

# The Rape of the Lock



## INTRODUCTION

### BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF ALEXANDER POPE

Alexander Pope was born into a Catholic family at the end of the 17th century, only a few short months after the forced abdication of Britain's last Catholic monarch, James II. Pope felt the full effects of anti-Catholic sentiment during his early life, as the Test Acts (a series of laws designed to inhibit the prosperity of Catholic families at the time) prevented his family from living within 10 miles of London and prevented him from attending a university. Instead, Pope was largely self-taught, teaching himself French, Italian, Latin, and Greek, and even reading Homer at an early age. By 1709, he had published a number of his poems entitled *Pastorals* in Jacob Tonson's popular collection *Poetic Miscellanies*, and by 1711 he had published "An Essay on Criticism." This essay was particularly well received and gained him a number of admirers with considerable literary clout, including Richard Steele and Joseph Addison, with whom he began collaborating on *The Spectator*, a landmark daily publication. Following the success of "The Rape of the Lock," in 1717 he published a folio of his work with two new additions, "Verses to the Memory of an Unfortunate Lady" and "Eloisa to Abelard." Pope's greatest satirical work, *The Dunciad*, first appeared in 1728 and the final version was printed in 1743. This mock-heroic mercilessly pokes fun at his contemporaries, and although it was originally published anonymously, Pope's distinctive wit meant it the authorship was no secret, reaffirming his position as one of the foremost satirists of his day. It is also worth noting that aside from his own literary creations, Pope was greatly interested in translation and editing. From 1715 to 1720, Pope published various editions of his translation of Homer's *Iliad* and published his translation of the *Odyssey* in 1726, shortly after the 1725 publication of his edition of the complete works of Shakespeare, which made a number of significant editorial changes and was heavily critiqued. Towards the end of his life, however, Pope's literary output began to decline, and he wrote little after 1738. Having always been a sickly child, Pope's final years were marked by a severe decline in health, and he died shortly after his 56th birthday.

### HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Pope's age was one marked by a number of significant political, social, and economic changes. After the deposition of Britain's last Catholic monarch, James II, and the passage of the Test Acts, anti-Catholic feeling was running high. Pope satirizes the Protestant distaste for Catholic practices over the course of "The Rape of the Lock." It is also worth noting that the early

18th century saw the rise of early industrialization and the spread of British colonial power further across the globe, both facts reflected in the poem's preoccupation with objects. The beginning of industrialized mass production meant owning more "stuff" was suddenly more affordable than it had ever been, and Pope mocks Belinda's almost senseless number of possessions. The expansion of the British Empire meant exotic objects (such as the coffee and china Pope mentions) were suddenly within reach, and an absurd version of this trend also features in the poem.

### RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Pope was writing in the Augustan literary period, a time of relative political stability which allowed the arts to flourish and which was dominated by a taste for the Neoclassical. As such, literature which drew on the classical tradition was especially popular, as demonstrated by the success of a number of Pope's works, including "An Essay on Criticism," drawing inspiration from the Latin poet Horace's "Ars Poetica," and his translations of Homer. The mock-heroic style married the contemporary taste for the classical with the popular genre of satire, as shown in "The Rape of the Lock," but also in Pope's *The Dunciad*. This is a key piece of literature which like "The Rape of the Lock," takes on the form of a classical epic to poke fun at contemporary life by creating a humorous mismatch between style and substance. Additional examples of the mock-heroic genre include John Dryden's "Mac Flecknoe," and later, Lord Byron's "Don Juan." Dryden's *Absalom and Achitophel* also captures and critiques the anti-Catholic sentiment of the time. Additionally, it is worth noting that Pope has borrowed the sylphs from an earlier literary work, Nicolas-Pierre-Henri de Montfaucon de Villars's *Comte de Gabalis*.

### KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** "The Rape of the Lock"
- **When Written:** Pope published three different editions of the poem from 1712 to 1717, making most alternations from 1712 to 1714.
- **Where Written:** England, likely in and around London (including Binfield and Twickenham).
- **When Published:** The final edition of the poem, including of all five cantos and Clarissa's speech, was published in 1717.
- **Literary Period:** Augustan
- **Genre:** Mock-Heroic, Narrative Poem, Roman à clef
- **Setting:** Belinda's House; Hampton Court; The Cave of Spleen
- **Climax:** Belinda's lock of hair is revealed to no longer be in

the Baron's possession, but has instead become a constellation in the sky.

- **Antagonist:** The Baron
- **Point of View:** Third-Person Omniscient

## EXTRA CREDIT

**In Real Life.** "The Rape of the Lock" is based on a real incident. Pope's friend John Caryll ("Caryl" is mentioned in Canto I) recounted to him how Arabella Fermor (to whom Pope addresses his dedicatory letter) had one of her own locks of hair snipped off by a suitor, Lord Petre.

**Word of Caution.** Writing under the pseudonym Esdras Barnivelt, Pope published a 1714 poem entitled "A Key to the Lock," cautioning readers not to take "The Rape of the Lock" too seriously.



## PLOT SUMMARY

At the opening of the poem, Belinda, a beautiful and wealthy young woman is asleep. Ariel, her guardian sylph, watches over her and sends her a dream which highlights what the role of the sylph is—namely to protect virtuous young women, though at times he makes the whole thing sound a tad sinister by suggesting that sylphs might control the action of mortals or get them into trouble. He is worried that some disaster is close at hand, though he is not sure what form it will take. He instead warns her through the dream to "beware of man." Belinda then awakes and begins dressing herself for a day of social engagements. With the help of her maid Betty and that of her attendant sylphs, Belinda then completes the elaborate process of beautifying herself.

Looking exceptionally beautiful, Belinda then sails from London to Hampton court, and dazzles the crowd as she sails along. The two **locks** in which she has styled her hair look especially attractive, and the Baron eyes them in admiration—he has resolved to take one for himself, either by force or by theft. Before sunrise that morning, he had prayed for success to the God of love. As a kind of sacrifice burned a pyre made up of "French romances" (i.e., love stories), garters, gloves, and all the tokens of his romantic past, including love letters. Meanwhile, back in the present Belinda's boat is still gliding along and Ariel is still troubled by the feeling that something horrible is going to happen. He summons a huge army of sylphs out of the air, and explains that he feels disaster is going to strike at any moment, though his idea of disaster is actually quite silly—that at worst Belinda might lose her virginity, but that it might also be something as trivial as a new dress getting stained, losing a piece of jewelry, or her lapdog dying. He instructs a number of sylphs to man different stations, including her fan, her lock, her watch, and her dog.

The boat arrives at Hampton Court and the lords and ladies disembark, ready to enjoy the pleasures of a day at court, in particular, gossip. Belinda soon sits down with two men to play a game of ombre. With a little help from her band of sylphs, Belinda begins the game well, declaring that spades are to be trumps, and quickly gaining the upper hand. The Baron, however, is quick to fire back and begins to dominate the game, and Belinda is close to being beaten. At the very last second, though, Belinda is able to win the final play, and reacts triumphantly.

Coffee is then served, which the smell of which revives the Baron and reminds him of his plan to steal the lock. Clarissa draws out a pair of scissors, like a lady equipping a knight for battle, and the Baron seizes them and prepares to snip off the lock. A whole host of sylphs descend on the lock, trying to twitch the hair and Belinda's earring to gain her attention and alert her to the danger. And, although she looks around three times, the Baron simply evades her glance each time and then moves closer again. At this moment, Ariel accesses Belinda's inner thoughts and sees that she has feelings for an "earthly lover." He feels that this ill befits the "close recesses of the virgin's thoughts." Resigned to the fact that she is not as pure as he had hoped, Ariel gives up on stopping the Baron from snipping off the lock. The Baron crows with delight and Belinda screams in horror at what has happened.

While Belinda is sadly considering the wrong done to her, Umbriel, a gnome, flies down to another realm, the Cave of Spleen. Here, he encounters a number of unpleasant things, including the East wind which was thought to cause migraines, the figures of Ill Nature and Affectation, all kinds of horrible phantoms and contorted bodies (women turned into objects, men who are pregnant), and the Queen of Spleen herself, a kind of magical being who touches women with melancholy and hysterics. He asks her to affect Belinda with "chagrin" and she obliges, presenting him with a bag of "the force of female lungs, / Sighs, sobs and passions, and the war of tongues" and a vial containing "fainting fears, / Soft sorrows, melting griefs, and flowing tears."

When he returns, he finds Belinda in the arms of Thalestris, and promptly tips the bag over them. Thalestris is accordingly hugely distressed at the lock's loss and Belinda's now tarnished reputation. She goes to her own suitor, Sir Plume, and demands he confront the Baron, which he does to no avail, with the Baron declaring that he will not give up the lock while his nostrils still breathe air (i.e., while he is alive). But Umbriel, not content with having stirred up enough trouble already, then opens the vial over Belinda, who appears to give a long lamenting speech about the loss of the lock, wishing she had stayed at home or at least heeded Ariel's warning.

Still, the Baron is unmoved. At last, Clarissa quiets the group and makes her own speech, which essentially argues that this whole debate is silly—that everyone, including women

themselves, places too much value on transient female beauty, and that women should instead invest their time and energy in being the best moral beings they can be. But her good sense is lost on the assembled company, and Belinda calls the women to arms.

A kind of mock courtly battle ensues, with fans, silks, and the ladies' scowls for weapons, much to Umbriel's delight. Belinda rushes at the Baron and blows snuff into his nose, with the help of the gnomes, fulfilling his earlier comment that the lock could only be taken from him if air stopped filling his nostrils. She then draws out a bodkin, threatening him with it. He tells her that he fears nothing in death but being separated from her and begs to live, burning with passion instead. She shouts at him to return the stolen lock, but miraculously the lock is gone. The narrator assures readers, however, that it ascended into the heavens, like Berenice's locks, where it shall be viewed by the common people of London and astronomers alike. Unlike every other lock, however, this one will never grow gray, but will burn brightly in the sky as an eternal testament to Belinda's spectacular beauty.

idea Ariel suggests at the opening of the poem: that beauty and virtue always go hand in hand. Belinda is based on the real-life figure of Arabella Fermor, who also had a lock of her hair cut off by a suitor.

**Ariel** – Belinda's guardian sylph. At the opening of the narrative, he explains to Belinda through a dream that he is tasked with protecting her beauty and chastity. He feels that some great disaster is looming in the near future and warns her to “beware of man.” Later, as Belinda is sailing to Hampton Court, Ariel calls up an army of sylphs to defend various parts of her, from including her hair, her earrings, and her fan. In the vital moment before the Baron snips off Belinda's **lock** of hair, however, Ariel gives up helping Belinda. When he gains access to her inner thoughts at this moment, Ariel spies “An earthly lover lurking at her heart,” meaning she is perhaps not as chaste as she ought to be. Even though Ariel seems to want to protect Belinda, there is definitely something a little sinister about him, too. If he is so interested in Belinda's chastity, why does he choose to send her a dream at the beginning which includes a young man designed to sexually appeal to her, “A youth more glitt'ring than a birthnight beau”? Some critics have also drawn comparisons between his opening speech to Belinda, at which point he “Seem'd to her Ear his winning Lips to lay,” and Satan's speech to Eve in Milton's *Paradise Lost* in which he is “Squat like a Toad, close at the ear of Eve; / Assaying by his Devilish art to reach / The Organs of her Fancy.” Similarly, his name recalls Ariel in Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, also a mischievous spirit. This allows Pope to suggest that there is something rather “tricksy” about the sylph, which in turn suggests rather a lot about the morality of the world of the poem. Ariel is, after all, meant to be regulating Belinda's morality by ensuring her chastity, so his fickleness reinforces Pope's satirical suggestion that good and bad are not as clear cut as they appear, especially not in such a vain setting as the court.

**The Baron** – The antagonist of the poem. Based on the historical Lord Petre, the Baron snips off Belinda's **lock** on account of his infatuation with her remarkable beauty and refuses to give it back. Readers learn that, earlier that day, he created a bonfire to the god of Love made out of, among other things, books containing romantic stories, love letters, and tokens from past romantic attachments, in order to pray for success in winning Belinda in some way, and settled on “raping” her lock. And while his cutting of the lock is not equated with rape in the modern sense—in the context of the poem, it means “theft” or “pillaging”—Pope is still using the word to connote injustice, and to unequivocally state that he has taken what he had no right to take. The fact that the Baron is only referred to by his title, revealing his masculinity and his station but nothing else, or else is satirically figured as a “knight,” the height of courtly masculinity, allows Pope to metonymically cast a kind of witty judgement over *all* noblemen, and to question the contemporary assumption that they were the intellectual and



## CHARACTERS

### MAJOR CHARACTERS

**Belinda** – The protagonist of the poem, Belinda is a wealthy and beautiful young woman who travels to Hampton Court for a day of socializing and leisure. Her remarkable beauty attracts the attention of the Baron, who snips off a **lock** of her hair in his infatuation. At the beginning of the narrative, Ariel explains to Belinda through the medium of a dream that as she is a both beautiful and a virgin, it is his task to watch over her and protect her virtue—though as the poem unfolds, it's unclear if Belinda is really as virtuous as she seems. Despite the fact that Belinda is Pope's protagonist, she's actually a bit of a slippery character to come to terms with, as the reader is provided with relatively little access to her inner thoughts, and her actions are often governed by supernatural forces. For instance, it is unclear how much influence Ariel, a sylph, is able to exert over her, and there is some suggestion that he actively toys with her morality. He claims it is her virginity which makes her worthy of guarding but sends her a dream of a handsome young man, “A youth more glitt'ring than a birthnight beau,” tempting her sexuality. Similarly, at the end of the poem, Umbriel, throws over her and Thalestris a bag of “Sighs, sobs and passions” and also empties a vial of “sorrows” over her too, meaning the rage she flies into is not entirely of her own volition. Fundamentally, as her name suggests with its literal meaning of “beautiful”, all readers can really know about Belinda is that she is attractive. The poem states that “If to her share some female errors fall, / Look on her face, and you'll forget 'em all”—in other words, she is so beautiful that those around her consider her basically exempt from any moral judgement, allowing Pope to satirize the

moral leaders of their day.

**Thalestris** – A courtly lady who befriends Belinda, and laments the loss of the **lock** with her. Like Belinda, she is subject to the “Sighs, sobs, and passions” dumped out of Umbriel’s bag, which prompts her to take to the fight to regain the lock so aggressively. However, her name does recall that of the mythological queen of the Amazons, a group of fierce female warriors, which suggests that Pope might be teasing the reader here again with the question of how much the characters’ actions are their own. Thalestris’s name suggests she might herself be innately war-like, even without the influence of Umbriel.

**Umbriel** – An earthly gnome who delights in wreaking havoc. He descends to the Cave of Spleen to collect a bag of “Sighs, sobs and passions,” which he dumps over Belinda and Thalestris, and vial of “fainting fears, / Soft sorrows, melting griefs, and flowing tears,” which he pours over Belinda, spurring them on to confront the Baron for snipping off Belinda’s **lock**. A more tangibly malicious figure than Ariel, Umbriel’s name recalls the Latin *umbra*, meaning “shadow,” suggesting to the reader that there is a real darkness to his character. But, like that of Ariel, Umbriel’s interference in the mortals’ actions also allows Pope to return to the question of how people create moral judgements. Instead of presenting a straightforward situation where Belinda and Thalestris behave aggressively of their own accord, Pope creates one where they are almost being played with like puppets and clearly cannot be held accountable for the things that they say and do.

**The Queen of Spleen** – Queen of the subterranean Cave of Spleen. A personification of the concept of spleen itself, she bestows hysteria, melancholy, and bodily disfunction on women. She provides Umbriel with a bag of “Sighs, sobs and passions” and a vial of “fainting fears, / Soft sorrows, melting griefs, and flowing tears,” which he pours over Belinda and Thalestris, allowing Pope to once again suggest that the mortals are not really in control of their own feelings or actions.

**Clarissa** – A lady at court who lends the Baron her scissors to chop off Belinda’s **lock** of hair. She later finds the whole incident frustratingly trivial and delivers a speech about how physical beauty is ultimately fleeting and that instead women should concentrate on being as morally upright as they possibly can. Looks might prove attractive to the eyes, Clarissa declares, but virtue is most attractive to the soul. While her speech obviously makes good sense, it is typical of a more traditional style of poem which would be primarily concerned with didacticism, or simply telling the reader what the moral is. Pope subverts the conventions of this style of writing by refusing to end the poem here and instead concluding with the absurdity of the courtly battle. But Clarissa’s name, meaning “clarity,” hints that the reader might do well to take her wise advice.

## MINOR CHARACTERS

**Sir Plume** – Thalestris’s suitor, who intervenes on the part of the ladies and confronts the Baron, asking him to return Belinda’s **lock**. Critics have connected him with the historical Sir George Brown, a friend of Pope’s.

**Zephyretta** – The sylph in charge of guarding Belinda’s fan. Her name is a pun on the word *zephyr*, or “soft breeze,” appropriate for a fan which itself creates a breeze.

**Brillante** – The sylph in charge of guarding Belinda’s earrings. Her name is a pun on the word *brilliant*, meaning “shining brightly,” which is appropriate for some sparkling earrings.

**Momentilla** – The sylph in charge of guarding Belinda’s watch. Her name is a pun on the word *moment*, which appropriate for the watch as a means of measuring time.

**Crispissa** – The sylph in charge of guarding Belinda’s hair. Her name is a pun on the old-fashioned word *crisp*, meaning “curl,” and thus is fitting given that her task is to guard Belinda’s **lock**.

**Betty** – Belinda’s maid.

**Shock** – Belinda’s lapdog.

**Caryl** – Pope’s friend John Caryl, who first related to Pope the real incident between Arabella Fermor and Lord Petre.

## TERMS

**Berenice’s Locks** – A reference to a mythological story, in which Berenice, queen of Egypt, was said to have cut off one of her locks of hair to ensure her husband’s safety in battle, after which the lock was magically transformed into a constellation. This story was popular with classical authors, appearing in the works of Callimachus and Catullus. **Belinda’s** own **lock** ascending into the heavens at the end of Canto V and appearing as a constellation humorously echoes this ancient story, creating another mismatch between the loftiness of classical subjects and the relative triviality and banality of Belinda’s situation.

**Ombre** – Popular three-person card game. Originally a Spanish game called *hombre*, in many respects a forerunner of the modern game bridge.

**Rape** – Theft or plundering. To the modern reader this word might appear to refer to a non-consensual sex act, but Pope is actually using this word in a slightly older sense, primarily to mean to steal or to plunder, so a more modern title might read something like “The Theft of the Lock.” Pope is still trying to emphasize that the **Baron’s** action is an immoral one, and it is true that their might still be a kind of violent sexual connotation to the word, but it is important to understand that Pope’s primary goal is *not* to equate the loss of the **lock** with a non-consensual sex act.

**Spleen** – In Pope’s time, spleen was a fairly general term for



various forms of bodily disfunction, all of which were believed to be primarily female characteristics. It was thought that the spleen sent up vapors to the brain which would result in migraines, hysteria, fainting and melancholy. Pope's fantastical Cave of Spleen is thus a kind of hell of female bodily disfunction, where old and sick women are found alongside women turned into objects and men who have fallen pregnant. It is from here and the Queen of Spleen herself that **Umbriel** is able to collect the negative emotions, the "Sighs, sobs and passions" he dumps over **Thalestris** and **Belinda**, inciting the frenzy which drives them to confront the **Baron**.

**Sylph** – Guardian spirit of the air, designed to protect virgins. Distinct from some of the other overtly malicious supernatural beings in the poem, such as **Umbriel** the gnome, the sylphs are at least superficially good. According to Ariel they are the souls of women now dead, and in particular those of beautiful and sociable women, noted for their "joy in gilded chariots" and "love of ombre." In the poem they serve to protect **Belinda's** chastity and her beauty, and they delight in the elaborate process of beautifying her for a day at court. However, the sylphs are perhaps a little shadier than they might initially appear. In a poem that mocks the vanity of court life, it appears unwise that such vain spirits should help govern mortals' actions. The extent to which the sylphs are able to influence mortals' actions is also unclear, and Pope hints that there might be something a little sinister about the relationship between **Ariel** and Belinda by choosing to echo Milton's *Paradise Lost*. This modern epic depicts the fall of Adam and Eve, and many critics have noticed that there are uncomfortable verbal echoes of Satan tempting Eve ("Squat like a Toad, close at the ear of Eve; / Assaying by his Devilish art to reach / The Organs of her Fancy") in Ariel's having "Seem'd to her [Belinda's] Ear his winning Lips to lay."

becomes increasingly silly, as the courtiers ultimately discover that the lock is no longer in the Baron's possession and has been transformed into a constellation in the sky above. Throughout the poem, Pope references the tradition of epic poetry—poems about serious conflict and heroism—to show, by comparison, how trivial and vain court life is.

One of the most important points to note about the composition of the poem is Pope's choice of meter: heroic couplets (pairs of rhyming lines in iambic pentameter). These are traditionally associated with works in the epic tradition, such as Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey* and Virgil's *Aeneid*. This misleadingly suggests to the reader that the subject matter of "The Rape of the Lock" will be equally heroic, and thus the poem's meter ironically emphasizes the triviality of the narrative. This is because epic poems typically recount profound, high-stakes struggles, such as clashes between cities, between mankind and the gods, and among the gods themselves. Epics are therefore normally seen as an extremely lofty poems which deal with the most serious of events. While classical epics were not composed in heroic couplets, 18th-century translations of the classics often were, and Pope's own translations of Homer are prime examples. This means that Pope's opting to use heroic couplets to focus on the trivial story of a woman's ruined hairdo in "The Rape of the Lock" was designed to strike contemporary readers as clearly ridiculous. Instead of encountering an epic poem about noble warriors and famous battles, the reader is presented with an obviously unimportant incident about the loss of a lock of hair.

Pope further emphasizes the contrast between the loftiness of the style and the silliness of the poem's narrative by drawing comparisons between his own characters and figures from the epic tradition. For instance, at the beginning of Canto V, after Belinda's lock has been cut off, Pope compares his characters to those in Virgil's *Aeneid*. The Baron is conflated with Aeneas ("the Trojan"), Thalestris with Anna, and Belinda with Dido: "But fate and Jove had stopped the Baron's ears. / In vain Thalestris with reproach assails, / For who can move when fair Belinda fails? / Not half so fixed the Trojan could remain, / While Anna begged and Dido raged in vain." Here, Pope is referencing Book IV of the *Aeneid*, in which Venus and Juno influence Aeneas, a refugee Trojan prince, and Dido, queen of Carthage, to become lovers. Aeneas cannot stay in Carthage, however, as it is his destiny to sail to Italy and found Rome. He is famously unmoved by Dido's rage or by her sister Anna's protestations, leading Dido to take her own life. This comparison between Belinda's feelings, lamenting her lost lock of hair (which will, of course, grow back), and Dido's, on the verge of suicide, is humorously misaligned, poking fun at the relative silliness of Belinda's idea of suffering.

Finally, in other places, Pope directly parodies portions of his own translations of Homer, to draw a close comparison between the intensity of battle and the triviality of court



## THEMES

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### THE TRIVIALITY OF COURT LIFE

Alexander Pope's "The Rape of the Lock" recounts a seemingly trivial episode of 18th-century royal court life. Belinda, a beautiful and charming young woman, spends a day at court where she encounters the Baron, an aristocrat greatly taken with her beauty. The Baron snips off one of the two large curls into which Belinda has styled her hair, and this prompts her to begin a kind of courtly war, demanding the Baron return the **lock** of hair. From here, the narrative

culture. For instance, the line, “Where wigs with wigs, with sword-knots sword-knots strive, / Beaux banish beaux, and coaches coaches drive,” echoes Pope’s own translation of the *Iliad*, 4.508–9: “Now Shield with Shield, with Helmet Helmet clos’d, / To Armour Armour, Lance to Lance oppos’d.” This parallel highlights just how unimportant these courtly activities are, as Pope draws a direct comparison between the noble activities of Homeric men and the vain activities performed by his own characters. Instead of fighting to the death with weapons (“Shield”; “Helmet”; “Armour”; “Lance”), the men at court merely compete to be the favourites of various ladies, as “Beaux banish beaux.” And instead of fighting with swords, these men compete to see who has the most decorative “sword-knot,” a ribbon or tassel attached to the hilt of a sword. For these men, as the “sword-knots” symbolize, looking good is more important than actually having any skill in combat.

Thus, Pope juxtaposes his use of epic meter and classical references with the silliness of the poem’s underlying narrative for comic effect. In doing so, he effectively mocks the importance afforded to transient expressions of beauty at court. By adopting an epic meter and drawing comparisons between Homeric figures and his own characters, he is able to emphasize that the concerns and duties of court life are ultimately insubstantial and appear downright silly alongside the great struggles depicted in epic poetry.



### BEAUTY VS. POETRY

Alexander Pope’s “The Rape of the Lock” offers a satirical glimpse into 18th-century court life, emphasizing society’s focus on beauty and

appearance. Centered around the experience of a beautiful young woman, Belinda, who loses a **lock** of her hair to the scissors of an infatuated Baron, “The Rape of the Lock” steadily becomes sillier and sillier as it goes along and the characters descend into a kind of pretend battle over the lock. Coupled with the Clarissa’s wise speech, which argues that women waste too much time focusing on their looks rather than thinking about how to be better people, it might appear at first glance that Pope’s central thesis is the idea that this kind of obsession with beauty is fundamentally absurd. But the poem’s conclusion, in which the lock ascends to heaven as a new constellation, seems to suggest that perhaps true beauty might really be of some value after all, but only if it becomes the subject of poetry and thus achieves a kind of literary immortality.

Pope mocks Belinda’s fixation on her own beauty by comparing her with an epic hero about to go into battle, which makes her own process of beautifying herself for a day at court appear relatively low-stakes and insignificant. In Canto I, Pope describes Belinda’s completed “toilet” as “awful Beauty” having prepared its “arms.” Here, Pope compares Belinda’s having finished grooming herself at her dressing table to an awe-

inspiring warrior putting on all of his armor and weapons. The cliché of the hero getting dressed in his armor in preparation for battle in a commonplace of epic. So here, Pope is in effect mockingly comparing Belinda’s seeking to make herself as attractive as possible with a warrior of epic preparing for battle. But while an epic hero normally goes to battle nobly to fight for some great cause, Belinda’s efforts appear almost entirely self-serving. She is not fighting for a cause but is instead trying to beautify herself for her own pleasure. This emphasizes just how unimportant her interest in beauty is. Relative to the great concerns of the epic hero, Belinda’s own interests, Pope emphasizes through the comparison, stem from her own vanity and have no life and death consequences.

Furthermore, towards the end of the poem, Pope uses Clarissa’s speech on the value of beauty to emphasize the ultimate futility in placing value in such a transient thing as beauty. For instance, in Canto V, Clarissa attempts to de-escalate the quarrel over the lock by reminding the court that there is no point obsessing over the bodily perfection the lock represents. This is because “beauty must decay, / Curled or uncurled, since locks will turn to gray.” In simpler terms, Clarissa’s point here is that, since one day everyone will grow old, it is important to remember that all beauty will fade and all hair ultimately turns gray, no matter how nicely styled. Therefore, to devote so much focus to the snipped lock is to misplace effort: all beauty is transient, so losing beauty today isn’t much different from losing it later on. Instead, Clarissa suggests that women focus their energies on becoming the best moral beings they can, as “Charms strike the sight, but merit wins the soul.” In effect, she states that moral worth is more powerful than beauty anyway, as beauty attracts the eyes but morality attracts the soul. In addition, morality is not subject to decay through “small pox” or “old age” and so it lasts longer, making it more worth pursuing.

But Pope complicates this seemingly straightforward moral at the poem’s conclusion, as the lock ascends to the skies where it becomes a constellation, suggesting that it is not as worthless as Clarissa argues it is. Clarissa states that “locks will turn to gray” as a means of illustrating that ultimately all beauty fades, but after the lock ascends into the skies, the reader learns that, while all other “tresses shall be laid in dust; / This lock, the Muse shall consecrate to fame, / And midst the stars inscribe Belinda’s name!” It can be difficult to understand what the reader is expected to gain from this, but one interpretation might be that Pope is speaking metaphorically about the power of poetry. Pope mentions “Berenice’s lock,” referencing a poem by the Roman poet Catullus (66), itself inspired by the work of Greek poet Callimachus, in which a lock of hair is transformed into a constellation. The point he seems to be making is that, in a way, not all hair does grow gray, as the enduring fame of the literary description of Berenice’s lock has given her beauty a kind of immortality. Thus, when he mentions that, through the

power of the “Muse” (a goddess of poetry), Belinda’s name shall be metaphorically written (“inscribe[d]”) in the stars, he is in effect suggesting that literary fame, rather than moral worth, is the true means to escaping the effects of aging and the fading of youth.

Overall, Pope does seem to suggest that a day-to-day obsession with beauty is fundamentally an absurd and hopeless pursuit. However, he complicates this clear-cut moral by suggesting that ultimately beauty can have a certain kind of power in that it can inspire art, such as poetry, and as such can be part of something which truly is able to transcend time. Thus, Pope seems to be saying that vanity itself is folly, but that to appreciate great art, one should be careful not to underestimate the role of beauty in inspiring great works.



## GENDER

Alexander Pope’s “The Rape of the Lock” follows a beautiful but vain young woman named Belinda, who loses a **lock** of her remarkable hair to a nobleman known as the Baron. Belinda’s furious reaction allows Pope to poke fun at her vanity. But it is also possible to read the poem as largely sympathetic to Belinda as a figure whose concern for her looks stems from the pressure put on her by a patriarchal society. Pope goes on to further defend the intellectual and moral authority of his female characters through the wisdom of Clarissa’s speech, demonstrating female intellect and moral authority. He furthermore questions the wisdom of such a patriarchal system by critiquing the Baron’s behavior as fundamentally immoral and that of his fellow male courtiers as foolish or at least as vain as their female counterparts, allowing him to suggest that such a patriarchal society is both unfair and misguided.

It is important to note that Pope was writing in a time when women were generally believed to be the intellectual and moral inferiors of men, and on the one hand the poem seems to support the idea that Belinda’s only real value stems from her beauty. For example, in Canto II, when Belinda’s beauty is adored by all around her, the narrative voice notes that “If to her share some female errors fall, / Look on her face, and you’ll forget ’em all.” This not only suggests that any moral failings she might have are on account of the fact that she is “female,” but also that society judges her worth not through her morality but her beauty, as these “female errors” are forgotten as soon as you “Look on her face.” The implication here is that society expects women to be beautiful to compensate for their perceived inability to be as virtuous as their male counterparts.

But Pope is perhaps more empathetic to Belinda than it might first appear, and he gives her a degree of moral authority, too. Traditionally, the protagonists of epic are male, with women as secondary figures who exist only to support or impede the men. So Pope’s treatment of Belinda as a kind of epic hero in her own right, relegating the male characters to secondary figures, in

itself can be read as a radical interest in female concerns. Pope also perhaps implicitly acknowledges that, while Belinda’s focus on her appearance isn’t exactly virtuous, it’s at least understandable. The Cave of Spleen, a kind of parodic idea of hell filled with female hysteria and bodily disfunction, offers a dark mirror of the world of the court, and is the only place in the poem where the reader encounters females who fall foul of the standard of beauty at court. Here Pope includes horrifying twisted images of courtly women who are no longer considered beautiful, youthful or healthy enough to remain there, such as the figures of “Ill-nature,” “ancient” and “wrinkled,” and “sickly” “Affectation.” This suggests that in a way, Belinda’s interest in her looks is completely justifiable, and even advisable, as it clearly is her most valuable asset in a world where the worst kinds of monsters are unattractive women. In this way, Belinda’s vanity isn’t a reflection on her own immorality, but rather a reflection of the superficiality of the world she lives in.

Furthermore, Clarissa’s speech at the end of the poem is an excellent example of how Pope is able to subvert contemporary expectations of women. Countering the idea that women lack intellectual and moral authority, Clarissa, a woman, gives the most lucid speech in the poem which counters the idea that all women have to offer is their beauty. She argues that “Charms strike the sight, but merit wins the soul”—in other words, that physical beauty may be superficially attractive, but moral worth is in truth more valuable—and that women should devote their efforts to being the best moral beings they can be. In doing so, she essentially proves the thesis of her speech, demonstrating her intellectual and moral sensitivity as she lays out such an intelligent and thoughtful argument.

In addition to showing the female characters’ virtue and intellect, Pope’s treatment of the male characters suggests a deep skepticism about their moral and intellectual integrity. For example, Pope depicts the Baron’s theft of Belinda’s lock of hair as immoral. While it is worth understanding that, at the time, the word “rape” was typically used to refer to robbery or plundering (rather than to explicitly describe a non-consensual sex act), Pope is still casting moral judgment on the Baron’s unfair acquisition of the lock simply by calling it a “rape,” since the word still connotes the taking of something unfairly or even violently. Furthermore, it is worth noting that some of the male characters introduced in the courtly battle in Canto V, such as “Dapperwit” and “Sir Fopling,” are given parodic aristocratic names, both of which suggest undue attention to one’s appearance (if someone is “dapper” they are well turned-out; a fop was a trifling and vain young man). This in turn suggests that they are relatively insubstantial figures with little moral value, allowing Pope to poke fun at the values of the male aristocratic class, the so-called moral and intellectual leaders of his time.

By showing the poem’s men to be vain and immoral, while showing the women—whom society would have automatically

considered to be vain and immoral because of their gender—as actually being clearheaded and virtuous, Pope seems to be expressing skepticism about the merit of 18th-century gender relations. After all, if men have all the power, but women are smarter and more virtuous, then the dominant social order seems deeply unfair.



## RELIGION AND MORALITY

Alexander Pope's "The Rape of the Lock" is perhaps not the most obvious place to turn for an understanding of religious culture in early 18th-century England, but the poem is full of moral questions about religious life and values. By the 18th century when this poem was written, England's last Catholic monarch had been deposed, and England was once more a Protestant nation. In this time, Protestants bitterly criticized Catholics, believing that Catholics had strayed from the proper worship of God and were therefore morally suspect. Pope himself was from a Catholic family, and throughout the poem it is possible to detect some witty critiques of Protestantism. By depicting the poem's characters (who are presumably Protestant—even though they are based on real Catholic figures from history, anti-Catholic legislation at the time made it difficult for Catholic families to own land or live in London) as hypocritical and not particularly pious, and then by introducing pagan elements that throw into question the possibility of moral judgment in the first place, Pope parodies the sanctimonious religious rhetoric of his time and suggests that Christianity isn't the best lens with which to understand the mysteries of human behavior.

An initial jab at Protestant hypocrisy can be found in the Canto I catalogue of the items involved in Belinda's grooming routine. The list of items on Belinda's dressing table casually mixes items required for her "toilet" (the process of getting ready to go to court) with those of religious significance—"Puffs, powders, patches, bibles, billet-doux." Here the Bible, the text of absolute moral authority, is mixed in with trivial items such as makeup and love letters, items associated with Belinda's own vanity rather than serious moral contemplation. This suggests how little importance is afforded to spiritual questions by ladies like Belinda, a playful indictment of the moral bankruptcy of the vanity of the Protestant upper classes.

Pope also makes a more specifically Catholic joke in this scene, by suggesting that Belinda's fixation on objects used to beautify herself hypocritically violates Protestant prohibition on worshipping idols. A common Protestant criticism of the Catholic faith was its interest in objects called idols. In the eyes of the Protestants, worshipping idols was morally wrong and detracted from the worship of God, amounting to little better than paganism. Thus, in Canto I, when Pope gives a long list of items needed by Belinda to complete her "toilet" ("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"), he is essentially mocking the Protestant contempt for idolatry. He suggests that Belinda's emphasis on her own appearance and the tools she uses to beautify herself has led to a kind of humorous and hypocritical worshipping of false idols of her own. He even goes out of his way to figure Belinda as a pagan "goddess" at her "altar" (i.e., her dressing table), suggesting that the "sacred rites of pride" of preparing for court are fundamentally hypocritical and improperly Christian, since they, too, revolve around object worship and have nothing to do with God. This suggests that Pope ultimately views the Protestant contempt for idolatry as worthy of mockery, since many Protestants live vain and vacuous daily lives, worshipping material objects that have nothing to do with God, and all the while condemning Catholics for their faith.

Finally, Pope complicates matters further by his inclusion of various supernatural beings. One such type of being is the "sylph," and they appear to exercise control over the actions of mortals. By calling into question whether the mortals' actions are their own or whether mortals are the puppets of the mysterious sylphs, Pope casts doubt on a bedrock aspect of Christian faith: that people can fairly be judged for their actions. Throughout the poem, Pope makes it clear that the sylphs have a degree of authority over mortals' actions. For instance, in Canto I Ariel explains that, in matters of courtly flirtations between men and women, "the Sylphs contrive it all," and likewise, later Umbriel is responsible for the intensity of Belinda's rage by releasing "the force of female lungs, / Sighs, sobs, and passions, and the War of Tongues" over her. Both of these moments suggest that human beings are not in control of their own actions.

But it's never clear whether the sylphs are guiding people towards good or bad behavior—in fact, they seem somewhat amoral. For instance, Ariel explains that "Oft, when the world imagine women stray, / The Sylphs through mystic mazes guide their way, / Thro' all the giddy circle they pursue, / And old impertinence expel by new." Ariel is claiming here that often when society thinks a woman has not followed the rules which typically restrict female behavior around men, the sylphs have been in control, guiding her away from danger. This is particularly vague, but seems to suggest that Ariel believes the role of the sylphs includes guiding women away from one bad behavior, only to slyly lead them into a new bad behavior later on.

Since Pope never quite specifies whether the sylphs are good or bad, or how much influence they have over the mortals, he makes it difficult for the reader to judge the characters' actions. After all, if the mischievous sylphs are controlling the characters' actions, then it's irrelevant to judge the characters'



behavior as being either moral or immoral. This ambiguity prevents the poem from becoming a straightforward morality tale illustrating the folly of vanity; while Pope is certainly mocking the vanity of his era, he's also using the sylphs to suggest that there can be no absolute moral judgements, since human behavior is mysterious and not necessarily under an individual person's control. This has profound significance for Pope's treatment of Christianity, since at the heart of Christianity is the notion that humans are in control of their actions and God will judge people accordingly. Through the ambiguous nature of the sylphs, Pope throws a wrench in the logic of the entire Christian religion, Catholic or Protestant, by suggesting that humans' actions are mysterious and their motives are opaque—and, because of this, it's simplistic and absurd to think that anyone could be straightforwardly judged.



## SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.



## THE LOCK

Belinda's lock of hair comes to symbolize the absurdity of the importance afforded to female beauty in society. Pope offers a hyperbolically metaphorical description of the two locks in Canto II, humorously framing the locks as alluring enough to virtually incapacitate any man who looks at them. The locks are "labyrinths" in which Love "[detains](#)" "his slaves" by binding their ears with "slender chains," thus poking fun at the idea that Belinda's beauty is truly powerful enough to make such a deep impact. This absurdity only grows as the poem progresses and after the Baron has snipped of Belinda's lock. Under the influence of Umbriel, Thalestris laments the loss of the lock as the symbolic loss of Belinda's reputation in society, exclaiming, "Methinks already I your tears survey, / Already hear the horrid things they say." In Pope's day, the respectability of a woman in society depended upon her having a spotless reputation and being perfectly virtuous, and, in particular, sexually pure. Thalestris then is essentially saying that the loss of Belinda's lock is a rupture which damages all of the rest of her beauty, and the Baron's having taken it in so intimate a fashion compromises the idea that she is chaste, and that people will think she in some way allowed him to violate her body. Obviously, this makes very little sense, allowing Pope to satirize the idea that beauty and virtue are so closely related. The lock's final ascension into the heavens is the most absurd part of the whole thing, and Pope's choice to cap off the whole poem with the transparently silly idea that the lock is too precious to remain on earth, that no mortal deserves to be so "blest" as to possess it, emphasizes the ridiculous amount of emphasis placed on female beauty in

society.



## PLAYING CARDS

In the poem, the playing cards that Belinda, the Baron, and another gentleman use in their game of ombre symbolize the trivial nature of life at court. Pope describes the playing cards in the terms of an epic battle, where kings, queens, and nobles battle one another, accompanied by "particolour'd troops, a shining train, / Draw forth to combat on the velvet plain." While epic heroes engaged in huge battles, where real kings, queens, and nobles' lives would have been at stake, this trio of modern figures at court—Belinda, the Baron, and the other gentleman—only come as close to epic battle as a game of ombre, where the cards make for a silly substitute for the lives which might be lost in a real battle. By infusing the card game with mock-seriousness, Pope consequently suggests that life at court for Belinda and her peers is likewise empty, trivial, and mockable.



## QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Signet Classics edition of *The Rape of the Lock and Other Poems* published in 2012.

### Canto I Quotes

☝☝ What dire offense from amorous causes springs,  
What mighty contests arise from trivial things,  
I sing—This verse to Caryl, Muse! is due;  
[..] Say what strange motive, Goddess! could compel  
A well-bred Lord to assault a gentle Belle?

**Related Characters:** The Baron, Belinda, Caryl

**Related Themes:** 

**Page Number:** l.1-8



### Explanation and Analysis

In the opening lines of Canto I, Pope foretells what the poem is going to be about: how people often react dramatically to seemingly insignificant events, particularly those created by love, or "amorous causes." Here Pope introduces the idea that the events the poem is about to recount are quite trivial, and he emphasizes this sense of triviality by including the opening hallmark of an epic poem: the invocation of the "Muse." In classical mythology, the muses were nine goddesses of the arts, and it was customary to begin an epic poem by asking for help from

one of these goddesses to tell the story appropriately. But epic poems typically were associated with serious subjects, and Pope has already told the reader that this is not a serious poem, but instead one which deals with “trivial things.” This introduces the reader to the recurring contrast between the loftiness of the epic style and the relative unimportance of the events Pope is portraying, which forms the crux of the poem’s humor.

☛ For when the fair in all their pride expire,  
To their first elements their souls retire:  
The sprites of fiery termagants in flame  
Mount up, and take a Salamander's name.  
Soft yielding minds to water glide away,  
And sip with Nymphs, their elemental tea.  
The graver prude sinks downward to a Gnome,  
In search of mischief still on earth to roam.  
The light coquettes in Sylphs aloft repair,  
And sport and flutter in the fields of air.

**Related Characters:** Ariel (speaker), Umbriel, Belinda

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** l.61-3



### Explanation and Analysis

This is part of the sylph Ariel’s speech to the sleeping Belinda, in which he outlines to her where the sylphs come from and what their function is. Here he explains that after they die, women’s souls return to their “first elements.” Contrary to the idea of a Christian afterlife in which souls are sorted into good and bad, Pope’s fantasy afterlife for women is basically amoral, making no effort to judge women on their merits. Based around the ancient idea of the four elements of fire, water, earth and air, Ariel explains that all women’s souls are sorted into one of four categories. Fiery women become salamanders, amphibians traditionally associated with fire; “Soft yielding” women become water spirits, while any woman who is a “prude” becomes an earthy “Gnome”; and “coquettes” themselves become sylphs. In less old-fashioned language, this essentially means that a woman who is too prim and proper to be desirable has a dull spirit which “sinks” until it becomes a “Gnome,” a malicious creature which remains on earth. By contrast, the “light” spirits of the “coquettes,” attractive and flirtatious women, are transformed into sylphs, which “flutter” through the air, enjoying themselves.

The supernatural elements of the poem are part of what gives it its zany sense of humor, but on a more serious note, the contrast between these categories says a lot about the values of the world Pope is depicting. Here women are not really seen as complex individuals, but instead are crudely lumped into categories. Indeed, the latter two categories are particularly problematic, as they essentially revolve around a woman’s desirability, or lack thereof. Women who are considered attractive are effectively rewarded by becoming sylphs, while those who are not are punished by becoming gnomes. And while it is easy to get bogged down in the fantasy, it is important to remember that this world is Pope’s way of parodying real contemporary court society. By creating such a harsh division in this parody world between women who are seen as desirable and women who are not, Pope is able to suggest that his contemporary society also put too much pressure on women to be desirable.

☛ With varying vanities, from every part,  
They shift the moving toyshop of their heart;  
Where wigs with wigs, with sword-knots sword-knots strive,  
Beaux banish beaux, and coaches coaches drive.  
This erring mortals levity may call,  
Oh blind to truth! the Sylphs contrive it all.

**Related Characters:** Ariel (speaker), Belinda

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** l.99-104

### Explanation and Analysis



This passage is part of Ariel’s speech to sleeping Belinda in which he explains who the sylphs are and what their purpose is. Here he explains how the sylphs manage the love lives of the women they guard while they are in court society. In this passage, Pope emphasizes how silly and superficial the world of the court is. He achieves this by creating a direct comparison between these courtly activities and the noble struggles depicted in epic poetry. The quote “Where wigs with wigs, with sword-knots sword-knots strive, / Beaux banish beaux, and coaches coaches drive” echoes Pope’s own translation of the *Iliad*, 4.508–9: “Now Shield with Shield, with Helmet Helmet clos’d, / To Armour Armour, Lance to Lance oppos’d.” Instead of the violent clash of weapons (“Shield,” “Helmet,” “Armour,” “Lance”), the world of the court is filled with purely decorative objects, like “wigs” and “sword-knots,” reflecting

the superficiality and triviality of the court life Pope is parodying.

Here Pope also once again highlights the dubious moral influence of the sylphs. The image of the sylphs treating a woman's heart like a "toyshop" or a plaything is quite sinister in its suggestion that the sylphs can have extreme control over human affairs and that they actively take pleasure in meddling. The final comment—that "the Sylphs contrive it all" while the mortals are "blind to truth"—reinforces this idea that the sylphs exert a great power over humans but that humans are simply oblivious to it.

☞ Late, as I ranged the crystal wilds of air,  
In the clear mirror of thy ruling star  
I saw, alas! some dread event impend,  
Ere to the main this morning sun descend.  
But heaven reveals not what, or how, or where:  
Warned by the Sylph, oh pious maid, beware!  
This to disclose is all thy guardian can:  
Beware of all, but most beware of man!

**Related Characters:** Ariel (speaker), Belinda

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** I.107-14

### Explanation and Analysis

This forms a later part of Ariel's speech to Belinda as she sleeps, warning her that he has foreseen in the stars that some disaster is close at hand for her. He does not know what form the disaster will take, but he warns her to be especially wary of men. This passage helps the reader understand the slipperiness of Ariel's character and the silliness of the values Pope is using him to represent. Ariel claims that it is his task to guard Belinda as a beautiful and chaste young woman, and this emphasis on her chastity comes across in his addressing her as "oh pious maid" ("maid" in this historical context effectively meaning "virgin") and cautioning her "Beware of all, but most beware of man!"



But this conflicts with his earlier actions—for instance when he summons a dream of a handsome young man ("A youth more glitt'ring than a birthnight beau") to keep her sleeping so that he can whisper in her ear. This dream sexually tempts Belinda, as demonstrated by her physical response of flushing, as the dream "caus'd her cheek to glow." Ariel thus isn't quite as concerned with Belinda's chastity as he claims to be, which allows Pope to suggest to the reader to

that Ariel is not the wholly good influence he claims to be either.

But, is also possible to read this passage as a broader comment on women in the poem. Here Pope suggests through Belinda's sexually-charged response to the mental image of the young man that his society's desire to control female sexuality is nonsensical to some extent. Belinda's reaction proves that it does not follow that simply because a woman chooses to remain a virgin she is purged of all sexual desire and is truly as "pious" she appears.

☞ A heavenly image in the glass appears,  
To that she bends, to that her eyes she rears;  
The inferior priestess, at her altar's side,  
Trembling, begins the sacred rites of pride.

**Related Characters:** Betty, Belinda

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** I.125-8



### Explanation and Analysis

At this point in Canto I, Belinda has awakened from her dream and has begun the elaborate process of beautifying herself for her day at court. Here Pope offers a witty critique of Belinda's vanity as she stares at her own reflection. By using the word "heavenly" to describe the sublimity of her beauty Pope adds a religious element to the image of her reflection, so that when she "bends" (as in prayer) to gaze at it, she is engaging in literal self-worship. To Belinda the closest thing she does to worshipping God is looking at her own reflection, illustrating the comical extent of her vanity, but also poking fun at the fact that she is without any real religious or moral convictions.

By describing these beauty rituals as "the sacred rites of pride," Betty as an "inferior priestess," and the dressing table as an "altar," Pope also makes the whole thing seem very pagan, like the worship of the ancient Greeks or Romans. These pre-Christian religious systems were generally regarded as morally deficient in Pope's day. This means that when Pope humorously compares Belinda's beauty routine to pagan rituals, he is once again essentially suggesting that this vanity has no moral value.

☞ Here files of pins extend their shining rows,  
Puffs, powders, patches, bibles, billet-doux.

**Related Characters:** Belinda

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** I.137-8

### Explanation and Analysis


This description of Belinda's dressing table occurs towards the end of Canto I, after Belinda has begun the elaborate process of beautifying and dressing herself for a day at court. These particular items fall in a humorously long list of items required to prepare Belinda, which mocks her vanity by demonstrating the comical amount of time and effort she puts into her appearance, allowing Pope to subtly critique the excesses of Belinda's fixation on her own beauty.

But there is also a religious component to this quotation. Pope positions "bibles" in the middle of a list of rather trivial objects, like make-up "Puffs" and "powders" and "billet-doux" (love-letters). The Bible however, in such a Christian society as Pope's England, was not considered trivial at all, but rather was seen as the source of all moral authority. So when Pope places the "bibles" within this jumble of trivial items, he is suggesting that Belinda is failing to differentiate properly between what is of little moral value and what is of great moral value. She is depicted here as devoid of any real religious or moral awareness, and this depiction creates a witty but scathing indictment of her class of society ladies.

turn suggests that the cross has little religious value after all, instead fulfilling a decorative function and attracting those who have least interest in Christian mores. Belinda's character, then, appears to be less motivated by Christian morality and more motivated by the desire to make the most of her beauty by adorning herself with "sparkling" trinkets.

- If to her share some female errors fall,  
Look on her face, and you'll forget 'em all.

**Related Characters:** Belinda

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** II.17-8

### Explanation and Analysis

This description of Belinda occurs at the beginning of the canto, as she sails to Hampton Court along the Thames. On this journey, her beauty is greatly admired by all around her, and the narrative voice notes that her beauty is so exceptional that to gaze on her face is enough to make anyone observing her overlook any "female errors" in her character. Here Pope is mocking the absurd level of importance afforded to her beauty by those around her, who are in effect prepared to suspend all moral judgements solely based on her spectacular appearance.

But on the other hand, Pope is also making quite an incisive point about gender here. Prior to this point in the narrative, Pope has repeatedly ridiculed Belinda's vanity as fundamentally superficial and pointless. But here, he shows that, in a way, Belinda's interest in her looks has a very real point and is actually quite astute. She evidently lives in a hugely superficial society, but also one which is particularly critical of women's behavior, as demonstrated by the suggestion that Belinda is prone to specifically "female errors." There is some justice, then, in the idea that Belinda is able to use her beauty and embrace her femininity in order to transcend the kinds of harsh judgements her society often places specifically on women.

- Love in these labyrinths his slaves detains,  
And mighty hearts are held in slender chains.

**Related Characters:** The Baron, Belinda

## Canto II Quotes

- On her white breast a sparkling cross she wore,  
Which Jews might kiss, and infidels adore.

**Related Characters:** Belinda



**Related Themes:** 


**Page Number:** II.8-7

### Explanation and Analysis

At this point in the narrative, Belinda is travelling by boat to Hampton Court, and on the journey her beauty is the toast of everyone around her. Pope describes her appearance in detail, and makes mention of the necklace she is wearing. At first glance, this cross she wears might appear to indicate that Belinda is at heart a religious and moral individual. But Pope takes care to mention that "Jews might kiss" it and "infidels adore" it. This means that even non-Christian people would be enchanted by its "sparkling" beauty and perhaps even its position on Belinda's "white breast." This in



**Related Themes:**  

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** II.23-4

### Explanation and Analysis

This description of Belinda's locks of hair occurs on her journey to Hampton Court, during which she is spotted by the Baron. Here Pope describes the locks as able to ensnare men with their remarkable beauty. In doing so, Pope is able to emphasize a number of key ideas in the poem about beauty and gender. For instance, the idea that Belinda's hair is able to metaphorically overpower men's "mighty hearts" and hold them captive subverts the more traditional idea that men are meant to be dominant and women are meant to be submissive. Characters like the Baron certainly buy into this idea, seeing Belinda's hair (and by extension Belinda herself) as a "prize" to be won either through "force" or through "fraud." This in turn reinforces the idea that perhaps in this superficial world, female vanity like Belinda's is not always as superficial as it seems and can instead contribute to a kind of female empowerment.

pagan-seeming altar out of her dressing table as she prepared for her day at court. But here, the Baron, a man who is supposedly without the "female errors" (such as vanity) to which Belinda is supposedly extra susceptible, makes his own pagan altar.

In Pope's Christian, age pagan worship was considered to be morally bankrupt, rejecting Christian mores. So it's noteworthy that Pope emphasizes to the reader that that, despite the fact that this is a world in which female morality is thought to be less robust than male morality (as demonstrated by Belinda's specifically "female errors"), the Baron is engaging in the same kind of morally questionable pagan-inspired activities.


The pagan motif is ultimately also quite a comical one. In epic poetry, pyres are usually rather serious affairs, used to cremate bodies or to make important sacrifices to the gods. The Baron's pyre is effectively a light-hearted parody of a classical pyre, constructed with trivial tokens of love like "French romances" and "billet-doux" (love-letters), meaning that Pope is once again able to draw a comical comparison between the lofty world of epic poetry and the superficial and silly world of the court to highlight just how superficial and silly it is.

☛ For this, ere Phoebus rose, he had implored  
Propitious heaven, and every power adored,  
But chiefly Love—to Love an altar built,  
Of twelve vast French romances, neatly gilt.  
There lay three garters, half a pair of gloves;  
And all the trophies of his former loves.  
With tender billets-doux he lights the pyre,  
And breathes three amorous sighs to raise the fire

☛ Whether the nymph shall break Diana's law,  
Or some frail China jar receive a flaw,  
Or stain her honor, or her new brocade,  
Forget her prayers, or miss a masquerade,  
Or lose her heart, or necklace, at a ball;  
Or whether Heaven has doomed that Shock must fall.

**Related Characters:** The Baron

**Related Themes:**   

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** II.35-44

### Explanation and Analysis

As the Baron watches Belinda sail down the Thames towards Hampton Court in Canto II, the narrative jumps back to before dawn ("Phoebus" is another name for Apollo, the sun god), when the Baron had prayed to "heaven" and specifically to "Love" to be able to win Belinda's lock. Earlier on, Pope poked fun at Belinda for metaphorically building a

**Related Characters:** Ariel (speaker), Shock, The Baron, Belinda

**Related Themes:**   

**Page Number:** II.105-110

### Explanation and Analysis

This passage forms part of the speech Ariel makes to the other sylphs, in which he explains that he has foreseen some disaster which will strike Belinda. At this point, he is enumerating various ideas of disasters which might occur, and in doing so he reveals much about the values of the world of the poem. The first disaster he envisages is that Belinda will lose her virginity in violation of "Diana's law" (Diana was the name of a classical goddess who was famously chaste), which demonstrates that this is a world in which female sexuality is greatly restricted.

But Pope also draws out the silliness of this world and its values as seen through Ariel's eyes. He achieves this primarily by using a rhetorical figure called a zeugma, which ties together two different usages of a verb for comic effect. For example, the idea that Belinda might "stain her honor, or her new brocade" contrasts the metaphorical staining of a reputation with the literal staining of a new gown. Evidently the first sense is much more serious than the second, but by tying them together into one expression, Pope is able to create the impression of Ariel as a character who is humorously superficial and values the two equally. The same effect is achieved when he worries that she will "lose her heart, or necklace, at a ball." And although it is not a zeugma, Ariel's worry that Belinda will "Forget her prayers, or miss a masquerade" conveys a similarly morally dubious idea, that in Ariel's eyes Belinda's moral and spiritual duties are important as attending lavish parties.


kind of parody of the epic sea voyage, and in conjunction with some of the other epic devices Pope is using, such as the heroic couplets and the opening invocation of the Muse, this sets the reader up to expect a big battle scene. The fact that the reader is presented not with a lofty battle sequence, but instead with "combat" which merely consists of a game of cards is thus comical, and once again highlights the triviality of court life in the poem by contrasting it with the weighty struggles of epic poetry.


☛ Just in that instant, anxious Ariel sought  
The close recesses of the virgin's thought;  
As, on the nosegay in her breast reclined,  
He watched the ideas rising in her mind,  
Sudden he viewed, in spite of all her art,  
An earthly lover lurking at her heart.  
Amazed, confused, he found his power expired,  
Resigned to fate, and with a sigh retired.

## Canto III Quotes

☛ Behold, four Kings in majesty revered,  
With hoary whiskers and a forky beard;  
And four fair Queens whose hands sustain a flower,  
The expressive emblem of their softer power;  
Four Knaves in garbs succinct, a trusty band,  
Caps on their heads, and halberts in their hand;  
And particolored troops, a shining train,  
Draw forth to combat on the velvet plain.

**Related Characters:** The Baron, Belinda

**Related Themes:** 



**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** III.37-44

### Explanation and Analysis

This description of Belinda's cards occurs at the beginning of Canto III, when she sits down to play a game of ombre with the Baron and one other gentleman. Pope chooses to narrate the game as if the cards were real noble figures and the game itself were a real battle. This allows him to once again humorously illustrate the silliness of life at court. The narrative voice treating the cards as if they were real kings and queens when they clearly are not suggests that Belinda and her companions take the game rather too seriously. In addition, it is worth understanding that most epics contain big battle scenes as one of many standard scenes (others include a sea voyage). Belinda's travel down the Thames is a

**Related Characters:** The Baron, Belinda, Ariel

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** III.139-46

### Explanation and Analysis

At this point in the canto, Ariel gains access to Belinda's thoughts as the Baron makes to chop off her lock. He and the other sylphs try to alert her to the imminent danger before it is too late, but when Ariel does gain access to her mind, he is shocked by what he sees: "An earthly lover lurking at her heart." Ariel has previously explained to the sleeping Belinda and the reader that it is his role as a sylph to protect her because she is "fair and chaste." But here, he learns that she is not as chaste as she pretends to be with, as she cherishes thoughts of an "earthly lover."

He is then "Resigned to fate"—that is to the Baron's stealing of the lock, an act with distinctly sexual undertones. The implication is that Ariel feels like Belinda is already no longer chaste and deserves to be violated. Here Pope once again illustrates the extremely harsh restrictions on female sexuality in this world. He also once again illustrates the slipperiness of the sylphs, who claim to be the wholly good guardians of the "fair and chaste." In Canto I, Ariel sends a dream of a handsome young man ("A youth more glitt'ring than a birthnight beau"), tempting Belinda's sexuality when he should be ensuring that she remains chaste. It seems especially fickle of him, then, to cast her away here and leave her to the machinations of the Baron on account of

her failure to be chaste in her private thoughts, when he himself was tempting her sexuality earlier in the narrative.

☛ The peer now spreads the glittering forfex wide,  
To enclose the lock; now joins it, to divide.  
Even then, before the fatal engine closed,  
A wretched Sylph too fondly interposed;  
Fate urged the shears, and cut the Sylph in twain  
(But airy substance soon unites again),  
The meeting points the sacred hair dissever  
From the fair head, for ever and for ever!

**Related Characters:** Ariel, Belinda, The Baron

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** III.147-54

### Explanation and Analysis

This passage towards the end of Canto III describes the moment in which the baron actually snips off Belinda's lock, and the way Pope goes about describing the action once again suggests the ultimate silliness of the whole affair. Referring to the scissors as a "fatal engine" immediately strikes the reader as ridiculous, as they are not being used to threaten Belinda's life, emphasizing the absurd degree of solemnity the characters are attaching to what amounts to a bad haircut.

Additionally, though, in this passage Pope echoes Milton's *Paradise Lost*, once again drawing attention to the shadiness of the supposedly good sylphs. The lines "Fate urged the shears, and cut the Sylph in twain / (But airy substance soon unites again)" recalls the moment in Book VI of Milton's Christian epic in which Satan is stabbed with a sword in a battle against the angels. That passage reads: "The griding sword with discontinuous wound/ Passd through him, but th' Ethereal substance clos'd / Not long divisible" (VI.329-31). This links the sylph with the character of Satan, which is similar to when Ariel is linked to Satan in Canto I, as Pope describes him having "Seem'd to her [Belinda's] Ear his winning Lips to lay" (much like Milton's Satan who is "Squat like a Toad, close at the ear of Eve;/ Assaying by his Devilish art to reach/ The Organs of her Fancy"). This repeated link between the sylphs and Satan then suggests that the sylphs are not as innocuous as they claim to be and are perhaps a more sinister moral force at work in the poem.

## Canto IV Quotes

☛ Here stood Ill Nature like an ancient maid,  
Her wrinkled form in black and white arrayed;  
With store of prayers, for mornings, nights, and noons,  
Her hand is filled; her bosom with lampoons.

**Related Characters:** Belinda, The Queen of Spleen, Umbriel

**Related Themes:** 

**Page Number:** IV. 26-30

### Explanation and Analysis

This description occurs in Canto IV when Umbriel descends to the subterranean Cave of Spleen, ruled over by the Queen of Spleen, in a parody of the epic trope of the hero's journey to the underworld. In this cave, Umbriel passes by a number of strange creatures, their bodies warped by spleen—a force that was, in Pope's day, believed to be the cause of female bodily disfunction. Although the Cave of Spleen episode is one of the poem's more fantastical sections and should be read rather lightheartedly, it also reveals much about the gender politics of the world Pope has created.

Many critics have chosen to interpret the Cave of Spleen as a kind of "darker mirror" of the surface world's courtly life. While the court is obsessed with female beauty to the point of absurdity, the Cave of Spleen's inhabitants represent a kind of ghoulish version society's female outcasts. The personified "Ill Nature," like Belinda, is supposed to be virginal, but she is not young (and thus "fair and chaste"), but is instead a spinster, "an ancient maid" with a "wrinkled form." This emphasizes the paradoxical standards set for women in Pope's world—Belinda is praised by the sylphs and society as a whole for her youth and her spotless reputation for chastity, but "Ill Nature" is condemned for her chastity in her old age. Apparently then, women are expected at some point to sacrifice what society considers their greatest virtue to avoid being considered undesirable by men and condemned to a grotesque underworld.

☛ There Affectation, with a sickly mien  
Shows in her cheek the roses of eighteen,  
Practiced to lisp, and hang the head aside,  
Faints into airs, and languishes with pride;  
On the rich quilt sinks with becoming woe,  
Wrapped in a gown, for sickness, and for show.

**Related Characters:** Belinda, The Queen of Spleen, Umbriel

**Related Themes:** 

**Page Number:** IV.31-6

### Explanation and Analysis



As with the description of “Ill Nature,” the description of “Affectation” occurs when Umbriel descends to the subterranean Cave of Spleen. This journey is a comic version of the epic convention of the hero’s journey to the underworld (e.g. Aeneas’ descent to the Underworld in Book VI of Virgil’s *Aeneid*), and so it includes mention of all kinds of fantastical creatures. In Pope’s Cave of Spleen, ruled over by the Queen of Spleen, Umbriel passes by bodies corrupted by spleen (which was, at Pope’s time, believed to be the cause of all kinds of bodily dysfunction, particularly among women).

The Cave of Spleen is thus often read as a kind of hell of female bodily dysfunction, the dark underside of Belinda’s glamorous court life in the world above. “Affectation” serves as a humorously grim portrait of a society belle like Belinda gone too far, which mocks the absurdity of fashionable female behavior at the time. Although she is youthful and attractive (she “Shows in her cheek the rose of eighteen”), unlike her counterpart “Ill Nature,” she is “sickly” with the excesses of ladylike behavior as she “Faints into airs,” “languishes with pride,” and “sinks with becoming woe.” Here Pope seems to be suggesting once again that the role of a society belle, like Belinda, is a difficult one to play, as it’s easy to spill over into absurd attempts to appear feminine, as “Affectation” is “Practiced to lisp” and “hang the head aside,” or even into “sickness.”

☛ Here living teapots stand, one arm held out,  
 One bent; the handle this, and that the spout:  
 A pipkin there like Homer’s tripod walks;  
 Here sighs a jar, and there a goose-pie talks;  
 Men prove with child, as powerful fancy works,  
 And maids turned bottles, call aloud for corks.  
 Safe passed the Gnome through this fantastic band,  
 A branch of healing spleenwort in his hand.  
 Then thus addressed the power: “Hail, wayward Queen!  
 Who rule the sex to fifty from fifteen,  
 Parent of vapors and of female wit,  
 Who give the hysteric, or poetic fit”

**Related Characters:** Umbriel (speaker), Belinda, The

Queen of Spleen

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** IV.47-60

### Explanation and Analysis

This passage continues Umbriel’s journey through the Cave of Spleen, a fantastical subterranean world filled with bodies warped by spleen. (Spleen was a medical term of the period describing what was believed to be the source of much female bodily dysfunction.) Filled with ghoulish creatures which darkly mirror the glittering world of the court above, the creatures in the Cave of Spleen are often read as a kind of collection of the outcasts from the world above, the casualties of a world which demands that, like Belinda, its women all be beautiful, distinctly feminine and chaste.

This passage in particular supports this reading. Here women’s bodies are literally transformed into objects associated with ladylike behavior, such as the “living teapots,” who look like the ladylike practice of serving tea has totally consumed them. Further on, “Men prove with child” (they are pregnant, in other words), a flagrant violation of the extremely gendered rules of the world above, while “maids turned bottles, call aloud for corks,” a grotesque image of female lust, the opposite of the obsession with chastity expected in the world of the court.


Umbriel is able to pass safely through this world carrying “A branch of healing spleenwort,” a kind of plant believed to counter the effects of spleen, until he reaches the Queen of Spleen herself. He describes her as one who governs women “to fifty from fifteen” (i.e. the years in which women menstruate). This once again draws out the rather slippery ideas about morality which run through the poem. For instance, the sylphs’ interference in mortal affairs has already raised the question of whether the mortals are indeed in charge of their own actions. Similarly, here Umbriel represents an internal force of the female body, menstruation, as one which is externally inflicted on individuals, causing them either to descend into “hysteric” or “poetic fit.” Thus, he once again raises the question of whether the world of the poem can really support any moral judgements of human behavior, since humans seem to have little control over their fate.



●● A wondrous bag with both her hands she binds,  
 Like that where once Ulysses held the winds;  
 There she collects the force of female lungs,  
 Sighs, sobs, and passions, and the war of tongues.  
 A vial next she fills with fainting fears,  
 Soft sorrows, melting griefs, and flowing tears.  
 The Gnome rejoicing bears her gifts away,  
 Spreads his black wings, and slowly mounts to day.  
 Sunk in Thalestris' arms the nymph he found,  
 Her eyes dejected and her hair unbound.  
 Full o'er their heads the swelling bag he rent,  
 And all the furies issued at the vent.  
 Belinda burns with more than mortal ire,  
 And fierce Thalestris fans the rising fire.

**Related Characters:** Thalestris, Belinda, The Queen of Spleen, Umbriel

**Related Themes:** 

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** IV. 81-94

### Explanation and Analysis

Towards the end of Canto IV, Umbriel acquires a “wondrous bag” and a “vial” from the Queen of Spleen, the ruler of a subterranean world. Her world is filled with nightmarish creatures contorted by the effects of spleen (thought in Pope’s day to be the medical cause behind a variety of forms of bodily dysfunction, particularly those pertaining to women’s bodies). At his request, the queen fills the bag with all kinds of female despair (“the force of female lungs, / Sighs, sobs, and passions, and the war of tongues”) while she fills the vial with “fainting fears, / Soft sorrows, melting griefs and flowing tears.”

When Umbriel arrives back in the surface world, he empties this bag over Thalestris and Belinda, causing Belinda to burn “with more than mortal ire” over the loss of her lock and causing Thalestris to fan “the rising fire.” Clearly all this fuss over what is essentially a ruined hairdo is ridiculous, so at first glimpse it might appear that Umbriel’s dumping off all these emotions over the two women (and thus inciting such extreme responses to the missing lock) is all that’s going on. But Pope is actually playing a much subtler game here – Belinda and Thalestris are already distressed at the lock’s loss before Umbriel does this, as evidenced by Belinda’s “dejected eyes” and “unbound hair,” so it’s very difficult to say where her own feelings end and where those forced on her by Umbriel begin. This means that, once again, Pope is toying with his reader by raising questions about the nature of agency and moral judgement. Here, he once again


stresses that this is a world where it’s impossible to tell to what extent someone is acting according to their own free will, and so it means that moral judgements become increasingly fraught, challenging the Christian idea that it’s always possible to sort good from evil.

### Canto V Quotes

●● But fate and Jove had stopped the Baron’s ears.  
 In vain Thalestris with reproach assails,  
 For who can move when fair Belinda fails?  
 Not half so fixed the Trojan could remain,  
 While Anna begged and Dido raged in vain.

**Related Characters:** Belinda, Thalestris, The Baron

**Related Themes:**  

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** V.2-6

### Explanation and Analysis



This description of Belinda’s pleading with the Baron to return her stolen lock at the beginning of Canto V is another instance of Pope playing off the classical epic tradition for comic effect. Here he is referencing Virgil’s Latin epic *The Aeneid*, in which the Trojan hero Aeneas is called on by Jupiter (also known as “Jove” in English) to leave his lover Dido and sail away to found Rome. The devastated Dido and her sister Anna beg Aeneas to stay, but having failed to persuade him, Dido ultimately kills herself. In this passage, the adamant Baron takes on the role of Aeneas, Thalestris becomes Anna, and Belinda becomes Dido. But while the situation in *The Aeneid* is incredibly high stakes, the situation Pope has created is contrastingly low stakes, creating a comical discord in the comparison he creates between them.


It is also possible to detect the recurring theme of morality at work here. Pope repeatedly challenges the Christian idea that it’s always possible to differentiate good from evil throughout the poem by introducing a variety of forces, such as the sylphs, which interfere with the mortals’ actions. This in turn makes it difficult to judge those mortals for their actions. In this passage, Pope once again reminds the reader that the mortals are not totally in control, since he compares the Baron to Aeneas (who was influenced by the god “Jove”) and compares Belinda to Dido (who was tricked into falling in love by the god Cupid). Aeneas and Dido were thus not totally responsible for their own actions, and this

comparison with the Baron and Belinda reminds the reader that they, too, are not totally responsible for their actions, meaning they cannot be straightforwardly judged for them.

“Beauties in vain their pretty eyes may roll;  
Charms strike the sight, but merit wins the soul.”  
So spoke the dame, but no applause ensued;  
Belinda frowned, Thalestris called her prude.

**Related Characters:** Clarissa (speaker), Thalestris, Belinda

**Related Themes:**  

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** V.33-6

### Explanation and Analysis

This passage occurs towards the end of Clarissa’s speech in Canto V, in which she chastises the assembled company of lords and ladies for behaving so foolishly. She reminds them that, while the loss of the lock seems dramatic, it is ultimately not very important since beauty is not as valuable as virtue. Beauty might attract the eyes, but virtue attracts the soul, so it is pointless to quarrel over such a trivial thing as a ruined hairdo.


The clear-headedness of this speech is emphasized by the fact that Clarissa’s name literally means “clarity,” suggesting she is a wise character who illuminates the issues she’s confronted with. The comic effect Pope creates, however, comes from the fact that no one seems to much care, as demonstrated by Belinda and Thalestris’ unimpressed reactions.

But there is also a more serious point about gender at work here. In Pope’s day, women were considered the intellectual and moral inferiors of men, celebrated most for their beauty. Here Clarissa neatly subverts this idea, demonstrating to the reader, if not to those listening, that her intellectual and moral perceptiveness surpasses those of the rest of the assembled company, men included.

“All side in parties, and begin the attack;  
Fans clap, silks rustle, and tough whalebones crack;  
Heroes’ and heroines’ shouts confusedly rise,  
And bass and treble voices strike the skies.  
No common weapons in their hands are found,  
Like gods they fight, nor dread a mortal wound.  
So when bold Homer makes the gods engage,  
And heavenly breasts with human passions rage;  
’Gainst Pallas, Mars; Latona, Hermes arms;  
And all Olympus rings with loud alarms.

**Related Characters:** Clarissa, The Baron, Thalestris, Belinda

**Related Themes:** 

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** V.39-48

### Explanation and Analysis


This is a description of the courtly battle that ensues in Canto V after the Baron refuses to return Belinda’s lock. Belinda and Thalestris, having scoffed at Clarissa’s speech on the unimportance of beauty, lead the charge against the Baron and his crew of aristocratic cronies. Here Pope once again draws out the silliness of the world of the court and its values by evoking a comparison with the battles of classical epics.

While the struggles depicted in epic involve huge clashes between gods (like “Pallas, Mars; Latona, Hermes”) and are incredibly high stakes, Pope makes it clear that this is not really the case here. The most ominous sounds of battle here are the “clap” of “Fans” and the “rustle” of “silks,” not the “loud alarms” of “Olympus” and even the raised voices of those engaged in battle are described in music terms (“bass” and “treble”), making the battle noises sound more harmonious than discordant. This juxtaposition between the intensity of epic battle and the frivolity of the courtly battle serves to once again highlight to the reader the ultimate triviality of the court’s concerns.

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

**Related Characters:** Clarissa, Belinda

**Related Themes:** 

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** V.143-50

### Explanation and Analysis

These final lines of the poem occur after Belinda's lock has mysteriously disappeared from the courtly battle and has ascended into the heavens to become a constellation. But in these final lines Pope appears to finally settle the question of the value of beauty which has recurred throughout the poem. He often paints Belinda's and the court's interest in her looks as morally wrong, since all looks ultimately fade, as Clarissa notes in her speech. On the other hand, he emphasizes that the superficiality of the world she lives in at

least partially justifies Belinda's concerns about her beauty, as beauty gives her power over the men who otherwise would seek to control her.

Finally, in the lock's fantastical ascension to the heavens, Pope acknowledges that much beauty is indeed ultimately transient, as the "fair suns" of Belinda's eyes one day "shall set" and her "tresses shall be laid in dust." But he also notes that this lock is special, as it shall be celebrated by the "Muse" (a goddess of art and poetry), and this will mean that Belinda's name shall live forever more. The point he's making is that while so much of physical beauty ultimately leads to nothing, poetic beauty, the Muse's charge, endures forever. By inspiring poetry like his own, beauty can, in a way, live forever, too.



## SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

## CANTO I

The narrative voice opens the poem by meditating on how great suffering often emerges from trivial matters and mentions that the story that follows was first communicated to the poet by a “Muse” named “Caryl.” The narrative voice wonders what might motivate a lord to assault a lady and a lady to reject a lord.

Belinda is lying in bed long after everyone else has gotten up, as she is kept asleep by her guardian sylph. As she sleeps, he sends her a dream of a handsome young man and whispers in her ear, having “Seem'd to her ear his winning lips to lay.” The sylph explains to her that a sylph is the guardian of a young and beautiful virgin. He further explains that after death all women’s souls return to the four elements from which they came. Fiery women become salamanders, “Soft yielding” women become water spirits, prudish women’s souls sink down into the earth and become gnomes, and “coquettes,” lighthearted and flirtatious women, become sylphs, which “flutter” through the air. These sylphs are tasked with protecting the chastity and pleasure of new “belles” entering society.

Some young women, the sylph continues, are ruined because they are watched over by malicious gnomes instead of sylphs. Fortunately for Belinda, she is in the care of the sylphs, who will make sure to steer her right, though all the ups and downs of life in society and at parties. Sylphs also make sure that life stays glamorous and exciting for ladies, keeping things working properly in the “toyshop of the heart.” The ladies’ hearts reflect life at court, so the heart is metaphorically a place “Where wigs with wigs, with sword-knots sword-knots strive, / Beaux banish beaux, and coaches coaches drive,” all contrived by the sylphs.

*This opening invocation of the Muse, a goddess of art and poetry, is a convention of epic poetry and thus establishes the poem’s mock epic style. The reference to “Caryl,” representing Pope’s real friend John Caryl, links the fictional world to the real incident which inspired Pope’s writing.*



*In this scene, when the sylph whispers into Belinda’s ear, he uncomfortably echoes Satan in Milton’s “Paradise Lost,” who tempts Eve “Squat like a Toad, close at the ear of Eve;/ Assaying by his Devilish art to reach/ The Organs of her Fancy.” This suggests that there is something devilish about sylphs, as does the sylph sending Belinda a tempting vision of a handsome young man when he’s meant to be protecting her chastity. The manner with which women’s souls are sorted into four crude categories (which distinguish between attractive women and unattractive women, or pruders and “coquettes”) also introduces the pressures that Pope’s world puts on women to be considered desirable.*



*The idea that some women are forced into ruin because of the influence of the gnomes and the idea that the sylphs are able to treat the human heart like a plaything (a “toyshop”) casts doubt on the freewill of the people in the poem. It is never completely clear to what extent the characters are in control and to what extent they are subject to supernatural influence. This in turn makes it tricky to judge their actions. Additionally, the lines “Where wigs with wigs, with sword-knots sword-knots strive, / Beaux banish beaux, and coaches coaches drive” deliberately echo Pope’s own translation of the Iliad, in which he writes that “Now Shield with Shield, with Helmet Helmet clos’d, / To Armour Armour, Lance to Lance oppos’d.” This direct verbal echo draws a comparison between the life-and-death struggles of epic poems like the Iliad and the triviality of life at court.*





The sylph explains that his name is Ariel and that he has consulted the stars and seen that some disaster is close at hand. He isn't sure exactly what form this will take, but he warns Belinda, the "pious maid," to "beware of man."

Ariel shares his name with the trickster spirit Shakespeare depicts in [The Tempest](#), which suggests to the reader that he is likely similarly mischievous. His warning to Belinda emphasizes the importance of chastity in her world, in turn highlighting the restrictive standards of female sexuality of Pope's day.



The dog Shock has decided that Belinda has been sleeping for too long and wakes her up. She reads some love letters and soon forgets the importance of Ariel's message.

Belinda's ability to quickly forget Ariel's message as she reads her love letters points to her sense of vanity, happy to put all else out of her mind when she is reading people praise her.



With the help of the sylphs and Betty, Belinda begins the elaborate process of dressing and grooming herself. Betty is figured as a pagan "priestess" while Belinda herself is the "goddess," and the dressing table becomes an "altar" for these "sacred rites of pride."

This description of Belinda's dressing routine echoes the convention in epic poetry of having a scene in which the hero is dressed in his armor. Transforming the armor scene into a dressing scene emphasizes how low the stakes are here; she's not preparing for war, she's preparing to socialize. The religious imagery also makes a witty moral judgement on these "rites of pride," suggesting that the vanity at their heart is not compatible with Christian values.



Belinda needs a whole slew of items to get ready for the day, including "India's glowing gems," "all Arabia," "tortoise" and "elephant" in the form of "combs," and "Puffs, powders, patches, bibles, billet-doux." The sylphs are crucial to arranging everything carefully (even though they are unseen), which means that Betty is "praised for labors not her own".

This passage once again emphasizes the absurdity of Belinda's vanity by showing just how many fancy grooming items she needs. In addition, her exotic items point to a broader trend in this period of colonialism giving the British control over other countries. When Pope describes a box of Arabian perfumes as "all Arabia," he is making it seem like Belinda herself is a great conqueror of these foreign lands, and thus he highlights the self-importance associated with her beauty. The mention of "bibles" jumbled in with a slew of trivial items like "Puffs" and "powders" shows how Belinda has come to regard the process of beautifying herself as being just as important as her religious duties. Meanwhile, the fact that the sylphs are able to work secretly so that Betty's work is no longer really her own once again casts doubt on the extent to which the poem's characters truly are responsible for their actions.



## CANTO II

Belinda sails along the river Thames, and everyone is dazzled by her beauty. She is wearing a bejeweled cross which is so sparkling that even “Jews” and “infidels” would want to kiss it. She smiles at everyone and her eyes are luminous, “Bright as the sun.” She is so beautiful that any “female errors” she might make would be instantly forgotten when anyone looked on her face.

Belinda’s hair, “to the destruction of mankind,” is styled into two beautiful curls. These **locks** of hair are so attractive that any man who looks on them is overcome with desire for her—the curls are “labyrinths” in which Love “detains” his “slaves,” binding men’s hearts in “slender chains.” The Baron is one such man, and he resolves to take one lock, either through trickery or by force.

Earlier that day, before the sun rose, the Baron prayed to Love for success in gaining his “prize” by building a pyre out of various objects associated with love, including volumes of French romances, “garters,” “gloves,” and love letters.

Back on the boat, everything seems to be going perfectly and everyone is happy—except for Ariel who is still troubled by the idea that something terrible is going to happen. He summons an army of sylphs, which descends down onto the boat. The army is made up of sylphs in an array of different forms and dresses. Ariel addresses them, calling out: “Ye Sylphs and Sylphids, to your chief give ear, / Fays, Fairies, Genii, Elves, and Daemons, hear!” He then continues by enumerating all the different roles spirits can have—some guide the planets, others create the weather—and he reminds them of the sylph’s role in guarding the beautiful.

*Most epic poems include a sea voyage, so Belinda’s travelling by boat emphasizes her role as a parody of an epic hero. Her bejeweled cross, which is so beautiful that even “Jews” and “infidels” would be attracted by it, suggests Belinda’s lack of religious conviction—the cross is a beautiful ornament rather than a symbol of her faith, a point Pope underscores by noting its appeal to non-Christians. But Pope does suggest that perhaps her vanity is not all bad. The phrase “female errors” suggests that, as a woman, Belinda’s behavior is criticized more harshly than a man’s. So, if her beauty means that these “errors” are instantly forgotten when gazing on her face, it seems only fair and wise that she cultivate her beauty to escape unfair moral scrutiny.*



*Here Pope once again appears to suggest that there might be something liberating about Belinda’s vanity. Her hair has the power to make “slaves” of the men who would treat her as an inferior person for being a woman, so depicting her curls as prisons for suitors who are dazzled by love suggests that her beauty evens the playing field a bit at the patriarchal court.*



*The pyre is a reference to both pagan religious tradition and the epic tradition. Pyres were normally built for funerary purposes, but here the Baron is using his pyre to burn trivial items like “garters” and “gloves” in order to pray to the god Love. In this way, Pope continues his parody of court life. This moment also recalls the female vanity of Belinda’s own pagan altar, fashioned from her dressing table. In Pope’s time, men were expected to be morally and intellectually superior to women, but the parallel between the Baron’s frivolous pyre and Belinda’s dressing table altar paints the two as being morally equivalent in their frivolity.*



*Here Pope complicates the sylphs’ influence even further. He has previously created echoes between Ariel and Satan in “Paradise Lost” to imply that the sylphs may be more devilish than they appear. Here, Pope echoes Milton again, but this time mimicking the voice of God himself, who calls out to the angels, “Hear all ye Angels, Progenie of Light, / Thrones, Dominations, Princedoms, Vertues, Powers, / Hear my Decree.” The effect is to suggest that Ariel’s motivation is somewhere between angelic and devilish, but Pope keeps this mysterious.*



Ariel explains to the assembled group that he just can't shake the feeling that something terrible is going to happen. He doesn't know what it is, but he's worried that it could be anything from Belinda losing her virginity to staining her new dress to losing her heart or a necklace at a ball.

*Here, Ariel lists ostensibly important things (the loss of Belinda's virginity or heart) alongside trivial ones (a stain on a dress or the loss of a necklace), which once again emphasizes the absurd fixation on appearances in the world of the court. This also calls into question again how much Ariel really cares for Belinda's virtue.*



To protect Belinda, Ariel assigns various sylphs different tasks. Zephyretta will look after her fan, Brillante will look after her earrings, Momentilla will look after her watch, Crispissa will look after her **lock**, and Ariel himself will look after her Shock.

*The sylphs' names match their tasks a little too perfectly. Zephyretta's name recalls the word "zephyr" (meaning a breeze), which matches the task of guarding Belinda's fan. Momentilla's name closely resembles the word "moment," which is resonant with guarding the watch. Crispissa's name recalls the word "crisp" (in its traditional sense) as a curl. This matching of names emphasizes the utter silliness of the whole process of guarding Belinda, their names making it seem as if they were all created specifically for these trivial tasks.*



Fifty sylphs will look after Belinda's petticoat, which is described as the "sevenfold fence" "stiff with hoops" and "armed with ribs of whale," "the silver bound" with a "wide circumference." Ariel completes his speech by explaining that, should anyone fail to look after their charge, they shall be severely punished. Quickly, all of them fall in line and await the dreaded event Ariel has predicted.

*The description of Belinda's petticoat here mirrors Pope's own descriptions of Ajax's "sevenfold shield" and Achilles' "broad shield," surrounded by "living silver." This furthers Pope's characterization of Belinda as a parody of an epic hero, but it also emphasizes once again the significance of chastity in her world. While the shields of heroes exist to protect their lives, Belinda's petticoat serves to restrict access to her sexually, and so the comparison of the petticoat to a shield suggests that for Belinda the loss of her virginity would be essentially fatal.*



## CANTO III

The boat arrives at Hampton Court, where Queen Anne takes counsel "and sometimes tea." The ladies and gentlemen disperse to enjoy the pleasures of a day at court—namely, gossiping with one another about everything from social engagements to the Queen to the décor. At "every word a reputation dies." This is all happening while the governmental functions of the court continue, somewhat hurriedly, as they are about to halt for lunch. The "hungry judges" quickly sign sentences and people condemned to death are hanged at the gallows so their jurors can eat sooner.

*This passage highlights the triviality of the world of the court. When Pope shows Queen Anne taking both counsel and tea, he comically mixes serious business with leisure. He also highlights this mixture in his description of the inane chattering of the lords and ladies, which nonetheless leads to the death of reputations. The darker side of this mixing of personal pleasure and serious business is revealed in the judges' hastily condemning people to death in order that they may eat sooner, demonstrating that this is a place in which personal greed is placed above justice or empathy.*



Belinda sits down to a game of ombre with two gentlemen “to decide their doom” and arranges her cards. The sylphs glide down to perch upon the cards, their rank corresponding to the card value, apparently because their female vanity and love of social rank lives on.

Belinda’s cards “Draw forth to combat,” and she declares that spades will be trumps. At the beginning of the game, things are going well for Belinda as she plays her strongest **cards**. Her first card, the “Spadillo,” “Led off two captive trumps and swept the board.” Her next card, the “manillo,” is just as successful, but her third card, the “basto,” is less successful and only gains one trump card and one “plebian” card. But she then plays the King of Spades, which proves to be a very successful move. Thus far Belinda is winning.

Then the Baron begins to dominate the game. His Queen of Spades beats her King of Clubs, and then he plays his high diamond **cards**, creating such an upset on the table that the “pierced battalions dis-united fall.” He even wins Belinda’s Queen of Hearts with his Knave of Spades, and she fears she is about to lose. However, he plays his Ace and, to his surprise, she plays the King of Hearts, meaning that she wins.

As Belinda celebrates her success, the narrative voice laments how little mortals know of the future and the disaster that is to come on this “victorious day” when Belinda’s “honors” will be “snatched away.”

Coffee is served on the “altars of Japan” and on “China’s earth.” The coffee sends up steam which heads to the Baron’s brain and reminds him of his plan to steal Belinda’s **lock**, even though the narrative voice once again wishes he would stop before it’s too late, and urges him to think of “Scylla’s fate.”

*The word “doom” continues Pope’s pattern of treating the events at court with exaggerated seriousness for comic effect, emphasizing their triviality. The sylphs’ love of social rank on account of their once being society belles satirizes the triviality of court life further by mocking its love of rank.*



*Epic poetry always features spectacular battles, usually great clashes between civilizations involving both mortals and gods. Pope’s description of the “combat” of the card game offers a parodic imitation of this sort of epic struggle, though of course it is significantly less impressive, which in turn emphasizes the silliness and self-importance of life at court.*



*Here Pope continues his comic treatment of the card game as a satirically poor stand-in for an epic battle, as demonstrated by his description of the “pierced battalions.” The fierce struggle between the Baron and Belinda also foreshadows the later tension between the two, as each struggles to dominate the other.*



*This parodies the convention in epic poetry of receiving a warning in a moment of pride. The mention of Belinda’s lost “honors” is also of note, as it sounds as if she will lose her virginity (and with it her reputation), though it is not clear yet what is actually going to happen to her.*



*Exotic items make a reappearance, highlighting the pompous colonialism of people at court. Pope’s description of the tea serving makes it sound as if these ridiculous characters control all the “altars of Japan” and “China’s earth,” when they really only have access to a couple of Japanese trays and some Chinese tea. Meanwhile, the narrative voice’s warning to the Baron to think of “Scylla’s fate” once again comically compares the high stakes of classical literature with the low stakes of the present situation, as Scylla was changed into a bird forever after she plucked one of her father’s hairs, a magical hair on which his power depended.*





Just at that moment, Clarissa pulls out a pair of scissors, and offers them to the Baron like a lady in a courtly romance arming a knight with his weapon. The Baron moves to chop off the **lock**. Suddenly, all the sylphs hurry to Belinda's neck and attempt to fiddle with her hair and twist her earring three times to get her attention. But each time, the Baron slips away and then comes back again.

Ariel accesses Belinda's inner thoughts, but—to his shock—finds “An earthly lover lurking there.” This resigns him to the loss of the **lock**. The Baron snips it off.

A sylph gets caught in the way and gets cut in half by the scissors, but he quickly recovers as “airy substance soon unites again.” Belinda cries out in horror while the Baron shouts out his victory. The narrative voice muses on how little chance the **lock** had against the scissors, since steel “could the labor of the gods destroy, / And strike to dust the imperial towers of Troy.”

## CANTO IV

Belinda is still quite upset about the loss of her **lock**, and her frustration and despair are deeper and more consuming than the despair of “ardent lovers robbed of all their bliss” and “tyrants fierce that unrepenting die.” In this moment, the sylphs leave her.

*Here the comparison Pope makes between the Baron and an honorable knight from a romance emphasizes the Baron's own self-serving form of masculinity in contrast to a knight's brave service on behalf of others. Instead of defending ladies, the Baron seeks to steal from and humiliate them.*



*Pope's narration here is a little opaque, but what has happened is that Ariel has discovered that Belinda's thoughts are not as chaste as he would wish, and so he allows the Baron to snip off the lock. It seems that Ariel feels that Belinda either deserves or wishes to be violated, particularly since the snipping of the lock has sexual undertones. This emphasizes the extreme restrictions this world places on female sexuality, where Belinda's private thoughts—not even her actions—can result in punishment for being too sexual. This also highlights the fickleness of Ariel's character, as in Canto I he tempts her mind with the vision of the young man, but now he judges her for her sexually-charged thoughts and abandons her.*



*This passage echoes Book VI of Milton's [Paradise Lost](#), in which the archangels battle against Satan. The humorous contrast between the incredibly high-stakes battle and the relatively low-stakes hair snipping emphasizes the triviality of courtly life. In particular, the verbal echo in question (“airy substance soon unites again”) recalls Satan's being stabbed with a sword (“but th' Ethereal substance clos'd / Not long divisible”). This once again draws a comparison between the role of Satan and the role of the sylphs, calling their motivation into question.*



*The comparison between Belinda's melodramatic despair and the despair of people enduring much greater suffering than a bad haircut once again emphasizes the silliness of what's going on. The fact that the sylphs, guardians of beautiful virgins, now leave her reinforces the idea that there is a sense in which the Baron has metaphorically sexually violated her, making her no longer a virgin.*



Umbriel, the gnome, a “dusky melancholy sprite,” appears and descends to the subterranean Cave of Spleen. When he first enters, he encounters the personified East wind languishing on a bed, away from the rays of the sun, with a migraine.

As he moves deeper into the Cave, Umbriel sees the Queen of Spleen’s two handmaids—Ill-Nature and Affectation. Ill-Nature is a withered old maid in a dress of black and white, with a heart full of spite for others. Affectation is youthful and sickly, and has been taught to speak with a lisp and to hang her head to the side. She is richly dressed, languishing on expensive bedding.

Umbriel continues through the Cave. A strange vapor hangs in the air, out of which strange shapes arise. These include women who are “expiring,” “glaring fiends,” “snakes,” “Pale spectres,” “gaping tombs,” “lakes of liquid gold” and “angels in machines.” There are also various bodies warped by the powers of spleen on all sides, including “living teapots,” men who are pregnant, and women who have been transformed into bottles and call out for corks. Umbriel passes along safely, holding a piece of “spleenwort” in his hand.

Eventually Umbriel reaches the Queen of Spleen herself. He hails her as the ruler of women between the ages of 15 and 50, making them either hysterical and ill or making them frantically attempt to compose poetry and plays. Umbriel explains that there is a beautiful woman who enjoys herself too much and looks down on the Queen’s powers, and he cites his past services for her, mentioning ruining women’s complexions, bringing about cuckoldry, rumpling up petticoats and bedding to make it seem like illicit sexual encounters have taken place where they haven’t, messing up a prude’s headdress, and killing a beloved lapdog. He then asks her to touch Belinda with “chagrin,” as this one act will create a great deal of discord.

Many epics include a descent into the underworld, for example Homer’s *Odyssey* and Virgil’s *Aeneid*. Here Umbriel echoes that descent as he flies down to the Cave of Spleen, a kind of hell of female bodily dysfunction, as shown by the East wind’s painful migraine, (as the wind was historically thought to be the source of migraines).



The Cave of Spleen acts as kind of a dark mirror for the lively court above and offers a grotesque glimpse of what happens to the women who are excluded from court life on account of failing to be youthful and beautiful society belles. Ill-Nature is thus depicted as a kind of social outcast, an old and unmarried woman, while Affectation represents the worst excesses of put-on femininity, a belle gone too far, whose unattractive lisping and hanging her head to the side is designed to strike the viewer as helpless and who may be surrounded by the comforts of wealth but is still sickly.



In Pope’s time, the spleen—an organ—was believed to send up vapors to the brain which induced hysteria and neurosis, as mirrored in the presence of the strange vapor which hangs in the air of the cave. But the effects of spleen were also believed to include various forms of sexual dysfunction. So, fittingly the cave includes women with distinctly unladylike sexual appetites, those who are “expiring” (a term used to mean both death and orgasm), and women transformed into bottles calling out for phallic corks. These, in conjunction with the pregnant men, represent a hellish vision of the utter violation of the gendered rules of the world above.



That the Queen of Spleen influences women aged 15 to 50 (the years in which women typically menstruate) reinforces the idea that spleen is closely tied to sexual dysfunction. Meanwhile, Umbriel’s list of ways he has interfered with mortals once again highlights the extent to which mortals in the poem are not totally responsible for their actions. While society likely judged these women for their bad complexions or adulterous affairs, it’s suggested here that, since Umbriel is actually to blame, these women cannot be judged for their actions.



Although it seems like the Queen of Spleen will reject Umbriel's request, she does grant it. She binds together a bag for him like the one in which, according to myth, Ulysses once held the winds. This bag contains "the force of female lungs, / Sighs, sobs, and passions, and the war of tongues." She also gives him a vial which holds "fainting fears, / Soft sorrows, melting griefs, and flowing tears." He is overjoyed and speeds back to the world above ground.

When Umbriel returns, he finds Belinda in the arms of Thalestris, a lady at court, who is lamenting the **lock's** loss. She asks if it was for this that Belinda took such pains with her hair, doing everything from using "torturing irons" to straining her "tender head" with "fillets." She worries that the Baron will put the lock on display for everyone to see and that Belinda's reputation will be ruined. She further worries that being Belinda's friend will reflect badly on *her*, and even that the Baron will have the lock placed in the center of a ring and display it on his hand for the rest of time.

Thalestris goes to her suitor Lord Plume, who is apparently particularly proud of his expensive snuff box and fashionable cane. He confronts the Baron and demands that he return the **lock** to Belinda, but the Baron refuses. He says that although it is a pity that Sir Plume speaks so finely in vain, he will not give up the lock while he breathes air through his nostrils.

Umbriel is not satisfied, however, and breaks the vial of "sorrows" over Belinda, who appears dejected. She gives a speech about how she wishes she had never tasted the pleasures of court and had stayed at home instead. She insists that the day was full of bad omens, including her dropping her "patch box" three times, "The tottering china shook without a wind," and Shock behaving unusually. She even remembers that a sylph warned her that a disaster was to come, but that she didn't understand until it was too late. She wishes to tear off the remaining **lock**, feeling that it "tempts once more" the Baron's "sacrilegious hands."

*"Ulysses" is the Latin name for Odysseus, so here Pope is referencing a scene from Homer's Odyssey, in which Odysseus receives the winds from Aeolus. This continues the mock epic style of the narration, which comically draws a contrast between the lofty and high stakes world of epic poetry and the triviality of this poem's own narrative.*



*Thalestris' melodramatic description of all the pains Belinda has taken to perfect her hairdo, including "torturing irons" and "fillets," suggests the absurd importance of beauty at the court. She thinks of Belinda as having bravely and dutifully carried out these painful rituals and attributes that to virtue, rather than vanity.*



*Lord Plume's name recalls the word "plume," meaning a decorative feather (like a peacock's). Coupled with the details of his fancy snuff box and cane, he forms a parodic portrait of a vain male courtier, a counterpart to the vanity of the ladies at court.*



*Umbriel's pouring the vial of "sorrows" over Belinda means she is not totally responsible for her actions—a recurring problem in the poem, since mortals are influenced by supernatural forces. It is thus difficult to tell if she really means anything she says about wishing she had been more modest and stayed away from the glamorous court. The mention of omens also ties into the mock epic style, trivially parodying the serious warnings of the gods in epic poems with the mention of totally banal events like Belinda's dropping her "patch box" or her china shaking.*



## CANTO V

Although everyone else is moved by Belinda's speech, the Baron is not, as "fate and Jove" have prevented him from truly listening to her. Thalestris also reproaches him, but like "Anna" she is unsuccessful. Belinda, like Dido, is overcome with emotion.

Clarissa grows fed up with the situation and steps forward to give her thoughts. She argues that the emphasis society puts on women to be merely beautiful is absurd, and that men should only praise women who are both beautiful and virtuous. She says that if vain activities, such as dancing all night and dressing oneself all day, ward off smallpox or stopped one from aging, it would make sense to ignore duty and never to learn anything, and it would actively be moral to take pleasure in beautifying oneself.

But Clarissa then points out that is not the case. A decline in one's attractiveness is inevitable—all hair eventually turns gray, every face ages, regardless of the make-up covering it, and anyone who is unmarried must die an old maid. She then says that the most sensible thing to do is to cultivate good humor in the face of aging, which often proves more effective than being flighty or haughty anyway. She sums up her argument by stating that, while exterior beauty may attract the eyes, virtue attracts the soul.

No one is very impressed with this speech. Thalestris calls Clarissa a "prude" and Belinda calls "To arms, to arms!" This begins a kind of courtly battle, where "Fans clap" and "silks rustle" and "bass and treble voices strike the skies." The narrative voice explains that this is exactly like how the gods of Homer fight, and it resembles a battle between "Pallas, Mars; Latona, Hermes" and Jove and Neptune. Umbriel is delighted with what's going on and watches gleefully, while the other "sprites" either watch or join the fray.

*Here Pope creates an extended comparison with Book IV of Virgil's Aeneid, in which the Trojan hero Aeneas is forced by Jupiter ("Jove") to abandon his lover, Dido. Dido ultimately kills herself after her pleadings come to nothing, and her sister Anna is likewise unsuccessful. In this allusion, the Baron is placed in the role of Aeneas, Belinda in the role of Dido, and Thalestris in the role of Anna. But crucially, while that epic scenario is very high-stakes, this fight over a lock of hair is rather low stakes. Therefore, in creating this comparison, Pope comically emphasizes the triviality of the situation. Meanwhile, the Baron's being compared with Aeneas influenced by "Jove" and Belinda's being compared to Dido, who was famously tricked into falling in love by Cupid, reminds the reader of the pervasive supernatural influence over mortals in the poem.*



*Clarissa's name literally means "clarity," and this speech is suitably clearheaded. It demonstrates her intellectual and moral authority. This both explicitly and implicitly counters the idea that, as a woman, she is the intellectual and moral inferior of men, and that the best thing she can be in life is beautiful – an idea which the court's obsession with female beauty encourages. However, it's worth remembering that she helped the Baron snip off the lock by offering him her scissors, so it's possible to read her speech as a tad self-serving, as a means of excusing her own behavior by suggesting that the lock was never really that important!*



*Here Clarissa argues that beauty is without true worth because, unlike virtue, it is ultimately fleeting. Decay awaits all bodies, no matter how beautiful, and so any beauty is itself transient and therefore worthless. And while this does make good sense, Pope later challenges this idea in the final lines of the poem.*



*Here Pope continues the mock epic style of narration, drawing upon epic battle scenes and comparing the characters' struggles with those of the gods ("Pallas, Mars; Latona, Hermes," "Jove" and "Neptune"). The humor here comes from the fact that this courtly fight is clearly not nearly as impressive or dramatic as an epic battle – here the most frightening sounds are the "clap" of "Fans" and the "rustle" of "Silks".*



Thalestris hurries through the crowd and “scatters death from both her eyes.” At her glance, two courtiers, Sir Dapperwit and Sir Fopling “perish.” Sir Plume is also “killed” “with a frown” but revives again when she smiles.

*Sir Dapperwit and Sir Fopling’s names are humorously apt (they evoke the words “dapper” and “fop,” which are associated with male vanity). This emphasizes both the silliness of the court and the fact that, despite their supposed intellectual and moral authority over women, the men in this poem appear especially foolish. Furthermore, the idea that, in this courtly battle, receiving a “frown” is a kind of metaphorical death reinforces the contrast between a bloody battle of epic poetry and the triviality of this court scuffle.*



Belinda approaches the Baron, ready to attack him. She pinches his nose and then releases, but only after throwing some snuff powder at him, which the gnomes push in the right direction. The Baron inhales the snuff powder, causing him to sneeze loudly. She then pulls out a bodkin, but this is no ordinary bodkin. The metal once belonged to her great-great-grandfather in the form of three seal rings, which was then melted down into a buckle for his widow, then passed down to her grandmother as a child in the form of a whistle, and then was turned into a bodkin for her mother, and then finally passed down to Belinda herself.

*The Baron had previously promised that he would never surrender the lock while his nostrils breathed air, so this sneeze comically fulfills that promise. The description of the bodkin meanwhile parodies the tradition in epic poetry of tracing the history of a particular weapon, once again comically comparing the high stakes world of epic with the triviality of the court.*



As Belinda prepares to stab the Baron with her bodkin, he shouts out that one day she, too, will be brought this low, but that he fears nothing in death, other than being separated from her. He then begs to be allowed to live, tortured as he already is by the flames of Cupid. She screams at him to return the **lock**, as angrily as the character Othello screams for the handkerchief in the play by Shakespeare.

*Belinda’s comparison of herself to the tragic figure of Othello as he searches for the handkerchief (he believes this to be proof of his wife’s infidelity, over which he ultimately murders her) once again creates a humorous juxtaposition between an incredibly tense and dramatic situation and her own relatively trivial one.*



But, mysteriously, the **lock** is nowhere to be found. The narrative voice muses that the lock was perhaps too “blest” for any mortal to possess and then informs the reader that many present assumed it had passed into the realm of the moon, where things lost on earth can supposedly be found, everything from “broken vows” to “lovers’ hearts” to “Cages for gnats.” But the narrative voice says that the “Muse” alone watched the lock ascend into the sky, in the same way that Romulus’ ascent to the heavens was seen only by Proculus. Then it shot along like a shooting star, more brightly than Berenice’s locks, and the sylphs watched on contentedly.

*The lock’s ascension to the heavens in the style of the mythical locks of Berenice is the high point of Pope’s increasingly silly classical references. Instead of drawing a comparison with an epic scenario to point out how different the courtly scenario is, now the courtly scenario and the mythological scenario appear to merge.*





The narrative voice continues, affirming that the “beau monde,” or the fashionable world, will gaze on the **lock** in the skies from “the Mall,” and that lovers will often mistake it for the planet Venus and will send up prayers of love from “Rosamonda’s lake.” It also states that “Partridge” will be able to spot this through “Galileo’s eyes” and with it predict the fates of “Louis” and “the fall of Rome.”

Finally, the narrative voice addresses Belinda herself, telling her not to be sad over the loss of her **lock**, since its position in the sky means that it will be all the more admired and will outlive her, never turning gray. It concludes by stating that it will inspire the “Muse,” who will then write her name among the stars.

*The “Mall” is a promenade in St. James’ Park in London and “Rosamonda’s lake” refers to a pond there favored by those unlucky in love. “Partridge” was a contemporary astronomer and “Galileo’s eyes” refer to a telescope. This slew of modern references further adds to the absolute absurdity of the lock’s ascension to heaven – Pope claims that it will be visible to the public, humorously tying together the mythological and the everyday.*



*Here Pope finally seems to make a judgement on what the value of beauty truly is. He agrees with Clarissa’s point that beauty is indeed transient, but his reference to the “Muse,” a goddess of art and poetry, seems to suggest that beauty can be valuable and achieve a degree of immortality by inspiring poets like himself to write works which do indeed live on.*





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