

## Observations on *The Rape of the Lock* Canto I

### **Belinda and her toilet:**

Belinda is seen in many different lights, not all of them harsh – as coquette, injured innocent, sweet charmer, society belle, rival of the sun and murderer of millions. This Cleopatra-like variety indicates simultaneously her charm, a vacuous lack of character, the chameleon coquette's accomplishment as an actress and also the peril of her position, dangerously unfixated. At one point the praise of her attractions may be a mere mask for Pope's satiric attack on the type figure of the coquette: at another it is praise no irony can fully undermine.

The metamorphoses of Belinda are matched by the magical transformations in Pope's presentation of her environment: "Ovidian graces", detected by Johnson in the translation of Homer, are here in plenty. Tortoise and elephant are here transformed to combs of ivory and tortoise shell; lacquer tables turn into "shining Altars of Japan". Startlingly recreative and enchanting though they are, they mirror the beau-monde's tendency to deify its trivialities and exalt its social occasions into rites, while casually neglecting what ought to be sacred: "Puffs, Powders, Patches, Bibles, Billet-doux".

Belinda's world is preoccupied with ceremonies. In the contrast with epic, the triviality and narcissism are manifest in the toilette scene. The toilet's greasy task is subjected to a scrutiny no less harsh in its implications, but masking them with a fastidiousness nicely suited to this context – beauty putting on its required face. While the hyperbole of the passage largely exposes the inflated, culpably vain seriousness Belinda brings to herself worship, it is also a vehicle of a delighted play of imagination and wit over the beautiful intense trivialities of this milieu:

This Casket India's glowing Gems unlocks,  
And all Arabia breathes from yonder Box.

Assured only moments earlier of the care which the "wise Celestials" exercise over her, Belinda in the glass discovers her own sufficient divinity. The eyes that are to "eclipse the Day" are infatuated with her self-created "heavenly image", like Milton's Eve at her creation, delighted with her "smooth watry image" in the lake. The passage consistently projects a series of ideal images of Belinda, matching her own idolatry: "Nymph intent", "the Goddess". And "awful Beauty" arming for her moments of total conquest. Pope maintains a double suggestion, first, that she is merely accentuating her natural beauty – "awakening" her grace, "calling forth" her face's wonders – and second, that she is engaged in jobbery and deception – "repairing" her smiles, purifying the glow of her cheeks in an uncomfortably close echo of the "young

Coquettes” who, in Ariel’s words, can produce at will “a bidden Blush”. Belinda is no more ingenuous than they.

The whole world does homage with its “Off’rings”, and at Belinda’s side her priestess works, until the anticlimactic moment which grounds the whole passage, finally, in the merely domestic and mundane: “And Betty’s praised for Labours not her own.” The mock-heroic element in this scene is present in the meticulous adjustment of the arming of the epic hero to this more feminine world, where the niceties of description have their own different justification, whether or not satirically wheighted. Belinda arms for a battle she cannot take less than seriously, dressing to kill: the epic phrase for armour, “glittering Spoil”, wittily suggests this, and also fits to a nicety the ransacking of the globe which feminine beauty takes, quite nonchalantly, as its due.

### **The Sylphs:**

In the sylphs we witness a delightful down-scaling of the epic Machines, light by any heroic standards and assailed by unholy panic at moments of crisis, yet adapted in every detail, physical and metaphysical, to their role as Belinda’s intimates and counselors. They reflect the beauty and explain the perilous tangles of conventions and anxieties that make up Belinda’s day. In considering them, we sense at once the tremulous intensity, the sensuous richness, with which Belinda is surrounded, and the pressures and apprehensions to which she is subjected. Her beauty is like their colours, ephemeral; her moment of uncommitted conquest as fragile as they; and they are as caught up as she in the intricate social structure which excites her dreams of power and is baited like a snare. As in Homer, where “heav’nly Breasts with Human Passions rage”, so in Pope the celestials mingle with their transcendence more than a wisp of human puzzlement, vanity and pride..

Pope’s observation of the mores of Queen Anne Society, for which the sylphs are both mirror and mock-apotheosis, made its own discoveries along lines already familiar to theatre-goers and the readers of Addison, Steele and others. Belinda, in the moments before waking – when she forgets the whole vision in a trice – dreams that the most winning of beaux tells her how the sylphs guide guide and protect her in the intricate vocation of combining endless provocation with inviolate maidenhood. The unsuspected implications and false logic of his account, reflecting the predicament of the “tender Maid” in a circle of rakes, reduce his armoury of noble terms such as “innocent”, “honour” and “purity” to the level of muddle and sham. Himself a metamorphosed coquette in disguise, citing the very best Miltonic precedent –

For Spirits, freed from mortal Laws, with ease  
Assume what sexes and what Shapes they please –

He understands all too easily the way into a belle's heart. He assures Belinda promptly of her own importance, then of the immortality of her feminine delight in the civilized trappings which she might think transient:

Think not, when Woman's transient Breath is fled,  
That all her Vanities at once are dead:  
Succeeding Vanities she still regards,  
And tho' she plays no more, o'erlooks the Cards.  
Her joy in gilded Chariots, when alive,  
And love of Ombre, after Death survive.

His voice glides smoothly in Belinda's ear, untroubled by the words which carry destructive implications ("Vanities" and "gilded"), or by the hollow echo of a couplet in Dryden's *Aeneid* describing the survival of nobler emotions in the after-life of heroes:

The love of horses which they had, alive,  
And care of Chariots, after Death survive. (*Aeneid*, vi. 890).

He is there, he whispers, to guard her purity according to sylphic theology:

Whoever fair and chaste  
Rejects Mankind, is by some Sylph embrac'd.

Celestially defended, the "melting Maids" are safe, for what we call "Honour" is really no more than Providence:

'Tis but their Sylph, the wise Celestials know,  
Tho' Honour is the word with men below.

Reassuring Belinda in this way, Ariel is in effect undermining her moral position, taking away with one hand the credit he gives with the other, and all unknowingly. He exclaims glibly how her defence is achieved. A maid would fall to Florio if Damon weren't, distractingly, at hand, if "old Impertinence" were not expelled "by new", and if the sylphs did not pander to the insatiable appetite for trivia and trinkets:

With varying Vanities, from ev'ry part,  
They shift the moving Toyshop of their Heart.

What we call levity is women, says Ariel, is the effect of the same divine guidance as determined their "honour": the concealed implication, that the two qualities are roughly on a par, almost the same thing, is devastating. But Ariel runs blithely on, to warn Belinda in epic style of the

foreshadowed “dread Event”, ending with a plea for caution from the lips that have just encouraged flirtatiousness:

Beware of all, but most beware of Man!