



The Rape of the Lock Summary and analysis

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Introduction : In "The Rape of the Lock," the Baron cuts off a lock of Belinda's hair. This act symbolizes a loss of chastity and virginity, and Belinda, who didn't consent to this, is rightfully offended. Both she and her brother attempt to retrieve the lock. It later flies off into space, never to be seen again.



Belinda has a dream warning her to beware of men and vanity. She promptly forgets this advice, however, and sails up to Hampton Court to play games with her friends.

At Hampton Court, one of Belinda's suitors, the Baron, declares that he'll have a lock of her hair, regardless of whether or not she gives it to him willingly. During a card game, his proxy, the Baron, cuts off a lock of her hair without her consent.

Belinda and her brother, Sir Plume, attempt to get the lock back, to no avail. Later, the Baron sneezes after having too much snuff, and the lock flies off into the sky.

Summery : The Rape of the Lock was written by Pope to chide gently the Fermor family when Lord Petre (referred to in the poem as "Baron") cut off a lock of Arabella Fermor's hair on a certain fateful day and such dire results followed. Pope started something that resulted in a piece of literature that has remained to this day a leading example of the mock epic satire. John Caryl, a good friend to Pope, asked him to write a little poem about the affair in order to help heal the wounds of the two families. The poem became a trivial story of the stolen lock of hair as a vehicle for making some thoroughly mature and sophisticated comments on society and humankind. Pope draws on his own experience in the classics in combining epic literary conventions with his own wit and sense of values. The entire poem is written in five cantos, making use of the popular rhymed iambic pentameter verse, along with balance, antithesis, bathos, and paranomasia.



The story is relatively simple. In canto 1, the reader finds Belinda (representing Miss Fermor) asleep but awakened about noon by her lapdog Shock. Before she awakens, she dreams about Ariel, a Rosicrucian sylph, who whispers praises in her ear and warns her to beware of jealousy, pride, and especially men. When she does awaken, she finds a love letter on her bed and, after reading it, quickly forgets all the advice that Ariel has given her. She has been invited to sail up the Thames with friends to Hampton Court palace and have fun and games with her host. She devotes much time to her cosmetics and hair in preparation for the trip.

The Baron, a suitor, is seen admiring a lock of her hair and vowing that he would have it by any means. The modern reader must remember that, until the 1920's, few women of character would cut their hair, an act symbolizing the loss of virtue, even chastity. The reader next sees the crew sailing up the Thames, with everyone but Ariel apparently pleased with the state of affairs. Worried, Ariel summons his helper sylphs and reminds them of their duty in helping to protect Belinda, one especially to guard her fan, one her watch, another her lock, and Ariel himself her dog. A host of sylphs are assigned to guard her petticoat, a literal device of armor in older times, protecting the female's sexual chastity.

After the cruise on the Thames, canto 3 sees Belinda, the Baron and the rest of the party arriving at the palace. There Belinda decides to play a Spanish card game called Ombre with two of her suitors. During the game, coffee, recently introduced into England by Queen Anne in order to help with the alcohol problem, is served, and fumes from the hot liquid open the rational mind of the Baron, providing him with new stratagems. With the help of a female crony named Clarissa, he manages to cut off the lock of Belinda's hair during the card game. At this rape, Belinda cries out in horror, and the Baron cries out in triumph. Ariel weeps bitterly because he was not able to prevent the deed.

In canto 4, a bad sylph named Umbriel takes advantage of the chaos and chooses to increase the woes by flying down to the Cave of Spleen to get more woes to dump onto Belinda. With his trusty key, "Spleenwort," in his hand, he enters and secures from the queen of Spleen a bag of horrible noises and a vial of tears, sorrows, and griefs. One of Belinda's friends, Thalestris,



demonstrates “fair weather friendship” when she announces that everyone is talking about the rape of the lock and that she is afraid that she, too, will be branded as “loose.” Thalestris attempts to get her brother Sir Plume to demand that the lock be returned. Sir Plume is unsuccessful.

Canto 5 shows Umbriel casting the vial of woes upon Belinda so that she is almost drowned in tears. She longs for simple, country life. Clarissa, the one who helped the Baron earlier in his successful venture, gives an interesting moral sermonette about vanity and age and the need of women to use good sense in the battle of the sexes. Soon a battle of teacups ensues, disturbed by the Baron’s sneezing from the snuff that he is using; this causes the lock to fly high into the air, never to be rescued. Some think that the lock has gone to the moon, where love letters and other love tokens find themselves eventually, but others think that the lock became a star.

The poem is a wonderful example of burlesque, a form that takes trivial subjects and treats them seriously, with the effect being comic. Many epic conventions are used here: the epic question is asked; Belinda’s toilet becomes the epic putting on of armor; there is the conference of protective gods; there are the games and the banquet; there is the descent into the underworld; and there are heroic encounters and apotheosis. The poem deals with an actual event and thus pokes fun at the two families, but more than that it shows the vanities of humankind. In doing so, much social satire of the fads of the day are presented. The conclusion shows that eighteenth century reason is strongly advocated; whatever one thinks of Clarissa’s early actions in the poem, it is difficult to ignore her advice near the end, advice that advocates the use of reason in all matters of life.

References :

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