A “Stranger Cause, Yet Unexplored”:

Belinda’s Imagination in

The Rape of the Lock

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In *The Rape of the Lock*, epic grandeur applied exquisitely to "trivial things" (1.2)[1] lends these things significance even as it satirically disparages them. Certainly, Belinda's world fascinates us. Yet beneath this surface glitter, and irrespective of Pope's conscious plan, we can find evidence of serious ideals in the so-called "trivial" world that do not inhere in the mature framework advocated by Clarissa.

A reader may facilely interpret the Fair as substituting narcissism for wisdom, frivolous games for purposeful living, over-refinement and ritual for true beauty and art. This view, however, does not translate the complexity of the text.

In his essays, Pope expounds his preeminent principle that people should always try to balance passion with reason, creative inspiration with natural order.[2] Just how and when this equilibrium is effected remains vague: "No methods teach" us when "nameless graces" will call Pegasus to "deviate from the common track" with "brave disorder."[3] In *The Rape*, Clarissa best expresses Pope's ideal — for instance, when without satire she labels beautiful women "the *wise* man's passion" (5.9-10). Clarissa's careful compromise, though, still leaves room for the more invigorating "flights," "screams," and "pretty eyes" by which Belinda wins souls (5.32-4). Even Clarissa, in fact, cannot resist abandoning the common track of "good humor" when she "tempts" the Baron to take her scissors (3.128-32). That encounter partakes of romance, religion ("reverence"), and subdued violence, which, as we will now explore, constitute the arsenal of the imagination.

The poet distorts the truth when he reports that the Fair and their Sylphs are "wondrous fond of *place*," that is, of hierarchy (3.35-6). Belinda and the supernaturals all break out of fixed structures, to the ultimate benefit of society, when those structures too severely imprison thought.[4] The poet of course realizes that hierarchy, although related to reason and order, can serve evil, as when judges, jurymen, and wretches are consigned each to their "appropriate" positions (3.20). An analysis of Belinda's mind suggests her (at least inchoate) awareness of the dangers of hierarchy expressed above.

Ariel, in his first speech, describes his protégée as fair, childish, and innocent, yet as understanding something that "overly" mature people do not. We should construe this compliment semi-seriously. Already, the poem hints that Belinda's "quick" and "unfixed" mind (2.9-10) has created her wonderful Sylphs: Ariel perhaps only "seemed" to speak (1.25-6), and no one except Belinda acknowledges communion with airy companions.[5]

Whatever stance we assert as to the fairies' status, they interact dynamically with the heroine's powers of inventiveness. Not merely the author's superposition of his art onto Belinda's blank consciousness, the supernatural machinery makes explicit Belinda's *own* intuitions. For example, the poem indicates that Belinda perceives how mature women must behave, as we will elucidate below. The Sylphs provide a mechanism by which she obtained the knowledge: after all, Sylphs were originally coquettes, *then* married ladies, and *lastly*, Sylphs. So when Ariel states, "The Fair expire with all their pride" (1.57), Belinda can then conceive of the possibility of never abandoning her flirtatious demeanor, and yet marrying and growing old as other women do.

Similarly, Ariel instructs his nymph that "whoever fair and chaste / Rejects mankind, is by some Sylph embraced" (1.67-8). Thus, an "old maid" may retain some of the magic of imaginative role-playing which young flirts enjoy.[6] Ariel extends the limits Clarissa would impose: in *his* world, the excitement and power of the young transforms but does not extinguish with age. Clarissa can only "scorn" a man (5.28); Belinda is given more potent license to "*reject* man*kind*."

Indeed, observe how the guardian sprite ends his teachings: "O pious maid, beware!… beware of Man!" (1.112-4). The striking imperative "Beware!," later used by Coleridge in "Kubla Khan"[7] to evoke the terrors of an enchanted world of untold possibility, reinforces the significant idea that one must risk everything, and flirt with unqualified rejection, to experience love. Here, the language defeats the satire, enticing the reader to cherish the energy Belinda's character exudes.

Also, in the potentially stultifying realm of high society, objects, like Sylphs, can stimulate creativity. Belinda heeds her guardian's caution: "Nor bound thy narrow views to things below" (1.36). Instead, her cosmetics represent a micro*cosm* of the universe, a "reaching out" to something larger and higher.[8] The Earth's most precious splendor, distilled and ordered, actually gives Belinda's face a "purer" blush and, her eyes, a "keener lightning" (1.143-4). Extracting Nature's essence improves upon the original. So, too, the Sylphs can select the "richest tincture of the skies" (2.65) and "steal from rainbows e'er they drop in showers / A brighter wash [*i.e.*, cosmetic lotion]…" (2.95-6).

Belinda transfigures Nature as well, bidding the tortoise and elephant to "unite" (a fantastic image!), then transforming and encompassing that unity into her comb (1.135-6).

In the "moving toyshop of her heart" (1.100), the heroine may appear to confound objects with abstractions. Pope's use of zeugma vividly emphasizes this disparity and at first glance belittles it. Hence, for instance, a coquette may "forget her prayers, or miss a masquerade" (2.108). Yet earlier, the poem portrays the thrill of "midnight masquerades" where "whispers in the dark…prompt…warm desires" (1.72-6). The ballroom, for the imaginative young woman, becomes a mystical stage where she can play out her larger fantasies. The association of prayers with whispers in the dark and with sexual tension (or the linking of a necklace with love) is not out of place or trifling for a sensitive romantic.

Religious objects themselves also catalyze original thought: First, Belinda tosses her Bibles among various other items. This perhaps represents a method for the young woman to break down strict hierarchy and, as at masquerades, think of religion in a more immediate and personal mode. Similarly, the refulgent cross on her bosom furnishes beauty with religious undertones (2.7-8). Finally, while the poem admittedly offers many supernatural allusions in jest, the "consecration" of the lock (5.149) allows the serious poet-hierophant to practice his art (namely, to preserve beauty and truth through fanciful

order). Therefore, we should suffer Belinda to practice her analogous "sacred rites" via her own brand of creative-religious imagery.

We can put forward opposing interpretations of Belinda's reification of people, too. In one sense, her gazing at her "heavenly image in the glass" points out that she is, like the Gnomes, "too conscious of [her] face" (1.79). And she tends to reduce others to symbols as well — again, like the Gnomes whose "gay ideas [*i.e.*, showy images] crowd the vacant brain."

Nevertheless, Belinda's brain seems filled with dreams (not vacuum) prior to her icon-worshipping sprees. Staring at a mirror affords opportunity for *mental* self-reflection as well as just physical, so we can hope that Belinda takes time for introspection, not just self-adoration. The significance of the mirror figure to anyone with a literary background tempts readers to assume that an imaginative girl will eventually discover something deep about her position in the world if she will but stare long enough.

Travelling through the remaining scenes, we meet with Belinda's admirable passion several times. As before, to give Belinda the benefit of the doubt, we can attribute the fascinating diction in the ensuing scenes directly to the appeal her reveries hold for us (and for herself). Of course, the bombast is intended to mock, but it also lets Belinda achieve all she can within Hampton Court's confines:

First, the protagonist imagines ombre as standing for more than a game. Thus, she can (for a refreshing change) feel the release of "*wild disorder*" (3.79-86). "Burning to encounter two adventurous knights," she takes risks, retains power over men (and over the cosmos),[9] and tastes "promiscuity" (3.80) and violence. In this light, hidden meaning pervades Belinda's victory scream.

Next, the "rape" occurs. Naturally it bears some relation to a genuine seduction. Ariel comments that his protégée let in an "earthly lover… in spite of her art" (3.143). On the contrary, she really had prepared the way for her lover by incorporating the best of Nature into her "art." That is, by learning all she required from her Sylphs, then testing

that intuited knowledge on the field of ombre and elsewhere, she now commands the (relatively mature) power to turn the Baron's rather ineffectual advances into a sexual act. (We will return to this theme below.)

The Cave of Spleen further demonstrates that fantasies promote worthy goals. The chthonic visions, while spectacular and suggestive, initially seem stagnant. Their "gifts" to femininity, however — such as soft sorrows, melting griefs, flowing tears, fainting fears, and the force of female lungs (4.83-7)[10] — very much resemble Sylphic liquidity and flirtation. A thin line separates the neurotic from the productive. So, when released onto a less repressed woman, like Belinda, these Affectations can bolster her role-playing, expressing what needs to be expressed yet maintaining some decorum.[11]

Of course, the outward symptoms of Belinda's spleen do not immediately convince us of her maturity. Her absurd displays, however, somehow help her enact her true feelings: In the final lines of the fourth canto, Belinda publicly describes her own locks thus: they "once gave new beauties to the snowy neck" (4.170). The tone of this line, especially in the distancing use of "*the*," discloses that underneath all artifice, she is aware of her self-made "conspiracy" of beautiful hair and virginal neck that would "ensnare" a man (2.19-28). Then, she teases the Peer further:

> "The sister lock now sits uncouth, alone,
> And in its fellow's fate foresees its own;
> Uncurled it hangs, the fatal shears demands,
> And tempts once more thy sacrilegious hands.
> Oh, hadst thou, cruel! been content to seize
> Hairs less in sight, or any hairs but these!" (4.171-6)

Surely, we are meant to understand that Belinda uttered this admission of sexual desire ("Hairs less in sight") unintentionally. Nonetheless, the text virtually assures us that, unconsciously, Belinda has inter-related her resourceful images — temptation, religion, seduction.[12] Importantly, these images belong to Belinda, not to the narrator alone. Although egocentric, the heroine breaks out of cliché and sterility, announcing her

most “secret passions” (4.2) in a manner no vacuous puppet of social order could. Her passions, then, are less counterfeit and shallow than they could have been. Furthermore, the “sublime” has not seeped out of this sublimation, since not mere libido but imaginative and personal myths animate these confessions. In comparison, we know nothing of Clarissa’s deepest motives for yielding the scissors to the Baron.

The epic culminates in the parlor battle of wits. More lurks here than empty banter and buffoonery: On the metaphorical tier, the Baron’s death wish (and the deaths Belinda’s charms cause throughout the story[13]) may represent active and healthy desire for carnal fulfillment. At least since Shakespeare’s time, such an equivalence has had commonplace usage.

Even if the reader cannot solemnly attend to the “dying in metaphor” (5.60), flames, or lightning, a moment of *literal* violence occurs when Belinda brandishes her “deadly bodkin” (5.88). A bodkin is a long, ornamental hairpin shaped like a dagger. While the word here does not denote a true dagger as it does in *Hamlet*, Belinda’s weapon, of masculine origin (5.90), could potentially maim her victim.[14] This chance of real destruction makes the scene, and Belinda’s role, significant: High society must now re-establish order in a way that accounts for the nymph’s power over its usual effete fare.

The subtext of the epic, then, asserts that one must engage one’s creative energy throughout one’s life. The sincerely tragic consequences of imaginative failure — Beauty’s domain rendered petty — appear on the Moon as “smiles of harlots,” “tears of heirs,” and “tomes of casuistry” (5.119-20). But Belinda’s hair ascends to heaven, where order and brilliance serenely co-exist. This perhaps is some effort at last by the narrator explicitly to differentiate Belinda from the useless and the hypocritical. Still, this ending also is dictated by epic conventions, by Pope’s politeness to Miss Fermor, and by his longing for reconciliation and compromise.

Notes

[1]Canto 1, line 2, *The Rape of the Lock*, in *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*, Volume Two, 5th ed., p. 2233. All subsequent parenthetical citations refer to this text.
[2]See *An Essay on Criticism*, 1.86-91, 2.235-6, 2.384; *An Essay on Man*, Epistle 2.
[3]*An Essay on Criticism*, 1.140-80.
[4]Observe how the Sylphs are described as liquid, airy, wild, and constantly in motion. *Norton Anthology*, p. 2232.
[5]Belinda's "vision" of Ariel disappears after she wakes up (1.120); later, she recalls it (4.165). The Sylphs apparently can control her thoughts (1.76-8, 2.99), yet she completely "amazes" and subdues Ariel with her "lurking lover" (3.145).
[6]Artistic inspiration among the inhabitants of the Cave of Spleen (Gnomes): (4.59-62).
[7]"Kubla Khan," line 49.
[8]As discussed in class on May 15.
[9]As discussed in class on May 16. See also 3.26, 3.57, 3.93-5, 3.46.
[10]Belinda proves the force of her lungs twice in the story, and each time the scream seems infused with importance. On the second occasion, the poet likens the lost lock to broken china, which in the coquettes' framework symbolizes lost virginity (see 2.106, 3.159, 4.163).
[11]Pope realized that the neurotics he described can channel their energy into pre-existing societal activities, such as composing literature, thus relieving other symptoms. In the post-Freudian era, Erik Erikson concurred and proposed that healthy psyches can avoid mental disease by similar channeling. For example, a *shaman*, by observing the private lives of his followers, will coax them into appropriate forms of releasing their emotions ("abreaction" in Freud's terminology) under the guise of religious devotion. The "patient" and the other followers will remain oblivious to their beneficial participation, since they are indoctrinated to believe that only the *shaman* himself can influence the workings of good and evil. (See Erikson's *Childhood & Society*.) In *The Rape*, masquerades and parlor games could provide contexts for abreaction.
[12]Religion is evoked by the word "sacrilegious" in line 174, and rape, by the word "seize" in line 175.
[13]For example, 2.13, 5.34, 5.64, 5.76-8, 5.145.
[14]Bodkin=dagger was obsolete usage by Pope's time, according to *Webster's*. See *Norton Anthology*, note #8, p. 2251; *Hamlet* III.i.75.