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Transformation in *The Rape of the Lock*

RALPH COHEN

IN 1968 there was published a collection of essays on *The Rape of the Lock*¹ which provides an opportunity for a study of the criticism and the poem. John Dixon Hunt reprints selections from John Dennis, Samuel Johnson, Joseph Warton, Thomas Campbell, William Hazlitt, W. L. Bowles, Lord Byron and continues with "Recent Studies." The editor correctly remarks that such studies since 1940 have "revised most romantic ideas about the poem."² Pope's wit has been shown to have a seriousness and complexity that the earlier critics denied, and the modern essays with their demonstration of the unity of the poem have revealed that the rhetorical devices and the diction support the poets' moral and social attitudes. But if one attends to the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century critics of the poem, not included in the anthology, one can recognize the context within which modern criticism of the poem has operated.

In 1899, Frederick Ryland in his "Introduction" to the poem, remarked that a "true classic spirit has led to the strictest economy in the development of the story."³ He found that the epic quotations, parodies and allusions maintained the sense of the mock-heroic;⁴ nevertheless, "For us the chief charm of the [*sic*] *Rape of the Lock* lies in the delightful irony, the use of epigram and anticlimax, the vivid and graceful pictures of the court-life of the times."⁵ Ryland praised the poem because it showed an aristocratic enjoyment of a highly artificial society.⁶ In 1909 George Holden, basing his comments upon those of Ryland, wrote that a poem "so brilliant, so faithful, and so complete a reflection of an

¹ John Dixon Hunt, ed., *Pope, The Rape of the Lock, A Casebook* (London, 1968).

² Hunt, p. 19.

³ Frederick Ryland, ed., *Pope's Rape of the Lock* (London, 1899), p. liv.

⁴ Ryland, p. lv.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ *Ibid.*

epoch was only possible perhaps on a lower plane, where an artificial style was brought to the description of a correspondingly artificial society and ways of thought. Such a work must always be in the truest sense unique.”⁷

The Victorian critics identified the poem with a narrow concept of correctness, the rhetorical features with the normal response of a classical education, the beauty and delicacy with Pope’s approval of the dazzling social life of his youth. “The truth is, I think,” wrote Thomas Marc Parrott in 1906, “that *The Rape of the Lock* represents Pope’s attitude to the social life of his time . . . it is the poets’ sympathy with the world he paints which gives to the poem the air, most characteristic of the age itself, of easy, idle, unthinking gayety. We would not have it otherwise.”⁸

The critics from the 1940’s to the present have rejected these readings of the poem which make it a sympathetic view of the social life it describes. And they have done this by a reconsideration of its language and rhetoric. They have thus restored the poem to the tradition of wit and have devoted their remarks to the subtlety of Pope’s craft and his ironic manipulation of values. But what is apparent as one reads the poem in the light of these valuable analyses is the tacit assumption that Pope wished to reassert the stable values of some great past and sought to contrast the artificial society of Belinda with that of the epic heroes. The difficulty with such an interpretation is that it ignores Pope’s sense of a changing, transforming society. Pope in *The Rape of the Lock* was dealing with a faded past and a changing present, but he was also aware that change could be natural or artificial. He saw the alleged beauties of past and present, but he distinguished between those forms that had become empty ceremonials, resisting or falsifying change, and those that provided a contemporary basis for renewed value.

This interpretation is not only consistent with the poet’s earlier “Pastorals” and *Essay on Criticism*, but it formed the grounds of his attack on false literature and culture in *The Dunciad*. A number of modern critics have noted transformations in the poem,⁹

⁷ George Holden, ed., *Pope’s Rape of the Lock* (Oxford, 1909), p. 3.

⁸ Thomas Marc Parrott, ed., *The Rape of the Lock and Other Poems* (Boston, 1906), p. 87.

⁹ See Reuben A. Brower, *Alexander Pope, The Poetry of Allusion* (Oxford, 1959), p. 150. See also J. S. Cunningham, *Pope: The Rape of the Lock* (London, 1961).

and Ricardo Quintana has written an essay, "The Rape of the Lock' as a Comedy of Continuity"¹⁰ in which transformation is seen as central to the meaning: "the concept of change permeates the poem and in various forms—it is itself appropriately and comically protean—underlies the entire composition. . . ."¹¹ Professor Quintana devotes his essay to demonstrating that the poem plays with the concepts of dissimilarity and resemblance and with the rhetorical devices of the series and of anaphora.¹² This conception of transformation with its emphasis on rhetoric and craft keeps the poem within the context established by modern critics, but it does offer the possibility of a new conception. And it is this embracing view I wish to develop as a method of understanding the poem and seeing it in terms of Pope's conception of human development.

In *The Rape of the Lock* change must be interpreted in terms of natural or normal change and unnatural or artificial and grotesque change. It is obvious that Belinda undergoes a metamorphosis as did the sylphs who were transposed from the natural to the supernatural realm, where they continue their transformations by assuming "what Sexes and what Shapes they please" (I, l. 69). The gnomes, too, were so transposed and returned in supernatural form to their appropriate element (I, ll. 63-66). If the chaste women can become sylphs in the air, there are those who are changed to various grotesque forms in the underground Cave of Spleen: "Unnumber'd Throngs on ev'ry side are seen,/Of Bodies chang'd to various Forms by *Spleen*"¹³ (IV, ll. 47-48).

These transformations from natural to supernatural forms, from one element to another, from natural to grotesque forms characterize the method of unfolding in the poem. Belinda the "Pious Maid" (I, l. 112) becomes "fierce *Belinda*" (V, l. 75), but even while still a "Pious Maid" she becomes, when she dresses, transformed by degrees just as her "deadly Bodkin" (V, l. 88) acquires a changing pedigree.

The major transformation, however, applies not to the characters or subject matter, but to the composition of the poem itself. In

¹⁰ *REL*, VII (1966), 9-19.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 10-11.

¹² *Ibid.*, pp. 12-15.

¹³ All quotations from Pope are from Geoffrey Tillotson, ed., *The Rape of the Lock and other Poems* and *The Twickenham Edition of the Poems of Alexander Pope*, John Butt, ed., II (London, 1940).

1712, *The Rape of the Lock* was published in two cantos, the whole comprising a total of 290 lines. When Pope revised it and republished it in 1714, it was composed of five cantos totalling more than twice the original and including the “machinery” of the sylphs. Even the imagistic changes from the first to the second version seem to be governed by consistent transformational and spectacular ends. For example, the 1712 version reads,

Sol, thro’ white Curtains did his Beams display,
And op’d those Eyes which brighter shine than they. (I, ll. 13-14)

This was changed to:

Sol thro white Curtains shot a tim’rous Ray,
And op’d those Eyes that must eclipse the Day. (I, ll. 13-14)

In the revised first line, the sun becomes actively responsible for a paradoxical “shot” that is “tim’rous,” and in the second line “eclipse the day” substitutes a spectacle term, “eclipse,” based on the blotting out of light, for “eyes,” based on increased light. Belinda is introduced in an image that implies her beauty is powerful enough to interrupt the natural cycle of the sun. And the attempt to transform Belinda into a powerful natural force reappears at the opening of Canto II. Originally the poem read:

Belinda rose, and ’midst attending Dames
Lanch’d on the Bosom of the silver *Thames* (I, ll. 19-20)

To this Pope added the image of the sunrise:

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*. (II, ll. 1-4)

Pope’s epic simile gave ceremonial or ritual meaning to the sailing of Belinda; her embarkation is made part of the beautiful cycle of the sun, though it is apparent that what is natural for the sun is unnatural for Belinda.

Bright as the Sun, her Eyes the gazers strike,
And like the Sun, they shine on all alike. (II, ll. 13-14)

In comparing the beauty of Belinda to natural change, Pope suggests that Belinda outdoes nature, that the transformations extend beyond the bounds of normal order by competing with rather than complementing nature. Cleanth Brooks, considering the lines

quoted above (II, ll. 13-14) writes: "Is this general munificence on the part of Belinda a fault or a virtue?"¹⁴ But this is indeed a mistaken query, for what is natural to the sun is not natural to a maid who needs a man; that the latter behavior is natural can be confirmed both by the plot of the poem and its occasion. Pope explains the occasion by saying that he sought to make a "jest of it."¹⁵ His heroi-comical poem not only contains allusions to the *Iliad*, the *Aeneid*, and other classical works, but to contemporary comic drama, opera, a contemporary card game, a book on the cabala, *Comte de Gabalis*, and to the mock-heroic poems of Boileau and Garth.

The transformations in *The Rape of the Lock* are characterized by two procedures: inevitable natural changes and artificial or unnatural changes. The first includes the human processes of growing old, of losing one's beauty and virginity, of hair turning to gray and the processes in nature of the sun's rising and setting, of flowers blooming and fading. The artificial human changes include painting oneself into godhood, pious women becoming splenetic, old women pretending to be young; the unnatural changes include men bearing children, women becoming teapots, eclipses hiding the sun. All these changes are conceived of cyclically—they are not progresses, but progresses and regresses, risings and fallings, ascendings and descendings.¹⁶ They are cycles in which the range of possibilities is fulfilled or distorted.

It does not follow, moreover, that the natural human process of growing old is disgusting, no more than the setting of the sun is. For each natural human change there is an appropriate decorum. The artificial or inappropriate changes result from humans competing with nature or from embracing changes without embracing the decorum and significance appropriate to them. Thus a society can formally adhere to social games or religious rites without giving them appropriate social or religious meaning.

Pope's satire in the poem is based on describing impressive forms of behavior that have been emptied of their traditional content with-

¹⁴ Cleanth Brooks, "The Case of Miss Arabella Fermor," *The Well-Wrought Urn* (New York, 1947), p. 79.

¹⁵ Tillotson, 83.

¹⁶ The cycles of man and nature are found in Pope's work prior to *The Rape*, especially the pastorals, *Windsor-Forest*, and "To Mr. Addison Occasioned by his Dialogues on Medals" (written 1713 [?], revised 1719), and also in all the major poems following *The Rape*.

out adapting to proper or “natural” modern values. In the giddy social world of Belinda, in which levity is substituted for love, false transformations substitute for true, virgins remain virgins despite their coquettish changes and they remain without the self-knowledge necessary to accept their proper feminine role. Pope admires Belinda’s powers, but he pokes fun at her failure to give them proper direction. The concluding stanza of the poem turns the joke upon the characters by making the poet—the muse—capable of altering the course of nature. For he, by his powers, by his knowledge of his powers, transposes the lock to a star that will immortalize Belinda’s name and make her rape the envy of all belles. Pope juggles the appearance of impropriety (“stray”) with giddy order, making these cyclical or circular movements merely another form of misbehaving. Traditional social forms are passed down in cyclical, ritualistic or ceremonial behaviors, but they become, in *The Rape of the Lock*, emptied or exaggerated—failures that are equally inadequate.

At the opening of *Windsor-Forest* Pope describes a serious situation of which the “mystick Mazes” is a comic version:

Here Hills and Vales, the Woodland and the Plain,
Here Earth and Water seem to strive again,
Not Chaos-like together crush’d and bruis’d
But as the World, harmoniously confus’d.
Where Order in Variety we see,
And where, tho’ all things differ, all agree. (ll. 11-16)

Although women seem to stray in *The Rape*, they agree to be part of the giddy social circle. And the sylphs who guard them are aerial and all too chastely concerned with their own and Belinda’s virginal importance, protectors of an unnatural condition of unending virginity: “Hear and believe! thy own Importance know/Nor bound thy narrow Views to Things below” (I, ll. 35-36). Pope has given the proper interpretation of this advice in the *Essay on Man*:

The bliss of Man (could Pride that blessing find)
Is not to act or think beyond mankind;
No pow’rs of body or of soul to share,
But what his nature and his state can bear. (I, ll. 189-192)

The sylphs’ advice that Belinda be guided by views beyond her natural limits is, of course, a temptation to pride. The sylphs represent false pride, as would be expected by their immortalizing un-

natural behavior. But at the same time, they assist the reader in understanding how to interpret the language of the poem.

I have been suggesting that Pope's statements on how to interpret the world, when serious, as in the *Essay on Man*, constitute a reversal of statements in *The Rape*, though both retain ideas of human limitation and controlled change governed by unknown harmony. In *The Rape* Ariel explains that certain words and acts are not to be interpreted in accordance with received meanings; for the unseen sylphs are at work: "'Tis but their *Sylph*, the wise Celestials know./Tho *Honour* is the Word with Men below" (I, ll. 77-78). Ariel in his pride attributes more authority to the sylphs than they deserve, for Belinda is beautiful without their help; their assistance guides what is there to be guided or protected. But this attitude gives the reader a clue for interpreting the social language of female behavior. The term "Honour" refers to visible behavior, but it actually includes the sylphs' invisible support of chastity. "Honour" is thus partially emptied of its reference to high moral worth because the morality is a consequence of the sylphs' efforts, not those of the virgins, and, in the presentation of Belinda, external forms belie their former substantial ceremonies, rituals, rites.

In explaining the "giddy Circle" that women pursue, Ariel boasts of his protection as follows:

With varying Vanities, from ev'ry Part,
They shift the moving Toyshop of their Heart;
Where Wigs with Wigs, with Sword-knots Sword-knots strive,
Beaus banish Beaus, and Coaches Coaches drive.
This erring Mortals Levity may call,
Oh blind to Truth! the Sylphs contrive it all. (I, ll. 99-104)

It is not merely that wigs, sword-knots, even "beaus" are social forms, but that in addition, these provide a rotating and giddy competition within the heart of the coquette, and the heart itself is a "moving Toyshop."

William Wimsatt, in discussing the line, "Where Wigs with Wigs, with Sword-knots Sword-knots strive," remarks upon Pope's rigor of compression and points to the emphasis on the final word "strive."¹⁷ But this example of zeugma is composed of parts of social ceremony that suggest the emptiness of the wholes, their

¹⁷ William K. Wimsatt, Jr., "Introduction," *Alexander Pope: Selected Poetry and Prose* (New York, 1951), p. xxx.

irrelevant striving and competition, in contrast to genuine social acts leading to love. This repetitive figure is, as Geoffrey Tillotson points out, an epic formulaic convention enacting opposition and confrontation.¹⁸ But Pope's use is consistent with the transformation procedures, and appears markedly different, for example, from Garth's use of this same figure, that insists on the violence and ridiculousness of combat.¹⁹

The relation of rhetorical features to social forms becomes in *The Rape of the Lock* one of the characteristic forms of wit. The wigs, sword-knots and coaches provide a series of expressions, each one of which is a term of social ceremony without the accompanying social significance; even the "beaus" become objects instead of humans. The series suggests the replacement of one wig by another, one sword-knot by another, stressing the emptiness of transition despite the lively movement and the ceremonial acts. For Pope, the social ceremonies have become no more than gestures filling pauses in conversation: "*Snuff, or the Fan, supply each Pause of Chat,/ With singing, laughing, ogling and all that*" (III, ll. 17-18).

In a society that has ceased to adhere to the significance of such acts, even natural acts can become empty, even corrupted, behavior. Thus dining becomes an excuse for failing to exercise justice with care:

Meanwhile declining from the Noon of Day,
The Sun obliquely shoots his burning Ray;
The hungry Judges soon the Sentence sign,
And Wretches hang that Jury-men may Dine. (III, ll. 19-22)

The normal descent of the sun from the height of noon is connected with the normal rising of the judges' appetites, but the unnatural, inconsiderate act of the judges in satisfying their appetites reveals that they have divorced the justice incumbent upon them as judges from their natural behavior as men. Thus in the opening series of Canto III dominated by empty repetition, competition, or misused natural behavior, Pope gives to the Augustan view of movement and transformation a witty, repetitive but only seemingly relevant social and ceremonial significance.

This is most convincingly achieved in the game of Ombre. The pasteboards, as Reuben A. Brower suggests, become kings and

¹⁸ Tillotson, 152, n.101.

¹⁹ Samuel Garth, *The Dispensary* (6th ed., London, 1706), Canto IV.

queens whom Belinda treats with the excitement and temper of actuality. It is Belinda's climactic game, attributing life to empty forms, a personified ceremony involving changes or transitions of fictitious powers and kingdoms in which she protects or conquers royalty.

The game of Ombre summarizes the disparity between natural and artificial social changes, between a socially appropriate society and one that has kept the forms but deprived them of relevance. The deprivation is expressed in substituting fragments for the whole, but it can equally apply to forms that have been falsified by pride and self-importance. This falsification of form and ceremony, like the real thing, relates past to present, tradition to practice, the supernatural to the natural, the allusive past to the contemporary social scene. For example, consider the references to rituals. The original 1712 version, like the version of 1714, included the altar of love built by the Baron (I, l. 53), the "shining Altars of Japan" (I, l. 91) and the reference to the "uncontroll'd Shrine" of honor (II, l. 23). The Baron's altar is composed of fragments, trophies of his former loves, and he uses them to raise again the fire in his heart to create an artificial cycle.

It is, therefore, significant to note that although these altar images are retained in the revision, a new and impressive altar image is added: the "sacred Rites of Pride" in which Belinda's self-adoration becomes a religious rite. The Popean technique here resembles that in the other altar scenes, for Pope reduces the classical import by converting a heroic dressing scene to an eighteenth-century prospect view in which the values are mockingly inverted. Thus the typical spatial movement and transformation in such a view must not be overlooked.

Unnumber'd Treasures ope at once, and here
 The various Off'rings of the World appear;
 From each she nicely culls with curious Toil,
 And decks the Goddess with the glitt'ring Spoil.
 This Casket *India's* glowing Gems unlocks,
 And all *Arabia* breathes from Yonder Box.
 The Tortoise here and Elephant unite,
 Transform'd to *Combs*, the speckled and the white.
 Here files of Pins extend their shining Rows,
 Puffs, Powders, Patches, Bibles, Billet-doux.
 Now awful Beauty puts on all its Arms;
 The Fair each moment rises in her Charms,

Repairs her Smiles, awakens ev'ry Grace,
 And calls forth all the Wonders of her Face;
 Sees by Degrees a purer Blush arise,
 And keener Lightnings quicken in her Eyes. (I, ll. 129-144)

The technique of taking a natural phenomenon and inverting it is central to the irony here. For what Pope describes is an inverted prospect. The movement in a prospect extends from the flowers seen immediately before the observer to a gradual extension to hills, clouds and God. The movement here is from the farthest reaches of the world, from India and Arabia, from large and small animals, from the ceremonial opening to the smallest dimensions of self-adornment, beauty being enhanced and then made "purer" than nature's blush and keener than natural lightning. Just as the other revisions involved transitions, so too does this rite, and the changes operate by degree of extension and movement so that the gems are "glowing," Arabia "breathes," pins "extend" their rows—the action grows and rises with the preparations, and the result of the action is a painted goddess, powerful in her beauty and pride, but the grace she has snatched is an artificial grace.²⁰

Belinda is at the beginning equated with Juno (echoing Virgil); at another time she is referred to in terms applied to Dido, and her lock is compared with that of Catullus' Berenice. These are not all the allusions associated with Belinda, but they can, perhaps, be used to support the consistency of artistic conception in the poem. For these references are fragments from the classical past, and fragments that are not and need not be made consistent. The classical past is misused by the frivolous present; it becomes a ritual, the significance of which has ceased to be appropriate. The manner in which Belinda sees her own face and commands her own prospect is the clue to the misconception. It is not that she behaves in a proud manner in contrast to women of the past, but that she sees things as an all-too-modern belle who inverts not classical but present values.

In this respect it is illuminating to compare Pope's translation of Sarpedon's speech and his reworking of it in 1717 to suit Clarissa in *The Rape of the Lock*. He added Clarissa's speech in Canto V "to open more clearly the Moral of the Poem, in a parody of the speech

²⁰ This paragraph represents material that appeared in my essay, "The Augustan Mode in English Poetry," *ECS*, I (1967), 11-12. For a different interpretation, see Earl R. Wasserman, "The Limits of Allusion in *The Rape of the Lock*," *JEGP*, LXV (1966), 435.

of Sarpedon to Glaucus in Homer.”²¹ In 1709, Pope published the first version of this speech in which Sarpedon argues for valor and heroism on the grounds that man’s choice is a heroic death or a safe and inglorious life:

Cou’d all our Care elude the greedy Grave,
Which claims no less the Fearful than the Brave,
For Lust of Fame I shou’d not vainly dare
In fighting Fields, nor urge thy Soul to War.
But since, alas, ignoble Age must come,
Disease, and Death’s inexorable Doom:
The Life which others pay, let Us bestow,
And give to Fame what we to Nature owe;
Brave tho we fall; and honour’d, if we live;
Or let us Glory gain, or Glory give!²² (ll. 43-52)

Both Sarpedon and Clarissa share the view of man’s limitations; it is inevitable that gallant youth be followed by age and youthful beauty by faded days. The transformation is the inevitable cycle of human existence. But Sarpedon’s urging is in terms of heroic sacrifice; Pope’s language of bestowing and giving becomes the heroic design. The progress that Sarpedon envisions is that of military nobility—glory; it is a progress that counteracts the inevitable decline: “Or let us glory gain, or glory give!” Yet, even though Clarissa parodies direct lines, the implications are quite different. Sarpedon says,

Why on those Shores are we with Joy survey’d,
Admir’d as Heroes, and as Gods obey’d? (ll. 33-34)

Clarissa says,

Why deck’d with all that Land and Sea afford,
Why Angels call’d and Angel-like ador’d? (V, ll. 11-12)

Sarpedon says,

Tis ours, the Dignity They give, to grace;
The first in Valour, as the first in Place. (ll. 37-38)

Clarissa says,

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

²¹ Tillotson, 195, n.7.

²² Pope, “The Episode of Sarpedon,” *Pastoral Poetry and An Essay on Criticism*, ed. E. Audra and Aubrey Williams, *The Twickenham Edition of the Poems of Alexander Pope*, I, 451.

Sarpedon says,

But since, alas, ignoble Age must come,
Disease and Death's inexorable Doom: (ll. 47-48)

Clarissa says,

But since, alas! frail Beauty must decay,
Curl'd or uncurl'd, since Locks will turn to gray (ll. 25-26)

The use of identical syntactical constructions and, to some extent, even identical words gives the two speeches a seeming similarity, but the comic quality depends on the irrelevance of the "seeming" or formal likeness, just as it does in the altar scenes. Sarpedon speaks with sublime rhetoric to encourage his friend and the warriors to battle. It is Clarissa's purpose in colloquial language to persuade Belinda to desist from battle. Sarpedon urges Glaucus to fight on, to sacrifice to fame "what we to nature owe," but Clarissa urges Belinda to abandon extravagant social behavior and act according to nature:

What then remains, but well our Pow'r to use,
And keep good Humour still whate'er we lose?
And trust me, Dear! good Humour can prevail,
When Airs, and Flights, and Screams, and Scolding fail.
(ll. 29-32)

The counsel of Clarissa is a counsel of adaptation, a view in which false and unattractive spectacles become the object of disapprobation. Her sophisticated approach to adaptation is apparent when she assists the Baron in the rape though she has clearly not anticipated the consequences that follow this action. She sought to satisfy the wish in Belinda's heart, but did not calculate upon the gulf between form and frankness. The parody is then another device to indicate that Greek heroism is for Greeks and modern modesty for moderns. In this poem allusion serves to bring to the reader's attention the transformation procedures central to its meaning. The argument for this is two-fold: Pope connects the Clarissa passage with numerous other passages in the poem so that it is explained by them, with allusion providing a confirming technique.

The term "glory," for example, recurs in several contexts. Sarpedon says, "Or let us glory gain, or glory give!" But Clarissa rejects the vanities of glory: "How vain are all these Glories, all our pains/Unless good Sense preserve what Beauty gains" (V, ll.

15-16). Canto II begins, "Not with more Glories in th' Etherial Plain,/The Sun first rises o'er the purpl'd Main" (ll. 1-2). In Canto III, heroes and nymphs converse about the "Glory" of the British queen in the same tones in which they describe an "Indian Screen." The conclusion of the poem declares that the ravished hair has, itself, become a form of "Glory": "Then cease, bright Nymph! to mourn thy ravish'd Hair/Which adds new Glory to the shining Sphere!" (V, ll. 141-142).

All of these "Glories" coalesce within the poem. In the second Canto, "Glories" is a pun that includes the sun's natural, brilliant rays in the early morning sky as well as the late launching of Belinda by nymphs and youths, the "Glories" who "around her shone" (II, l. 5) spinning, unlike planets, in a giddy circle. The natural cycle is compared with the artificial forms, and in Canto III, genuine political eminence, "Glory" of the British queen, is balanced with a "charming *Indian screen*" whose purpose is to conceal inglorious sexual behavior. Effervescence and deflorescence are joined in ritual forms that imply the trivializing of both. When, therefore, Clarissa asks that good sense preserve the "Glories" gained by beauty, she asks for the adapting of wisdom to the forms women ought to follow. She asks that the forms be supported by the actualities of intelligent social experience. When, at the end of the poem, the hair adds new "Glory" to the heavenly sphere, "Glory" refers again to brilliant and cyclically enduring heavenly light resulting from transformations affected by heaven and the muse. Here, the "Glory" will continue long after Belinda shall cease her sexual battles, and her tresses shall, like the china vessel, be laid in dust. Thus Belinda's wise adaptation to changing social attitudes will lead men to adore, not deplore her name.

The parody of Sarpedon is a game of display in which the poet demonstrates his knowledge and his wit. It is, also, a conceptual manner of controlling the language and plot of the poem. Clarissa confirms Belinda's relation to the contemporary social scheme, and she enhances this by hyperbolically placing the scheme in the heavenly, angelic realm as well as among the daily earthbound paints and curls. But it is by adaptability to the reasonable, good-humored social world that the games, displays, and hyperboles must be understood. Tradition, allusions, wigs and epic invocations are

recognizable tags of a formal life that require good humour and wisdom to change and adapt them to the present.

By not recognizing that Homer's world is as transitory as Belinda's, and that there is a decorum proper to each, Murray Krieger mistakenly assumes that Pope finds only the heroic tradition hospitable to decorum: "As his *Homer* shows Pope to have viewed it, in the old and revered heroic tradition the world of serious significance and consequences and the world of high play and the grand manner were one."²³ This is not, however, what Pope says in his introduction to the *Iliad* regarding the times of Homer:

It must be a strange Partiality to Antiquity, to think with Madam *Dacier* "that those Times and Manners are so much the more excellent, as they are more contrary to ours." Who can be so prejudiced in their Favour as to magnify the Felicity of those Ages, when a Spirit of Revenge and Cruelty, join'd with the practice of Rapine and Robbery, reign'd thro' the World; when no Mercy was shown but for the sake of Lucre, when the greatest Princes were put to the Sword, and their Wives and Daughters made Slaves and Concubines? On the other side, I would not be so delicate as those modern Criticks, who are shock'd at the *servile offices* and *mean Employments* in which we sometimes see the Heroes of *Homer* engaged.²⁴

In stressing the transformational concept of the poem, I do not wish to overlook the sexual interpretation, for the "Hair," "the frail *China jar*" and the "Frenzy" of a gentle belle are also to be understood in terms of change, ceremony and cyclical movement. The issue is not whether the sexual references exist, but, rather, how to take them.²⁵

The sexual references belong with the varied allusions to the realm of transformation, for the losing of virtue is part of a normal cycle whereas the transition to sylphs belongs to the artificial and unnatural cycle. In the well-known passage in Canto II, in which Ariel outlines the possible threats to Belinda, there can be noted Pope's typical procedures in this poem:

Whether the Nymph shall break *Diana's Law*,
Or some frail *China Jar* receive a Flaw,

²³ Murray Krieger, "The 'Frail China Jar' and The Rude Hand of Chaos," *The Centennial Review*, V (1961), 187.

²⁴ Pope, "Preface," *The Iliad of Homer*, Books I-IX, ed. Maynard Mack, *The Twickenham Edition of the Poems of Alexander Pope*, VII, 14.

²⁵ For a discussion of the sexual imagery, see Cleanth Brooks, "The Case of Miss Arabella Fermor," *The Well-Wrought Urn*.

Or stain her Honour or her new Brocade,
 Forget her Pray'rs, or miss a Masquerade,
 Or lose her Heart or Necklace, at a Ball;
 Or whether Heaven has doom'd that *Shock* must fall.
 (II, ll. 105-109)

Of this series, J. S. Cunningham remarks, "The paired calamities are not merely ludicrously ill-assorted contrasts. There is a metaphorical transference across the gap, so that one item in a pair can almost become a symbol for the other."²⁶ The sexual surrogates of china and the lapdog are surely implied. But in the rhetorical features of zeugma that somewhat fictional ancient "Honour" and the very recent "new Brocade" are held together by a single physical term in which tradition and social ceremony can be reduced to a staining action involving transformation. Or losing what one had, whether heart or necklace, involves transformation at a social ceremony, a ball, equating internal feelings with external adornment, though control of both is lost by the possessor. But "breaking," "flawing," "staining," "forgetting," "amusing," "losing" or "dooming" are a consistent series of transformational social disasters enacted by or upon the nymph in such a way that the balanced alternatives become instances of the "giddy Circle." For held together by balance are terms like "Heart" and "Honour" that can be balanced only if they have been emptied of their traditional meaning.

Pope further developed the idea of the transformational cycle in his 1714 revision, when he added the pedigree of the bodkin. In the 1712 version, Pope had written:

Now meet thy Fate, th' incens'd Virago cry'd,
 And drew a deadly Bodkin from her Side. (II, ll. 140-141)

This he revised:

Now meet thy Fate, incens'd *Belinda* cry'd,
 And drew a deadly Bodkin from her Side.
 (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, ll. 87-96)

²⁶ J. S. Cunningham, *Pope: The Rape of the Lock* (London, 1961), p. 41.

The bodkin is the consequence of an ancient line of transformations; it was originally three seal-rings, then a vast buckle, then a whistle, then a hair-pin, then a dagger. Richardo Quintana finds this passage the example of “literal changes.”²⁷ The bodkin’s changes are surely literal, but they are also a commentary on cultural values. The devices of adornment and social ceremony were part of an ancestral progress, so that what served as an identification for the great, great Grandsire becomes a deadly weapon identifying an incensed virago. The origin of the bodkin is no longer identifiable in Belinda’s weapon, and it has, like the sylphs, taken on shapes appropriate to men and women, though Belinda uses it as though she were an unnatural Amazon. But the point of the pedigree is to compare a natural lineage with an artificial one, Belinda’s descent with the bodkin’s descent, for Belinda is at this moment a strange descendant from the “ancient Personage.” The pedigree points to a similarity of descent that leads to a difference in character, and the last couplet underlines the difference: “Then in a Bodkin grac’d her Mother’s Hairs,/Which long she wore, and now Belinda wears,” For these lines refer to the bodkin which her mother wore in her hair and Belinda wears at her side, though it may also imply that there is a continuity of form or dress (wearing an object) though not of meaning.

The bodkin is another example of false adaptability, and it belongs with the manner in which Pope invoked the machinery of the sylphs from the volume, *Comte de Gabalis*. In this cabalistic volume the sylphs are masculine and the sylphids feminine and both are capable of marriage and of child-bearing (though not in the customary manner) and they have borne such heroes as Achilles and Sarpedon. In making the aerial creatures immortal extensions of womanly pride and chastity, Pope fixed them within the cycle from mortality to immortality, while converting them into agents supporting the conventions and pretensions and emptiness of the social whirl. The Gnomes, who are the friends of demons, are seduced by them to give up their immortality and to persuade men to do likewise (ll. 179-181). In a typical reworking of his sources, Pope offers alternatives of extravagant chastity or extravagant spleen; the sylphs inherit the air and gnomes descend to the Cave of Spleen, but both function to act upon earthly Belinda.

²⁷ Quintana, p. 15.

In addition to converting the sylphs into guards rather than players, protectors of ceremonials but not participants, Pope gives to them the typical role of anxiety-ridden creatures. I have been arguing that the poem must be understood as contrasting natural with empty or false transformations; that the sense of the past exists for display, knowledge, recognition, but that in the natural course of events the significance of the past changes. The artificial social and ceremonial forms of the present are burlesques or witty commentaries on the failure to recognize the need for adaptability, and the lightness, wit, and delicacy of the poem rest on a conception of language in which allusions, contemporary and classical, cabalistic doctrine, restoration comedy, and the common social patterns of behavior discussed by Addison and Steele,²⁸ are converted into a description of the “giddy Circle” governing female fashion and that all these fragments suggest the diverse forms, ceremonials, and rituals that have ceased to have content appropriate to present behavior. The sylphs’ anxiety exemplifies this situation because female and male sexual behavior is not governed by principles stabilized by modesty or good sense or good humor. For this reason, there is uneasiness about Belinda’s frivolity and self-knowledge; the slightest sign that she has genuine feelings of love, not mere surface responses that “shine on all alike” (II, l. 14), causes the sylphs to retreat.

The sylphian anxiety results from an uneasiness in defending unnatural ideals of chastity against natural desires, limitless forms against bounded behavior. Thus Ariel admits in Canto I:

In the clear Mirror of thy ruling *Star*
I saw, alas! some dread Event impend,
Ere to the main this Morning Sun descend. (I, ll. 108-110)

In Canto II the sylphs await the dread event:

With beating Hearts the dire Event they wait,
Anxious and trembling for the Birth of Fate. (II, ll. 141-142)

In Canto III, “anxious Ariel” resigns himself to the fate that impends, as he becomes aware of Belinda’s danger:

²⁸ For a discussion of the relevance of Addison’s and Steele’s essays to Belinda’s behavior, see Hugo M. Reichard, “The Love Affair in Pope’s *Rape of the Lock*,” *PMLA*, LXIX (1954), 887-902. Reichard declares: “As it happens, the relevance of Addison and Steele bears out George Sherburn’s opinion that the ‘tone of the poem was certainly learned from those sober discourses on the foibles of women that adorned the *Tatler* and *Spectator*’ ” (888).

Just in that instant, anxious *Ariel* sought
 The close Recesses of the Virgin's Thought;
 As on the Nosegay in her Breast reclin'd,
 He watch'd th' Ideas rising in her Mind,
 Sudden he view'd, in Spite of all her Art,
 An earthly Lover lurking at her Heart.
 Amaz'd, confus'd, he found his Pow'r expir'd,
 Resign'd to Fate, and with a Sigh retir'd. (III, ll. 139-146)

The language of looking and watching, of movement and transformation are typical of techniques in the poem that illustrate the power of the natural to invalidate the aid of the artificial. In the final reference to anxiety, Pope specifically identifies his allusion to Dido. In Dryden's translation the lines from the *Aeneid* read:

But anxious cares already seized the queen;
 She fed within her veins a flame unseen;
 The hero's valour, acts and birth inspire
 Her soul with love, and fan the secret fire. (IV, ll. 1-4)

Pope writes:

But anxious Cares the pensive Maid opprest,
 And secret Passions labour'd in her Breast.
 Not youthful Kings in Battel seiz'd alive,
 Not scornful Virgins who their Charms survive,
 Not ardent Lovers robb'd of all their Bliss,
 Not Tyrants fierce that unrepenting die,
 Not *Cynthia* when her Manteau's pinn'd awry,
 E'er felt such Rage, Resentment and Despair,
 As Thou, said Virgin! for thy ravish'd Hair. (IV, ll. 1-10)

In the context of the poem, the "anxious Cares" have shifted from the sylphs to Belinda, but since she does not acknowledge the earthly lover, she becomes the prey of Umbriel. The reference to Dido touches on serious sorrow only swiftly to proceed to a hyperbolic series of comparisons that define Belinda's "Rage, Resentment and Despair." These instances of anaphora define crucial or ritual moments of contrary situations: the rage of young kings who are taken captive alive but prefer death; of virgins who are alive but whose charms are dead; of lovers whose ardors are unconsummated, and of ancient ladies whose kisses are untaken, of tyrants who do not repent their misdeeds, and of Cynthia whose manteau has been pinned awry. As each item in the series is introduced by the same negative term, and as the martial, sexual and social images are connected, the plural subjects are contracted to a single Cynthia.

The combination of an allusive figure with images of obvious and

extreme disproportion—whether they be of life or drama—perpetrates an obvious artificiality upon the seriousness of the allusion. This particular instance is not one of the more successful because of its wholesale mixing of instances, but if one takes some of the more famous series in the poem, Pope's procedure will become apparent.

"Here files of Pins extend their shining Rows,/Puffs, Powders, Patches, Bibles, Billet-doux" (I, ll. 137-138)—In these lines Pope creates a neatly ordered system, with files of pins, with facial cosmetics, with love messages, for the Bible, too, is a message of love. The series has been called a "disarray of values," which it is, and "disarray" a shrewd paradox to describe the neat order.²⁹ The Bible has undergone a transformation; emptied of its religious implications, it is a social form, not a work to believe in and live by.

This neat and fashionable series can be contrasted with that of grotesque phantoms rising in the "Vapour" over the Cave of Spleen in Canto IV:

Now glaring Fiends, and Snakes on rolling Spires,
Pale Spectres, gaping Tombs, and Purple Fires:
Now Lakes of liquid Gold, Elysian Scenes,
And crystal Domes, and Angels in Machines. (IV, ll. 43-46)

The natural hallucinations of the spleen exist in the air where coils roll, tombs gape, gold flows in lakes and angels appear in machines; they create again a chaotic mixture of heaven and hell in one and the same fantasy, and the four elements become confused and transformed. But this series of contradictory visions is based, as Geoffrey Tillotson notes, on a "satiric catalogue of the scenic effects of contemporary opera and pantomime."³⁰ They are, moreover, simultaneous instances of the emptiness of true visions of God's presence or of the Elysian fields.

This airy, operatic vision becomes the basis for the climax of the poem, for the epic battle is not merely a social confusion, but a ringing and singing: "Heroes' and Heroines' Shouts confus'dly rise,/ And bass and treble Voices strike the Skies" (V, ll. 41-42). The episode formalizes the epic conventions to illustrate their irrelevance to actual behavior, for whatever impressive values the past may have had, these have been conventionalized, put into play and song, lost their original relevance in a different society. But as long as society

²⁹ Maynard Mack, "Wit and Poetry and Pope': Some Observations on his Imagery," *Pope and his Contemporaries*, ed. James L. Clifford and Louis A. Landa (Oxford, 1949), p. 31.

³⁰ Tillotson, 183, n.43.

maintains such empty rites, rituals and ceremonies, it calls attention not to epic greatness but to that aspect of epic life in which, as Pope wrote, “ancient Poets are in one respect like many modern Ladies; Let an action be never so trivial in it self, they always make it appear of utmost Importance.”³¹

The allusions, therefore, become part of the language conception governing the poem: references to past and present, to epics, dramas, operas and mock-epics, reveal that the socially pretentious world of Belinda uses linguistic forms as artificial ceremonials. The “giddy Circle” confuses natural cycles with artificial changes. In the transformatory world that Pope describes, neither splenetic hallucinations nor Belinda’s arming is an appropriate use of past or present.

Pope deliberately rejects a conception in which allusive contexts provide the model of a great past or in which locks and lap dogs reach allegorical dimensions. One makes classical allusions only to disregard them. One lives by, and calls upon, ceremonies without considering that they must be adapted to new stages of the human and social cycles. Pope’s rhetorical figures, whether zeugma, syllepsis, paradox, repetition, anaphora, become subtle poetic instruments that imply empty or rigid or confused ceremonials. And whether Pope writes in the grotesque or in the minutely particular, in the false sublime or aerily beautiful, his language converts rhetorical conventions into transformational devices by which the confused harmony of an operatic hero-comedy rings out in verse and bells.

The concluding passages convert the poem into an act of wit controlled by the poet, for it is he, in the person of the muse, who sees the raped lock transformed from an artificial cycle to a natural one in the heavens.

But trust the Muse—she saw it upward rise,
Tho’ mark’d by none but quick Poetic Eyes. (V, ll. 123-124)

Thus the poet becomes the great reconciler, establishing in his poem a new natural cycle, demonstrating as the poem does, the proper attitude to social behavior and the relation between natural cycles and current behavior.

This *Lock*, the Muse shall consecrate to Fame,
And midst the Stars inscribe Belinda’s Name! (V, ll. 159-160)

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³¹ Tillotson, 142.