

## From Moving Toyshop to Cave of Spleen: The Depth of Satire in "The Rape of the Lock"

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**I**N *The Rape of the Lock* a young Alexander Pope has constructed a masterpiece of tightly-knit imagery, which reveals itself more on each reading of the poem: central images which jump up and meet the eye are found to continue in almost every line, diverging to explore different ideas, then uniting again into a single striking picture. For the sources of his imagery Pope travels from the universal to the tiny, from sky-shaking thunderstorms, rolling planets, and the four elements, to bodkins, tweezer-cases, and a lady's hair. Images occur within larger images to give the reader a feeling of looking into a magnifying glass or a deep lagoon; and in the ideas which grow through the poem there is a similar range and development. In the Epistle Dedicatory of 1714 Pope declares that *The Rape of the Lock* was "intended only to divert a few young ladies,"<sup>1</sup> seeming to confirm that it was but "a jest" to laugh together two quarrelling families;<sup>2</sup> yet breathing through his couplets are deeper emotions and a broader social vision. The "little unguarded Follies" of Arabella and her sex become part of a searching psychological study of the contemporary coquette, which itself moves out into a depth of social criticism anticipating the satires to come; and almost from its beginning the poem is pervaded by growing hints of the chaos which will end *The Dunciad*.

In his address to Belinda in Canto I, Ariel's description of the four types of Rosicrucian spirits retains an epic grandeur in its framework, being structured on the four basic elements of creation: fire, water, earth, air. Here, however, these elements be-

come the four humours which determine feminine behaviour patterns, the spirits being visual representations of different aspects of female nature.

But know, ye Fair, a point conceal'd with art,  
The Sylphs and Gnomes are but a woman's heart.<sup>3</sup>

"The Fair" returning to their first elements after death remind us of the portraits in "Moral Essay II: On the Characters of Women"; yet it is interesting that the spirits all seem to show different traits in Belinda herself—almost subconsciously, from this point, we cannot accept her as a mere caricature of a certain kind of woman but must see her as a more complicated person who contains elements of all women. The "fiery Termagants" who mount up in air foreshadow both the flame of Belinda's anger (with an ironical relationship to the fires of love) and the fate of her lock, blazing off to the stars. "Nymph" is used generally to refer to a young woman, Belinda included (she is also associated with water in Canto II); but the "Soft yielding Minds" are like those of the young maidens who are so easily distracted by the "moving toyshop" parade of beaux ensured by the sylphs:

When *Florio* speaks, what *Virgin* could withstand,  
If gentle *Damon* did not squeeze her hand?

(I, 11. 97-98)

With the hint of the downward-sinking Gnome, however, foreshadowing Umbriel's trip to the Cave of Spleen (the source of Belinda's anger and, to a large extent, a comment on her psyche), we suspect her of prudery as well.

Pope's concentration is on the sylphs, rather than the other spirits, and on their service to coquetry, both in his social commentary and in this as the dominant trait of Belinda's outward self. The attention is well merited, since the sylphs contain in themselves the basic paradox of Belinda's personality: although they "sport and flutter" like a modern-day "tease", they are essentially devoted to chastity, a duty which ironically relates them to their elemental opposites, the Gnomes. In the same way, Belinda's fluttery, sylph-like exterior hides a positively gnome-like psyche (as hinted in the Cave of Spleen). This relationship would apply to most coquettes, whose habit it is to

flirt and vacillate, never making a true commitment to a love relationship. The sylphs are indeed the chief proponents of this inconsistency as well as being its visual embodiment—an impression particularly noticeable in the description in Canto II of their "airy Garments" dipped in "ever-mingling Dies" of "Colours that change when'er they wave their Wings", and in their constant movement. Yet from Ariel's opening revelation of sylphish duties we can see interesting parallels between she who "fair and chaste / Rejects Mankind" and those "predestin'd to the Gnomes' Embrace":

Some Nymphs there are, too conscious of their Face,  
 For Life predestin'd to the Gnomes' Embrace.  
 These swell their Prospects and exalt their Pride,  
 When Offers are disdain'd and Love deny'd.

(I, 11. 79-82)

"Face" here can mean both physical beauty and reputation (a dual meaning developed throughout the poem); yet the preservation of both of these is a prime requirement of coquetry and the chief function of the sylphs. Both in worshipping her own image at the toilette and in her splenetic rage at the rape Belinda may be seen as being "too conscious" of her "Face"; and her prospects and pride are exalted both in the toilette and in the card game, as she "swells her Breast with Conquests yet to come". The "gay Ideas" of peers, Dukes, and the trappings of social status are gnomish dangers, Ariel warns, which "early taint the Female Soul"—yet this image itself looks ahead to the "moving Toyshop" contrived by the sylphs for maids' protection. In the metonymic effect of both "gay Ideas" and "moving Toyshop" we can see that there is but a short step from here to the Cave of Spleen: there, the posturing tea pots and frustrated bottles make an implicit comment on the psychology of the Toyshop which sees a man as nothing more than his wig or his Garter.

The description of Belinda at the beginning of Canto II subtly continues the theme of the "moving Toyshop"—in her "quick" and "unfix'd" mind and eyes we can see the activity of the "giddy Circle" of maidens' sylph-inspired affections, while at the same time:

Bright as the Sun, her Eyes the Gazers strike,  
And, like the Sun, they shine on all alike.

(II, 11. 13-14)

While emphasizing her centrality and divine beauty, this couplet also indicates a kind of superficiality, a lack of commitment to any one admirer:

Favours to none, to all she Smiles extends,  
Oft she rejects, but never once offends.

(II, 11. 11-12)

As Hugo Reichard points out, this impartial flirtation is correct behaviour for a successful coquette;<sup>4</sup> in it there is a kind of balance or propriety, yet the rejection can easily develop into the "Offers . . . disdain'd, and Love deny'd" by the Prude destined to the Gnomes' embrace.

In this vision of Belinda as the rising sun, we have a symbol of the coquettish ideal which it is the chief duty of the sylphs to promote; in actuality, however, this brightness is but an imitation of the sun, just as the glitter of the sylph world is opposed to the warm fires of human love and sexuality throughout the poem. This opposition is apparent from Ariel's first appearance as "a Youth more glittering than a *Birth-night* Beau", which contrasts to Belinda's own natural blush of excitement (all the more uncalculated because she is asleep).

The battle between the coquettish ideal and normal humanity occurs both on the social level and in Belinda's own psychology, and the sylph world, as described in Canto II, forms a good visual framework for it. In her efforts to "call forth" her beauty (with the aid of the sylphs) so as to rival the sun, Belinda is striving for an ideal that is as unnatural to humans as the "Field of purest Aether" in which the sprites enjoy the true "Blaze of Day" (II, 11. 77-78).<sup>5</sup> The downward movement of the passage which follows these lines prepares us for what Belinda really is:

Some less refin'd, beneath the Moon's pale Light  
Pursue the Stars that shoot athwart the Night,  
Or suck the Mists in grosser Air below,  
Or dip their Pinions in the painted Bow,  
Or brew fierce Tempests on the wintry Main,  
Or o'er the Glebe distill the kindly Rain.

(II, 11. 81-87)

The only part of Belinda that comes near to rivalling the "Blaze of Day" is her flying lock, foreshadowed in the shooting stars pursued by sylphs; while the "grosser Air" and "Mists" look ahead to the climate of the Cave of Spleen, and the "fierce Tempests" to Belinda's temper and the war of the sexes which is brewing.

There are more hints of the "other" Belinda, of the "gnomishness" which naturally follows her sylphish aspirations, in the list of punishments with which Ariel threatens his troops in Canto II—"Gums and Pomatums", for example, the creams used to achieve a sylph-inspired beauty, are the exact opposite in their substance to a sylph's airiness. (In the "Characters of Women" the same contrast is devastatingly portrayed in "Sappho's greazy task".) We see also the "rivell'd Flower" of an aged beauty, and the vapours of Belinda's thoughts and of the Cave of Spleen.

With but a "sigh" as Ariel retires, Belinda is given to the dominion of Umbriel, who transports us to a full view of what underlies the coquettish exterior. This gnome can be seen both as an embodiment of her state of mind and as an aid to the action, exemplifying the dual function of the Machinery in the poem. In the Cave itself there is a similar ambiguity, which leaves us uncertain as to whether the Gnome is descending into a representation of Belinda's actual subconscious, or into a mythical underworld which represents what she *could* become. The description of the Cave contrasts to the sun and breezes of the sylph's realm, as it is "sheltr'd close from Air"; yet it reminds us of the artificiality which the sylphs promote as they keep "imprison'd Essences" from exhaling. We can see in the hallucinatory images of Hades echoes of the punishments of the sylphs: "Lakes of liquid Gold" and "Angels in Machines". The "Vapour" in which Umbriel arrives and which hangs over the scene is itself reminscent of the vapours of coffee and thought in Canto III — in particular the "Ideas" of an "earthly Lover" which rise from Belinda's mind and send Ariel into retirement:

Sudden he view'd, in spite of all her Art,  
An earthly Lover lurking at her Heart.

(III, 11. 143-44)

Whether the "Lover" is an actual person or simply an image for Belinda's natural urge to love, he is opposed here to "all her art" — either the arts of makeup, or the arts of coquetry which must dissemble rather than admit to an earthly lover. In the quick transition at this moment of Ariel's discovery, it is apparent that the darkness of the gnomes' world follows coquetry as inevitably as night the day:

For, that said moment, when the *Sylphs* withdrew,  
 And *Ariel* weeping from *Belinda* flew,  
*Umbriel*, a dusky melancholy Spright . . .  
 Down to the central Earth, his proper scene,  
 Repair'd to find the gloomy Cave of Spleen.

(IV, 11. 11-13, 15-16)

Through the sylph-inspired repression of an earthly lover (he likely remains hidden from herself as well as the world), Belinda is subject to Umbriel and the Goddess of Spleen. She is hopelessly human and earthbound; like Umbriel, her "proper scene" is closer to "central Earth".

In the scenery and inhabitants of the Cave we see incarnations of different elements of Belinda, what she is and what she may well become. The "ancient Maid" shows the fate of both chaste Coquettes and Prudes; in her parody of a nun, she continues the lack of respect for prayers with which Belinda subordinates her Bibles to her billet-doux, only now the once-admired bosom is filled with "Lampoons". This caricature looks back to the brilliant example of zeugma at the beginning of the canto, describing Belinda's "Rage, Resentment, and Despair" at the loss of her lock, with its swift succession of pictures all significant with reference to her. In the "ardent Lovers robb'd of all their Bliss" and the "Tyrants fierce" we can see the Baron and Belinda respectively; yet we are also reminded that "scornful Virgins" when they have survived "their Charms" become "ancient Ladies" who are refused kisses.

The "becoming Woe" of Affectation reminds us of Belinda in her "Sorrow's Pomp" in 1712; and although this has become "beauteous Grief" in 1714-17, "Her Eyes half-languishing, half-drown'd in Tears" give the impression that her grief is a little undecided and even insincere. Just as the sylphs help shift the

clothes, changing a flounce or adding a furbelo, so Belinda's eyes cannot quite decide whether to languish or to drown in tears, as a suitable reaction to the crime. In the emphasis on appearance we can see how close the sylphs' functions come to the airs of Affectation, "Wrapt in a Gown, for Sickness, and for Show"; even their constant movement and inconsistency can be seen in "each new Night-Dress" giving a "New Disease".

In his appearance Umbriel is a sooty-winged "dusky melancholy Spright", whose function is the exact converse of that of the sylphs — "As ever sully'd the fair Face of Light" (i.e. Belinda). As he lists his achievements to the Goddess of Spleen, we see that, like those of the sylphs, they all have to do with appearance:

But oh! If e'er thy *Gnome* could spoil a Grace,  
Or raise a Pimple on a beauteous Face,  
Like Citron-Waters Matrons' Cheeks inflame,  
Or change Complexions at a losing Game . . .

(IV, 11. 67-70)

Both Umbriel and the Sylphs are concerned also with reputation, and seem to equate it with appearance: all of Umbriel's lines here are suggestive of both — inflaming Matrons' cheeks (as with alcohol), planting heads with "airy Horns", rumpling petticoats, and upsetting prudes' hairdos. (This last could be an oblique reference to Belinda and her recent loss.)

Through Umbriel's address Pope expands Belinda's problems to include "the Sex from Fifty to Fifteen", and show how Belinda's denial of her own darker side contributes to her downfall. "A Nymph there is which all thy Pow'r disdains" is Umbriel's accusation: in the balance, Belinda is neither sylph nor gnome, but human.

One of the most interesting relationships between the world of the sylphs and that of the gnomes occurs in the previously-mentioned connection between the Cave of Spleen and the "moving Toyshop" of a maiden's heart. Just as a disease is governed by a night-dress, or as "transient Breath" is all that underlies Womans's "beauteous Mold", so in the minds of young coquettes all that is important about their beaux are "Garters, Stars, and Coronets" — the competition in the Toyshop is be-

tween wigs and sword-knots, both unnecessary articles of decoration. Pope emphasizes, however, that this view of their lovers is the result of an overall outlook on society — these women see themselves as equally shallow — by painting the women as objects, usually a jar or a vase.

This is brought to life in *Belinda* and the powerful extent of "China vase" imagery associated with her throughout the poem. In Canto II, the "beauteous Mold" is transformed into a "painted Vessel" — it is left up to us either to look at *Belinda* as the gorgeous battleship decked out in Beauty's arms (she merges with the boat in our minds as Pope does not define the "painted Vessel" clearly) or to take the broader interpretation, the idea of woman as a container, empty (in this case) but beautiful. Like most images in the poem, this one bears a strong relationship to the underlying sexual discussion, particularly with later reference to the "frail China jar" receiving a "flaw" — a traditional representation of the loss of virginity.<sup>6</sup> After the actual catastrophe, however, Pope shows the emptiness of his vessel *Belinda*, now "fall'n from high" to "painted Fragments"; he points here to the destruction of her splendid but vain shell of beauty, and also to her eventual fate as a mere human being — dust to "glittering Dust". The sexual significance of the empty vessel which should be filled, either by the sexual act or by childbearing, becomes even clearer when we look into *Belinda*'s "toyshop" in the Cave of Spleen. Here Pope again brings to its point the recurrent image of people transformed to objects, giving us a beautiful portrait of the world as *Belinda* sees it and of the deeper psychology behind her view. Men and Maids here both resemble and have the same importance as the objects in her cluttered dressing table, which delineates her whole world: she can have no conception of them as anything more complicated than a jar or a bottle. Without Freud's help, Pope hints quite intimately at the problems of a "good" coquette — the thwarted sexual yearnings of the "Maids turn'd Bottels" and the sighing Jar reminiscent of *Belinda* herself. As in the confusion of "Garters" and "Wigs", Pope indicates here the vanity and affectation in *Belinda*'s society: the unnatural pose of the tea pots is surely a reflection of how she has seen the men around her in their



foppish postures—" . . . One Arm held out, / One bent; the Handle this, and that the Spout".<sup>7</sup>

Not only people, but also emotions and intangible ideals are imprisoned in object form in this dressing-table world of Belinda and her contemporaries — there is a natural progression from the wits of beaus in snuff-boxes and tweezer-cases to love itself being transformed into a dressing-table object: "Lovers' Hearts with Ends of Riband bound"(V, 11.116, 118). This makes a complete development from the relative whimsy of the moving Toyshop, to the psychological sickness of the Cave of Spleen, to the vision of social sickness and despair in the "Lunar Sphere". The true emotion of love is seen in the form of a chaste love-object such as a billet-doux, in which the "Wounds, Charms" and "Ardours" are only literary. Similarly, in the incongruity with which Ariel lists potential catastrophes (II, 11.105-110), "Honour" is equated with "new Brocade" and Belinda's heart is as easily lost as her necklace: intangible moral concepts and the seat of a persons's emotions are reduced to the status of decorative objects.<sup>8</sup>

On the level of the love discussion underlying the poem, the billet-doux is rivalled by the image of fire, representing human passions, which is particularly associated with the Baron. The shining and glitter that surround Belinda are like an imitation of the warm fires of human love and sexuality, just as a coquette's smiles are an imitation of true passion:

When kind Occasion prompts their warm Desires,  
When Musick softens, and when Dancing fires?

(I, 11.75-76)

Knowing our natures, Pope intends these softly glowing fire images to be more attractive to us than the static language of objects and the insubstantiality of the sylph world.

From his introduction, the ardent-eyed Baron's association with fire is apparent, as he raises with "am'rous Sighs" a fire more powerful than Belinda's imitation sun. Indeed, he is a step ahead of the sun (not to mention the sleeping Belinda) in imploring Heaven "ere *Phoebus* rose". It is notable that his altar is built of six vast French romances, which correspond to the merely literary love of the billet-doux, and which presumably

will burn as well. As it turns out, the fire does conquer: the symbols of coquetry are consumed on the pyre, and Belinda's lock, the ultimate love-object, catches fire as it shoots up into the sky.

Yet underneath the glitter of Belinda herself there lurks hints of fire: from the uncscious "glow" of her cheeks in Canto I to the "rising Fires" of anger fanned by Thalestris. As Geoffrey Tillotson points out, the comparison of Belinda to the sun is continued in Canto III, as the declining "burning Ray" of line 20 looks ahead to the nymph who "Burns to encounter two . . . Knights at *Ombre*".<sup>9</sup> Here, however, she is not so much concerned with her shining image as with a human feeling of competitiveness, seen in her more "natural" reaction to the prospect of defeat — "At this, the Blood the Virgin's Cheek forsook. . . ." And in the vision of the Goddess of Spleen "screen'd in Shades from Day's detested Glare" we have a possible hint that inwardly Belinda is not quite content with her sun image. We can see, however, that in her what should be the creative fire of love has become (through the repression of "all her Art") the destructive fire of anger. Herein perhaps lies the answer to the question posed in Pope's invocation:

Oh say what stranger Cause, yet unexplor'd  
 Cou'd make a gentle *Belle* reject a *Lord*?  
 In Tasks so bold, can little Men engage,  
 And in soft Bosoms dwells such mighty Rage?

(I, 11.7-12)

The conflict between love and coquetry is also expressed by means of two opposing sets of rituals which help to hold the poem together: the Toilette and the Coffee Hour, and the Baron's propitiation of Heaven and rape of the lock. In the mock Mass of the dressing-table, Belinda begins as the high Priestess robed in chaste white, a celibate devoted totally to her religion — and she ends in the armour of Beauty, rising "in all her Charms" to sally forth on the Thames as its guardian Goddess. Corresponding to the Priestess, however, is the Baron who has built his altar before Belinda has even awakened, and who worships not his own image, but chiefly Love and the "Pow'rs" which exist beyond those of Belinda and the sylphs. The clutter

of offerings on his altar is similar to that on the dressing-table; but the objects are consumed in the fires of love rather than being laid in the "mystic Order" of the instruments of vanity.

At the crucial moment in Canto III the two religions come into confrontation. There is a feeling of extravagant ritual (similar to that of the toilette) in the "shining Altars", "silver Lamp", and "fiery Spirits" of the coffee hour, as the priestess/goddess sits in state, surrounded by her hovering attendants. But in a quick moment the roles are changed, as the Baron, Priest at the altar of Love, takes over the rites and the priestess becomes sacrificial victim: the impression of ritual being conveyed by the "tempting Grace" or deliberateness with which Clarissa offers the weapon, and the "rev'rence" with which he takes it. After a fleeting vision of Belinda as the archetypal sacrificial virgin, with the blades spread behind her neck, it is only fitting that one of the symbols of her vanity is sacrificed instead. At the same time, there is an echo of the underlying theme of mortality in this reminder of those truly tragic virgins in whom the severing occurs at the neck. The fate of the sylph "cut . . . in twain" reminds us that like "Airy Substance", hair *does* grow again; yet it hints at a far more dire separation, that of soul from body, at the time when "All those Tresses shall be laid in Dust."

J. S. Cunningham comments on "the *beau-monde's* tendency to deify its trivialities and exalt its social occasions into rites, while casually neglecting what ought to be sacred".<sup>10</sup> This can be seen in the conventions and formulae by which Belinda's whole social existence is governed: the toilette, the coffee hour, the obligatory "visit" which acquires a religious importance:

While *Visits* shall be paid on solemn Days,  
When numerous Wax-Lights in bright Order blaze.

(III, 11.168-69)

Pope emphasizes this aspect of Belinda's society with epic ritualistic formulae, as well as repeated references to "the Watch"; but he brings it sharply to a point in the following black lines:

Mean while declining from the Noon of Day,  
 The Sun obliquely shoots his burning ray;  
 The hungry Judges soon the Sentence sign,  
 And Wretches hang that Jury-men may Dine.

(III, 11.19-22)

Here the same valuing of ritual is carried over into life and death existence. In 1712 the connection between the hungry judges and Belinda's cronies is clearer, as the Coffee Hour follows on the heels of the judges' and jurymen's dinner-time; in this Juvenalian passage Pope is emphasizing the visceral impulse under society's ritual. (The death of reputations of III, 1.16, too, may be compared to the death of the wretches — taking place at a word.) The implication of the structure of the passage, which parallels the "Long Labours of the Toilette" to the judges' work day is devastating — here Pope is pinioning the values which can subordinate the death of a husband to that of a lapdog, and is putting them in the context of society at large. Among others, Murray Krieger in his article "The 'Frail China Jar' and the Rude Hand of Chaos" has interpreted this couplet as presenting an ugly alternative to Belinda's world, a world whose "fragile decorum" and "disinvolvement" from reality make it precious.<sup>11</sup> It would seem by this passage, however, that Pope is suggesting rather that the world of the judges is an *extension* of Belinda's world; that the topsy-turvy values and lack of moral substance which constitute its "fragile decorum" have here become a mortally important force in the world of "justice". The coquette's lack of commitment, her refusal of the social responsibilities of love and wifehood, is paralleled by the judges' abdication of responsibility — both are inhumane.

This same sense of incongruity is more subtly expressed at many other points in the poem, such as Ariel's listing of the different duties of the sylphs in Canto II, which delicately hints at a sense of despair in that these incarnations of frivolity and impermanence guide all human actions, with special attentions to the British Throne. (Indeed, the same or related forces which control the "mystic Mazes" of women's whims [I, 1.92] are those which guide the stars and planets.) Similarly, in his description of the Toilette in Canto II, Pope's ceremonial, world-

encompassing language, like that of *The Dunciad*, Book IV, gives a vision of the whole world offering itself at this altar to vanity:

Unnumber'd Treasures ope at once, and here  
 The various Offerings of the World appear . . . .  
 This Casket *India's* glowing Gems unlocks,  
 And all *Arabia* breathes from yonder Box.

(I, 11.129-30, 133-34)

Another epic convention, that of giving the pedigree of the hero's equipment, affords Pope an excellent opportunity for a condensed picture of social decline as he describes the ancestry of Belinda's "deadly Bodkin" in Canto V, 11.88-96; it had descended from the Lord Chancellor's chain, to a belt-buckle for his widow, to a baby's whistle, and finally to its present hair-gracing state. The poet manages to compress into this image not only the vision of a civilisation decaying into triviality but also a sense of its scrambled priorities and possibly of female responsibility — a sense which is even stronger in Canto II, as the poet expatiates on the significance of the sacred locks:

Love in these Labyrinths his Slaves detains,  
 And mighty Hearts are held in slender Chains,  
 With hairy Springes we the Birds betray,  
 Slight Lines of Hair surprize the Finny Prey,  
 Fair Tresses Man's Imperial Race insnare,  
 And Beauty draws us with a single Hair.

(II, 11.23-28)

Mankind is ensnared by the tiny, just as the fish and the birds are, and it is this work of the sylphs which has a whole civilisation tangled in its web, an idea supported by the recurring image of hair as a prime weapon of vanity. Belinda's locks are nourished "to the Destruction of Mankind", and are graced by the same "deadly Bodkin" that her mother wore. In the line "And mighty Hearts are held in slender Chains" we have the same sense of greatness, of deep human emotions, bound by the tiny that is to be found in the "lunar Sphere" (II,1.18). And the compelling ". . . Beauty draws us with a single Hair" contains the same admission as "Look on her Face, and you'll forget 'em all" (II,1.18). Although delivered in a lightly complimentary tone, this last line becomes more significant when we consider

the replacement of the word "forgive" of 1712 with "forget" — there is now a hint that the mental erasing of Belinda's faults is not a conscious decision, that the moral awareness implicit in the word "forgive" has been dulled.

At the end of Canto V, however, Pope drops all his humorous and lighter shades of meaning to concentrate into a few vivid images his vision of the elements of society. Even the order in which he relates them, moving from heroic human achievement to the insect level, give us a feeling of decline — social, moral and intellectual — sharper than at any other point in the poem; and for me this is perhaps its moment of deepest feeling:

Some thought it [the Lock] mounted to the Lunar Sphere,  
 Since all things lost on Earth are treasur'd there,  
 There Heroes' Wits are kept in pondrous Vases,  
 And Beaus' in *Snuff-Boxes* and *Tweezer-Cases*.  
 There broken Vows, and Death-bed Alms are found,  
 And Lovers' Hearts with Ends of Riband bound;  
 The Courtier's Promises, and Sick Man's Pray'rs,  
 The Smiles of Harlots, and the Tears of Heirs,  
 Cages for Gnats, and Chains to Yoak a Flea;  
 Dry'd Butterflies, and Tomes of Casuistry.

(V, 11.113-22)

Here is a museum of triviality and tragedy, a collection of the symbols of the "moral chaos"<sup>12</sup> of Belinda's society; it is the bleak conclusion of the theme of objectification, taken to the social and deep intellectual level. The wits of men are contained in objects reminiscent of the vanity of the "moving Toyshop"; and a Lover's Heart is no more than a billet-doux, tied round with a tag-end of ribbon. Alongside these leftovers of Belinda's world, Pope vividly paints in a few phrases the hypocrisy at the base of this society — "the Smiles of Harlots", "the Tears of Heirs", and the pseudo-intellectual "Tomes of Casuistry" — and gives a black picture of what vanity and riches come to: "Dry'd Butterflies" (like the "rivell'd Flow'r" of an aged coquette) and "Death-bed Alms". In the emblems of hypocrisy we can see element of Belinda herself, of the artificial nature of her smile and the insincerity of her tears.

The "Cages for Gnats, and Chains to Yoak a Flea" are the final instance of the theme of incongruity, here ridiculing false learning, but also reminiscent of the punishment of the sylphs

and the incongruity of their tininess controlling mankind. In the following line, however, the satire goes deeper: "Casuistry" implying "specious reasoning about matters of conscience"<sup>13</sup> even as "Honour" is equated by the sylphs with "Levity" in Canto I. It is defined by Geoffrey Tillotson as "the minutely argued adaptation of ethical rules" encouraged by the Counter-Reformation and portrayed by Pope in *The Dunciad* as one of the executioners of Morality; and Pope himself refers (in the letter of 27 April 1708, quoted by Tillotson) to the profound Casuists, grave Philosophers, who have written "... whole Tomes and Voluminous Treatises about Nothing." The "Tomes" in this line, through physically heavy, have the moral and intellectual weight of "Dry'd Butterflies".

Here is an example of how the "Filagree-work"<sup>14</sup> with which Pope's poem is criss-crossed carries in fact its own weight of meaning, a weight which is often to be found in its very lightness. One aspect of this meaning is evident in the idea of transience and mortality touched on previously; Belinda's beauty, for example, is shallow and brief, just as the "vernal Flow'rs" from which its colours are drawn are soon killed by the summer heat. When Pope draws out this flower symbol, the sense of impermanence soaks through the whole poem; Hampton Court, the seat of the government, is "crown'd with Flowers", Belinda wears a nosegay on her breast (the beauty of the latter will hardly outlast its adornment), and even her conception of Christianity is confined to "Wreaths of Heav'nly Flowers". On the darker side of this image we have the sylph shrivelled up like a "rivell'd Flower", in a graphic picture of Belinda's future, and with his picture of Affectation Pope brings the flower image to its point: she combines "roses" in her cheeks with an hypocritical "sickly Mien", showing exactly what those roses are worth — they are associated with outward appearance, and only with youth, being "the Roses of Eighteen".

The "lightness" of *The Rape of the Lock* has even more weight when seen in the social context of an upset in values, as in the Lunar Sphere and the bodkin history — indeed it becomes the most powerful support of the work. Through this all-pervading idea of incongruity, of universal concepts reduced to trivialities

and of tiny objects ludicrously exaggerated, Pope communicates his vision of a society whose priorities have become hopelessly scrambled as it descends into chaos. He even manages to convey a sense of decline through the order (or disorder) of his images, ending most often on an anticlimactic note: a striking example is in Thalestris' vision of universal destruction, once again involving the four elements of Creation:

Sooner let Earth, Air, Sea to Chaos fall,  
Men, Monkies, Lag-dogs, Parrots perish all.

(IV, 11.119-20)

This reflects the "moral chaos" which Williams sees in the couplet at the beginning of this speech:

*Honour* forbid: at whose unrival'd Shrine  
Ease, Pleasure, Virtue, All, our Sex resign.

(IV, 11.105-06)

Perhaps the most encompassing image in the poem is to be found in its very structure, in the shifts of mood which occur as Belinda's day progresses, preparing us for a climax not far removed from the vision of Thalestris. With hints of light and sound Pope manages to convey to us the onset of a great thunderstorm, deepening his ominous shadows under a brightness that grows thinner and thinner. Belinda's day starts at the sun's peak, noon-time ("just at Twelve" (I, 1.15), and ends in storm and chaos. In Canto II Pope ingeniously develops the sense of a "calm before the storm", of hints of doom weighing down a mood of peace, summed up best in line 50 — ". . . softened Sounds along the Water die". Although the "painted Vessel glides . . . secure", the sunbeams still tremble on the "floating Tydes"; the security is shifting, transient, mutable. (These hints will soon be borne out in the "trembling" sylphs of II, 1.142, and in the premonition of "impending Woe" by which Ariel is oppressed.)

Ironically, it is Belinda's narrowly-won triumph in Canto II which first touches off the storm; as her King "falls like Thunder on the prostrate *Ace*" she breaks the late-afternoon calm with exulting shouts which themselves reverberate like thunder. Too soon, as the choric warning foretells, they will be changed to



"screams of Horror" at the catastrophe of the rape. It is then that the storm breaks in earnest:

Then flash'd the living Lightning from her Eyes,  
And Screams of Horror rend th'affrighted Skies.

(III, 11.155-56)

And it culminates in the chaotic battle of the sexes:

To Arms, to Arms! the fierce Virago cries,  
And swift as Lightning to the Combate flies . . .  
Heroes' and Heroines' Shouts confus'dly rise,  
And bass, and treble Voices strike the Skies. . . .  
*Jove's* Thunder roars, Heav'n trembles all around;  
Blue *Neptune* storms, the bellowing Deeps resound.

(V, 11.37-38, 41-42, 49-50)

In the trip to the Cave of Spleen Pope has enlarged the darkness of Belinda's mind to include all women — "That single Act gives half the World the Spleen" (IV, 1.79) — and has centred in Belinda "the Force of Female Lungs", all the feminine ire of the world. And it follows that the results of this attitude, the war of the sexes (with its chaos increased to universal proportions by the mock-epic comparison to the gods) echoes from "the bellowing Deeps" to the skies; an entire civilisation loses its base and crumbles:

Earth shakes her nodding Tow'rs, the Ground gives way,  
And the pale Ghosts start at the Flash of Day!

(V, 11.51-52)

There is also a tragic and magnifying echo in the reference to Othello at the end of the battle. Here the theme is similar — the overvaluing of a trivial object (the handkerchief) — and Othello's roarings end in a mental chaos comparable to that of the battle. This allusion brings to mind the idea of love betrayed or denied — ". . . And when I love thee not, / Chaos is come again."

At the centre of the poem we find an example of an "extended image" in the card game, which draws neatly together the main images and themes of the work. It serves as a perfect expression of the depth of Belinda's emotion — if she "burns to encounter . . . Knights" it is only on the card table — but the game also carries the darker themes of mortality and social decline. In epic tradition, the images and action of the card game are prophetic

of both the rape and the battle: we see Thalestris in the Baron's "warlike Amazon", and as Belinda is "just in the Jaws of ruin" there is a glimpse of the scissors spread behind her neck. Some minor images which thread the poem are continued too, in the Queens holding flowers, their emblems of "softer Pow'r", and in the pictures of the Kings: any sexual overtones in the King of Spades' "manly leg" are denied by his "many-coloured Robe" which hides the rest. And the "embroider'd *King* who shows but half his Face" gives us a sense of both hypocrisy and the decorative glitter of diamonds, reminiscent of Belinda's world.

As the various cards fall on tricks, their fate becomes heavy with a sense of mortality, in the mock-epic comment on the vanity of human wishes:

Ev'n mighty *Pam* that Kings and Queens o'erthrew,  
And mow'd down Armies in the Fights of *Lu*,  
Sad chance of War! now, destitute of Aid,  
Falls undistinguish'd by the Victor *Spade*!<sup>15</sup>

(III, 11.61-64)

The most striking effect of the game, however, is in its movement, which builds in speed and vividly portrays a society tumbling into chaos. The vision of overturned authority in the King of Clubs (he who normally carries the symbol of authority is now reduced to ridiculousness — "Giant Limbs in State unwieldy spread" — and his crown is of no avail) helps lead up to the climactic description of the fall into disorder. Here the glitter and vanity of the Diamonds, headed by the king of hypocrisy and his shining queen:

Of broken Troops an easie Conquest find.  
*Clubs, Diamonds, Hearts*, in wild Disorder seen,  
With *Throngs* promiscuous strew the level Green.

(III, 11.78-80)

In the "Throngs promiscuous" there are overtones of the sexual discussion — the phrase reminds us of the coquette's lack of discrimination but connects it to a more serious and widespread moral disorder. Pope gives this fall worldwide reverberations with "*Asia's* Troops and *Africk's* Sable Sons", then neatly connects a vision of overwhelming catastrophe (like the onset of Dulness) with images of the cracked vessel and the divided hair:

The pierc'd Battalions dis-united fall,  
In Heaps on Heaps; one Fate o'erwhelms them all.

(III, 11.85-86)

Perhaps the main importance of the card game in this discussion is as an image of the poem as a whole, as it portrays in miniature the same "orchestral combinations"<sup>16</sup> of imagery and resulting richness of theme. The poem itself acts as does one of its images, expanding in a manner similar to the world it describes; as it moves from the light world of "jest" and literary entertainment to a depth and darkness of social vision, a deep humanity ties the two together. Just as there is both darkness and light in Belinda herself (and in her society), so the "light" mode of the poem contains both the incisive comment of the satires and hints of the broad vision of *The Dunciad*; our laughter at the "little unguarded Follies" of Belinda's world is always on the edge of a sense of the tragedy inherent in the situation as Pope saw it. Critics from Hazlitt to Tillotson have not known "whether to laugh or weep" over *The Rape of the Lock*; it seems possible to do both. Under the dazzling technical mastery of their depiction, both female follies and sweeping chaotic grandeur spring from a depth of feeling which assures our equally sincere feeling in response.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup>All quotations are taken from the Twickenham edition of the poem (general editor John Butt), Geoffrey Tillotson, ed., *The Rape of the Lock and Other Poems* (London: Methuen, 1962).

<sup>2</sup>James Osborn, ed., *Joseph Spence — Observations, Anecdotes and Characters of Books and Men* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1966), p. 44.

<sup>3</sup>Parnell, "To Mr. Pope", *The Works of Alexander Pope*, 1717, rpt. in John Barnard, ed., *Pope: The Critical Heritage* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1963), p. 55.

<sup>4</sup>Hugo Reichard, "The Love Affair in Alexander Pope's *The Rape of the Lock*," *PMLA*, LXIX (1954), 887-902, rpt. in J. Dixon Hunt, ed., *Pope: The Rape of the Lock — A Casebook* (London: Macmillan, 1968), p. 167.

<sup>5</sup>Cf. the criticism of Platonism in the *Essay on Man*, Epistle II, 22-30. The central theme of the first two epistles — man outstepping his place in the universe — also helps govern Pope's presentation of Belinda.

<sup>6</sup>Aubrey Williams traces the literary history of this image in "The 'Fall' of China and *The Rape of the Lock*," *PQ*, XLI (1962), 412-425, reprinted in Maynard Mack's *Essential Articles for the Study of Alexander Pope* (Hamden: Archon Books, 1968), pp. 284-300.

- <sup>7</sup>For pointing out that the tea pot is comparable to a man in an affected pose, I am indebted to Professor R. D. Chambers of Trent University, Ontario.
- <sup>8</sup>John Preston speaks of this theme of objectification as helping to show that this world is "without a soul", in "Th' Informing Soul: Creative Irony in *The Rape of the Lock*," *Durham University Journal*, (1966), 127-128.
- <sup>9</sup>Geoffrey Tillotson, ed. cit., p. 170.
- <sup>10</sup>J. S. Cunningham, *Pope: The Rape of the Lock* (London: Edward Arnold, 1961), p. 34.
- <sup>11</sup>Murray Krieger, "The 'Frail China Jar' and the Rude Hand of Chaos," *Centennial Review of Arts and Sciences* (1961), 176-94, rpt. in J. Dixon Hunt, p. 206.
- <sup>12</sup>Aubrey Williams, op. cit., p. 284
- <sup>13</sup>Aubrey Williams, ed., *Poetry and Prose of Alexander Pope* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1969), p. 100.
- <sup>14</sup>William Hazlitt, *Lectures on the English Poets*, IV (1818-19), excerpts reprinted in J. Dixon Hunt, p. 93.
- <sup>15</sup>William Frost compares this to Sarpedon's death in the Iliad; see "*The Rape of the Lock* and Pope's Homer," *MLQ*, (1947), 342-54, rpt. in Mack, pp. 271-73.
- <sup>16</sup>Bonamy Dobrée, ed., *Alexander Pope's Collected Poems* (London: Dent, 1924), p. vi.

## The Canadian Singers

for Gordon Lightfoot

The Canadian singers  
 sing of adversity sorrow  
 & loss: their voices document  
 mine cave-ins shipwrecks riots  
 wars & love spilled lonely shapless  
 on a tavern table: how they  
 lyricize disaster; make a dollar;  
 find identity.

John Ditsky