cubism in Art and Literature* (1960), pp. 32-3. Sypher is speaking of general analogues of style and mood only. A direct influence from the Watteau painting, submitted to the Académie Royale in 1717, would not be possible.

The game of Ombre quickly resolves itself into a contest between Belinda and the Baron, the necessary third player being put into the background. Belinda is clad militarily in the arms of "awful Beauty" and "Pride" (I, 128, 139); and confident of her power, she plays a military game with "Let Spades be trumps" (from Italian *spada*, a sword). She wins the first four tricks with cards which symbolize her pride: "Spadillo . . . unconquerable Lord!", "Manillio" the "victor", "Basto", and "The Hoary Majesty of Spades" (III, 49, 51, 53, 56). She then suffers a reverse, and Pope makes the Baron's first winning trick an extended example of the humbling of "haughty Mien, and barb'rous Pride" (III, 65-75), which images Belinda's own humiliation.

Belinda, too confident of herself, has overlooked the Baron's skill as an old campaigner in the fields of love (II, 29-40), and that, as an accomplished combatant there, his weapons are likely to be, not military, but amatory. He now "his *Diamonds* pours apace" (III, 75), knowing that diamonds (the pun is surely intentional) have brought him success in amorous contests before. She now perceives the true designs of the Baron:

The *Knave of Diamonds* tries his wily Arts,
 And wins (oh shameful Chance!) the *Queen of Hearts*.
 At this, the Blood the Virgin's Cheek forsook,
 A livid Paleness spreads o'er all her Look:
 She sees, and trembles at th'approaching Ill.
 Just in the Jaws of Ruin, and *Codille*. (III, 87-92)

The "Ruin" which Belinda sees however, is allied to her concept of "Honour" and "Pride"; and in as far as these concepts are objectified by the actions and duties of the Sylphs, they are concerned with externals only (I, 41-104; II, 91-136). Like the society in which she exists, Belinda values the appearance rather than the reality, the appearance of virtue rather than virtue itself. Later Belinda will endorse the viewpoint of society enunciated by Thalestris:

Honour forbid! at whose unrival'd Shrine
 Ease, Pleasure, Virtue, All, our sex resign. (IV, 105-6)

In the game of Ombre, Belinda saves her "honour" temporarily, but by chance alone, as "The *King* unseen / Lurk'd in her Hand" (III, 95-6); and since this winning card was "unseen" it is implied that Belinda had taken too little account of the power of the enemy, and had failed properly to assess her own strengths and weakness. Pope adds a textual moral comment to this scene:

Oh thoughtless Mortals! ever blind to Fate,
 Too soon dejected, and too soon elate!
 Sudden these Honours shall be snatch'd away,
 And curs'd forever this victorious day. (III, 101-4)

Again the pun is intentional, for not only the "Honours" of the game of Ombre but all those "Honours" which Belinda values will be snatched away by the inevitability of Fate.

As Reichard points out (*Love-Affair*, 888) there is no indication in the poem, nor is it necessary to suppose, that Belinda, sexually awakened though she is, is seeking honourable marriage in which to lose her chastity. Through the card-game she has become fully aware of the Baron's sexual intentions, but she does little to prevent them being achieved. In as far as the Sylphs objectify her "Honour", they go to protect her lap (III, 115) from the possible stains of a coffee-cup. But here again Belinda demonstrates that she acknowledges appearance and externals only. The lap of her brocade dress is the external, sexual symbol of her physical chastity, but for that chastity itself the Sylphs do not and cannot provide protection—indeed protection is not thought of; and of the "stains" which can come from the "coffee-cup" world of Hampton Court, Belinda is unheeding. Nor is Belinda entirely guiltless of bringing about her own downfall. The ambiguity of her actions as she sips her coffee ("Thrice she look'd back, and thrice the Foe drew near"—III, 138) and the sudden discovery by Ariel that "in spite of all her Art" to conceal it, an "Earthly Lover" lurked "at her heart" (III, 143-4) suggest, as has often been noted, that she is not entirely unaware of what is about to occur. What she does not realize, because of her disordered sense of values, is the seriousness of what is involved. Pope recognizes it, and emphasizes it by the contrast he draws between the fate of *appearances* (the Sylph) and *reality* (the lock):

Fate urg'd the Sheers, and cut the *Sylph* in twain,
 (But Airy Substance soon unites again)
 The meeting Points the sacred Hair dis sever
 From the fair Head, for ever and for ever! (III, 151-4)

As a symbol of Beauty the lock is "sacred" to Belinda, but as a symbol of true virtue it is sacred to Virtue and Morality; and "for ever and for ever" underlines, even mourns, the finality of the loss. The dramatic scene of canto III closes with a tableau of a despoiled Belinda and an exultant Baron. To this "picture" Pope appends an eight-line moral comment (III, 171-8) which stresses not only the inevitability of Fate for all things, but also

Belinda's involvement as an agent of Fate: the "Steel" that cut the lock was an "unresisted Steel". Belinda, Pope has judged, ought to have resisted, but she didn't.

In *The Rape of the Lock*, Pope is depicting the events of only a day, yet despite this compression, Belinda's "decline and fall" is shown to be irreversible. Even the complex Sun imagery of the poem demonstrates this—in canto I Belinda wakes and outshines the morning sun; in canto II the sun is in the splendour and glory of midday, and so is Belinda on the barge; but the events at Hampton Court—the game of Ombre, the cutting of the lock, the ensuing recriminations—take place as the sun is "declining from the Noon of Day" (III, 19). Finally there is the foreshadowing of sunset and death at the end of canto V (ll.147-8). As the path of the sun is determined, so is Belinda's. She declines further, her feminine charms lose their attraction for the reader, as she succumbs to Spleen and Prudery under the domination of the gnome Umbriel; and the poem gives no indication that this domination by Umbriel ever ceases. Belinda falls totally when she approves Thalestris's cynical assessment of "Honour" as an outward façade for which

Ease, Pleasure, Virtue, All, our Sex resign. (IV, 106)

"All" here is not qualified, has no limits, and reaches out to embrace Belinda's willingness to lose "Hairs less in sight—or any Hairs but these!" (IV, 175-6). The sexual ambit of these terms is unmistakable.

Thalestris plays a major role in securing Belinda's unequivocal acknowledgement that appearance is to be valued above reality, Reputation to be more important than Virtue. Aubrey Williams argues (*Casebook*, 230-31) that Belinda's positive response to Thalestris's speech is one of emotion rather than reason, and that, with the introduction of Clarissa's speech (V, 9-34) Belinda is offered an alternative course of action—one opposed to the empty viciousness and domination at all costs proposed by Thalestris. Williams argues that here "an opportunity is given to Belinda to transcend the limitations of a world where 'honour' and 'virtue' are equated with 'reputation' and 'appearance'". It is in her ratifying Thalestris's rather than Clarissa's speech that Williams sees Belinda's irreparable downfall. But an examination of Clarissa's speech does not support this notion of "transcendence".

In the speeches of Thalestris and Clarissa, Pope does seem to be offering a thesis and an antithesis. However, when Clarissa's

speech was added to the poem in 1717 (the poem's second revision) Pope noted only that it was "introduced in the subsequent Editions, to open more clearly the MORAL of the Poem" (*TE* II, 199n.). Despite Williams's (and others) contention, this is by no means the same as saying that Clarissa's speech *is* the moral of the poem; what appears to be an antithesis may be only superficially so. It is a commonplace of critical observation that Clarissa's speech is "informed" by the significance it draws from its epic parallel, Sarpedon's speech in *Iliad* XII, of which Pope had already made a translation by 1709; it is this translation he appears to be imitating in *The Rape of the Lock*. Williams finds in Sarpedon's words (ll.27-52 of Pope's translation) "a glorious enunciation of the spirit of magnanimity" and finds the last two couplets especially relevant to Belinda's situation. He argues that Clarissa's moral stance is one of "fundamental validity" and one "at variance with the surrounding moral chaos of the poem's world". But is this really so?

If Clarissa's speech is to receive much weight from its epic parallel, one must think of the Sarpedon speech in context. In this context it is a speech, not of resignation to the fact that "Alas, ignoble Age must come, / Disease, and Death's inexorable Doom" (ll.47-8), but a speech of incitement to fiercer war on the foe. In the epic simile preceding the speech (ll.13-20) Sarpedon is characterized as a hungry lion:

Regardless, furious, he pursues his way.
He foams, he roars, he rends the panting Prey.

The speech itself does not entirely arise from "magnanimity" or "generosity" (to use Williams's terms), but has another basis as well, for

Fir'd with the Thirst of Glory, thus he spoke,

recalling very much Belinda "whom Thirst of Fame invites" (III, 25). Again (l.45) Sarpedon indicates the main point of his argument as "Lust of Fame", and this again recalls the Belinda of the game of Ombre.

Sarpedon's speech is one of nobility, but it is a nobility that makes a virtue of necessity; but unlike Belinda's, Sarpedon's quest for Fame and Glory is not ultimately an end in itself: it is rather, as he says, "to Vindicate the bounteous Pow'rs above" (l.36), from whom so many gifts and endowments have come. In Clarissa's speech there is no appeal to the duty owed to "Pow'rs above", no recognition that those Powers even exist; the

poem itself recognizes such Powers however, "Cosmic" powers, and the moral Power whose laws are contained in the Bible. Clarissa does appear to postulate the existence of a higher Power with her reference to "Virtue" (V, 18), yet that Power, on examination, is one that exists within society, not above it—it is the male of society and male approval to which Clarissa looks for endorsement of her set of values:

That Men may say, when we the Front-box grace,
Behold the first in Virtue, as in Face! (V, 17-18)

and again:

Beauties in vain their pretty eyes may roll;
Charms strike the Sight, but Merit wins the Soul. (V, 33-4)

In a society where bibles and billets-doux are held to exist in equality, the approbation of the male might easily be, as the complaisance of Clarissa sees it, of paramount importance for women:

What then remains, but well our Pow'r to use,
And keep good Humour still, whate'er we lose? (V, 29-30)

Clarissa's "whate'er we lose" is on par with Thalestris's "Ease, Pleasure, Virtue, All", and Belinda's "any Hairs but these". As *The Rape of the Lock* makes very clear, the male of Hampton Court society is scarcely to be considered the equivalent of Sarpedon's "bounteous Pow'rs above"; her speech is not the antithesis of Thalestris's, merely its pleasanter aspect.

Pope did believe that good-humour in a woman was of great importance, and had already placed it above physical beauty as a desirable attribute in his *Epistle to Miss Blount; with the Works of Voiture* of 1712:

But Madam, if the Fates withstand, and you
Are destin'd *Hymen's* willing Victim too,
Trust not too much your now resistless Charms,
Those, Age or Sickness, soon or late, disarms;
Good Humour only teaches Charms to last,
Still make new Conquests, and maintains the past:
Love, rais'd on Beauty, will like That decay. (ll.57-63)

But Pope is here speaking of good-humour only within the bounds of matrimony; his advice to Miss Blount contains the proviso that what he says is conditional upon her "fate" being that of marriage. This is far from advising Belinda to "Keep good Humour still, whate'er we lose". In his later poem, *An Epistle to a Lady* (1735) he again lays stress on good-humour in a woman (ll.257-68), but he introduces his discourse with a simile which

lays most stress on the paramount importance of “virgin modesty”, in imagery which plays off against the “Sun” imagery of *The Rape of the Lock*.

Had Belinda taken Clarissa’s advice she would, though having lost her chastity of mind, have retained some of her personal charm; by aligning herself with Thalestris she consciously continues in the ways of Pride and Ill-Nature, Prudery and Spleen, and becomes ugly—like Thalestris, another “fierce Virago” (V, 37). In the ridiculous sex-combat which follows, she quickly becomes the “fierce Belinda” (V, 75), and later “incens’d” (V, 87). She now fully accepts the values of society, a society which (including Belinda) displays its trivial mind by the triviality it attempts, in its foolish guesses (V, 112-22), to place upon the lock. The battle is a Fool’s Game of Prudery and Affectation—metaphoric “deaths” abound, encased in a cocoon of literary reference, and sexual puns are made on “dying”, puns which were commonplace, not to say stale, by 1714.

Belinda’s absorption into society has fully justified the warning with which the poem began:

Beware of all, but most beware of Man! (I, 114)

For Belinda, and for the larger moral concerns of the poem, this warning has a twofold meaning: not only is Belinda successfully assaulted by *a* man, the Baron, but successfully assaulted also by Man, i.e. the surrounding society in which she lives and whose values she comes to accept without reservation. Only the poet Pope, now revealed as the moral voice of the poem, is fully aware of the value of what Belinda has lost. Through the medium of his “Muse” the lock is translated beyond the sub-lunary sphere of mutability (“the Lunar Sphere” V, 113) and trivia, to the stellar sphere of immutability and immortality. Only the poet, knowing the true value of it, has the power to “consecrate” the lock to “Fame” (V, 149). That in doing so he will also “mid’st the Stars inscribe *Belinda’s* Name” is a consequence, but not a necessary one—for Belinda’s “fame” depends on her association with the lock, not the lock’s on Belinda. As a symbol of virtue, of chastity of mind, the lock can stand alone.