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THE REVERSAL OF GENDER IN "THE RAPE OF THE LOCK"

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Pope focuses most of the attention of his "heroic-comical poem" on its heroine rather than its hero, and his prejudicial treatment of the poem's other women over their male counterparts echoes this central imbalance. Belinda, Thalestris, Clarissa, Spleen, and Ariel and Umbriel—originally women—dominate the men as well as the poem itself. They are unquestionably the superior forces in this epic, and their usurpation of man's accustomed role in the epic genre is reinforced throughout the poem. On the other hand, the men in the poem—Baron, Sir Plume, Dapperwit, Sir Fopling, "a Beau and Witling"—assume many of those characteristics connoted by the antique term "weaker sex." This article examines how Pope developed this reversal of roles in *The Rape of the Lock*.

In her rage in Canto IV Thalestris provides men with an interesting list of associations: "Men, Monkies, Lap-dogs, Parrots, perish all!" (IV. 120)¹ Such names as Plume, Fopling, Dapperwit, and Witling evoke the posturing of the ape kingdom and the mimicry of parrots as well as monkeys. Certainly the men are made to look comic in Canto V when they are demolished by their ladies' stares:

"O cruel Nymph! a living Death I bear,"
Cry'd Dapperwit, and sunk beside his Chair. (V. 61-62)

Sir Plume's answer to Thalestris is a combination of the chattering of a monkey and the confused urgency of a seafarer's parrot:

"My Lord, why, what the Devil?
Z-ds! damn the Lock! 'fore Gad, you must be civil!
Plague on't! 'tis past a Jest—nay prithe, Pox!
Give her the Hair. . . ." (IV. 127-130)

Perhaps the most significant association that Thalestris suggests is that of "lap-dog." According to Abbott's concordance to Pope's work, Pope never used the word elsewhere, though in this poem he mentions "lap-dog" four times.² The word first appears in *Rape* as a comment on Belinda's stylish sleeping habits:

Now Lapdogs give themselves the rowzing Shake,
And sleepless Lovers, just at Twelve, awake. (I. 15-16)

Like Thalestris' "Men, Monkies, Lap-dogs, Parrots," the next use of the word links lap-dogs with men as well as with "womanish" emotion:

Not louder Shrieks to pitying Heav'n are cast
 When Husbands or when Lap-dogs breathe their last.
 (III. 157-158)

This juxtaposition is a deflating one for husbands, and it chides the ladies for their curious priorities. Since an earlier, unrevised version uses "monkeys" in the place of "lap-dogs," it is apparent that Pope was searching for the animal with the most appropriate connotations.³

In the eighteenth century the lap-dog was primarily thought of as a frivolous passion of fashionable ladies and connoted tamedness, timidity, and vanity (*OED*). All of these associations have female aspects, and certainly one of the effects of Pope's juxtapositions is to emasculate the men in his poem. Like "monkeys, lap-dogs," and "parrots," all favorite pets of stylish society, men become the housebroken possessions of the women, to blither at their command, to obey their every wish (despite his confusion, Sir Plume does manage to "demand the precious hairs"), and to faint before the displeasure of their glances.

The first view of the Baron is a comic, unmanly one as he "prostrate falls" before an "altar" of female memorabilia. The basic irony of the poem is that the "rape" is not a lusty, virile ravishing of the heroine, but rather the snipping of a lock of her hair by a dandy in spiritual raptures: ". . . By this Lock, this sacred Lock I swear." (IV. 134) The Baron, moreover, did not desire the lady, but only her lock—an icon for his altar.

Th' Adventrous Baron the bright Locks admir'd,
 He saw, he wish'd, and to the Prize aspir'd. (II. 29-30)

The Baron's fate is sealed from the beginning:

. . . he begs with ardent Eyes
 Soon to obtain, and long possess the Prize:
 The Pow'rs gave Ear, and granted half his Pray'r,
 The rest, the Winds dispers'd in empty air. (II. 43-46)

Thus the Baron is foredoomed to lose his adventure, and he is seen at the mercy of the "powers," sylphs, gnomes, and women. He cannot beat Belinda at Ombre or in battle, and finally he loses his cherished "prize." Even on the one occasion of triumph—his "rape"—Clarissa must supply him the instrument of outrage, his "spear."

While endowing all the men with such “feminine” qualities as weakness, cowardice, vanity, and romantic sentimentality, Pope reverses the process by attributing to the women traits commonly associated with men. Both Thalestris—whose name is an allusion to the man-like Amazons—and Belinda are characterized as “fierce.” Belinda’s approach to the game of Ombre is at once aggressive and ambitious:

Belinda now, whom Thirst of Fame invites,
Burns to encounter two adventurous Knights. (III. 25-26)

Though anger is hardly the special failing of men, such rage as Thalestris displays—“Men, Monkeys, Lap-dogs, Parrots, perish all!”—can in no way be thought lady-like. Belinda, after her triumph over the Baron at Ombre, exhibits neither modesty nor reserve, but gloats in unrestrained boisterousness: “The Nymph exulting fills with Shouts the Sky.” (III. 99) Flightiness is commonly thought a feminine trait, and, conversely, calm reason is considered a male virtue, but the women, on the strength of Clarissa’s rational speech in Canto V, can claim this positive masculine characteristic as well as many of the questionable ones.

Like the overall action of the poem, the reversal of commonly accepted male-female roles builds to its crescendo in the battle of Canto V. The women here are indisputably the aggressors following Thalestris into the fray:

“To Arms, to Arms!” the fierce Virago cries,
And swift as Lightning to the Combate flies. (V. 37-38)

Her achievements in the field further substantiate the women’s overwhelming superiority in general, and in this fight in particular:

. . . thro’ the Press enrag’d Thalestris flies,
And scatters Death around from both her Eyes, (V. 57-58)

and reinforce the “womanliness” of the men:

A Beau and Witling perish’d in the Throng,
One dy’d in Metaphor, and one in Song. (V. 59-60)

The decisive individual struggle belongs of course to Belinda and the Baron, and Pope’s description of that contest once again reverses common expectations:

But this bold Lord, with manly Strength indu’d,
She with one Finger and a Thumb subdu’d:
Just where the Breath of Life his Nostrils drew,
A Charge of Snuff the wily Virgin threw. (V. 79-82)

As Hugo M. Reichard paraphrases, the Baron has been “felled before witnesses, by a woman with a snap of her fingers, in a puff

of tobacco, amid a fit of tears and sneezes. . . ."⁴ When the scene is visualized in this manner, the Baron is subjected to a most unmanly defeat, and, significantly, Belinda's weapon, snuff, is a distinctly unladylike substance for "a gentle Belle" to have in her possession.

Belinda tries to finish the job with her mother's hairpin, but Pope has termed it "a deadly Bodkin" (V. 88), and she draws it, not from her hair, but "from her Side," where daggers were more commonly worn. Moreover, Pope adds an unusual eight-line parenthetical history of the ornament:

(The same, his ancient Personage to deck,
Her great great Grandsire wore about his Neck
In three Seal-Rings; which after, melted down,
Form'd a vast Buckle for his Widow's Gown:
Her infant Grandame's Whistle next it grew,
The Bells she gingled, and the Whistle blew;
Then in a Bodkin grac'd her Mother's Hairs,
Which long she wore, and now Belinda wears.) (V. 89-96)

This passage functions both as a parody of Homer's long descriptions of weapons and as a comment on contemporary man's diminished stature, parallelling the fate of the "three Seal-Rings" in their reduction first to "a vast Buckle," then to a baby's "Whistle," and finally to a hair ornament. More germane to this paper, however, are the ever less masculine reincarnations of an object that once belonged to a man and was used, presumably, in dealings between important men. Ultimately, the seal rings undergo a transformation (not unlike that of the sylphs and gnomes, a change discussed below) in the opposite direction of the poem's heroine, whom Pope describes by the end of his poem as "fierce Belinda" wielding, as her great-great-grandfather might have, a "deadly Bodkin."

Pope depicts Belinda as a more worldly creature than the worshipful Baron. Whereas he is first seen "prostrate" before his altar, she is shown in bed having a "Morning-Dream" that "caus'd her Cheek to glow." (I. 22, 24) Pope later suggests that this blush is either insincere or unchaste when he writes that the artifice of her toilet "sees by Degrees a purer Blush arise." (I. 143) On two occasions in the poem, Belinda's person is referred to in rather wanton terms. In the first instance, the risqué meaning hinges on an ambiguous antecedent:

On her white Breast a sparkling Cross she wore,
Which Jews might kiss, and Infidels adore. (III. 7-8)

That "which" refers to "her white Breast" rather than to the cross is a possibility at least forceful enough to be considered. The second instance is much less subtle than a vague antecedent and underscores the irony of the poem's title:

Oh hadst thou, Cruel! been content to seize
Hairs less in sight, or any Hairs but these! (IV. 175-176)

This outburst of Belinda, noticeably set at the very end of Canto IV, brings into question the lady's spiritual purity.⁵ In contrast to the Baron's carefully adorned "altar," Belinda's Bibles appear among her "Puffs, Powders, Patches" and "Billet-doux." (I. 138) The implication is that Belinda puts her religious affairs on the same level with primping. Throughout the poem Pope uses this technique of deflating that which is traditionally of great value by inserting it next to trivia—"When Husbands or when Lap-dogs breathe their last." In this way the poem questions just how highly Belinda values her chastity:

Whether the Nymph shall break Diana's Law,
Or some frail China Jar receive a Flaw,
Or stain her Honour, or her new Brocade,
Forget her Pray'rs, or miss a Masquerade. (II. 105-108)

Such intimations of moral slovenliness substantiate a reversal of gender by portraying Belinda as more cavalier and worldly than her fastidious, trinket-collecting Baron.

Above the human strife in Pope's poem, the mythological machinery reflects the same inversion of sexual roles. In fact, the transformation of Ariel and Umbriel from female humans to male sylph and gnome who spend eternity flitting about ladies could serve as a metaphor for the sex switching that pervades the poem. When Umbriel visits the Cave of Spleen in Canto IV, that gloomy kingdom is a woman's domain ruled by the Goddess Spleen attended by handmaidens. Here, where "Bodies chang'd to various Forms" (IV. 48) is the rule, one finds the ultimate sexual reversal when "Men prove with Child." (IV. 53)

Pope has woven the reversal of sexual characteristics so intricately into his poem that, as the game of Ombre begins, Belinda opens on the attack, using no less virile personages than "Sable Matadores / . . . Leaders of the swarthy Moors" (III. 47-48), while the Baron begins his "invasion" with a woman—"his warlike Amazon" (III. 67), and Belinda is finally victorious when she captures his "prostrate Ace" with a King. Belinda's association with "swarthy Moors" is given an interesting echo in the last lines of the poem when, demanding that the Baron "restore the Lock," she is compared to Shakespeare's Moor:

Not fierce Othello in so loud a Strain
 Roar'd for the Handkerchief that caus'd his Pain. (V. 105-106)

Pope, who might just as well have chosen a famous woman, links Belinda instead to a swarthy warrior in the extremes of rage. Perhaps an even more delicate embellishment of the reversal theme is Pope's use of classical simile. When he likens the action in his story to Homeric conflict—

So when bold Homer makes the Gods engage,
 And heav'nly Breasts with human Passions rage;
 'Gainst Pallas, Mars; Latona, Hermes arms (V. 45-47)

—the syntax, “ ‘Gainst Pallas, Mars; Latona, Hermes arms,” suggests that Mars and Hermes take the active role, raging “ ‘gainst” the more passive Pallas and Latona. Since Pope's women—the aggressors throughout the battle—are here on the attack, Pope in his simile balances the Baron and the men on one side with Pallas, the goddess of wisdom, and with Latona, who spent her life hiding in fear of Hera, while he associates Belinda and the women with the god of war and the god of cunning and trickery. Again, keeping in mind that the women are dominating the battle from first to last, it is reasonable to assume that it is the women and not the men to whom Pope refers in his comparison to the noise on Olympus:

And all Olympus rings with loud Alarms.
 Jove's Thunder roars, Heav'n trembles all around;
 Blue Neptune storms, the bellowing Deeps resound. (V. 48-50)

But it is Pope's allusion to Nisus and Scylla that is literally and figuratively the central image in the poem. It is this instance of lock-seizing that the poem establishes as the archetype, and as such, it has particular relevance to the major action of the poem:

Ah cease rash Youth! desist ere 'tis too late,
 Fear the just Gods, and think of Scylla's Fate!
 Chang'd to a Bird, and sent to flit in Air,
 She dearly pays for Nisus' injur'd Hair! (III. 121-124)

In this myth, Scylla murders her father, Nisus the King, by clipping from his head a purple lock of hair which was the source of his power and his life. She is later drowned and is transformed into a sea heron, pursued forever by her angry father, reincarnated as an eagle. Here Pope has not only managed to diminish the gravity of the Baron's “theft” by comparing it to patricide, but he has obviously switched genders in his poem by having the man clip the lock and be raged after by the woman.

By attributing to women “manly” traits and vice versa, by mirroring this reversal in the poem’s mythological apparatus, and by playing the gender switch against traditional classical simile, Pope has managed an inversion of roles in keeping with the form he has chosen—the mock epic. This depiction of a world in which the sexes are backwards and nature is perverted from the ideal to its opposite becomes a major satirical device in *The Rape of the Lock*.

NOTES

1. Alexander Pope, *The Rape of the Lock and Other Poems*, Vol. II of *The Poems of Alexander Pope*, ed. Geoffrey Tillotson (London: Methuen and Co., Ltd., 1954), p. 190. References to this work are noted in parentheses in the text.
2. Edwin Abbott, *Concordance to the Works of Alexander Pope* (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1875), p. 168.
3. *The Poems*, II, 177.
4. “The Love Affair in Pope’s ‘Rape of the Lock,’” *PMLA*, 69 (1954), 901.
5. Cleanth Brooks, in his article “The Case of Miss Arabella Fermor,” says, “Pope’s friend, Matthew Prior, wrote a naughty poem in which the same *double entendre* occurs. Pope himself, we may be sure, was perfectly aware of it.” *The Well Wrought Urn* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, Inc., 1947), p. 94.