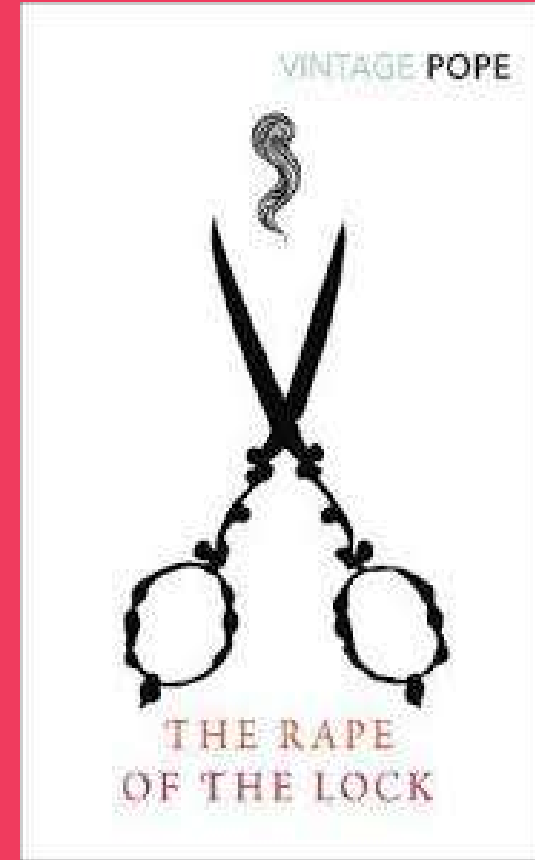


Review: “The Rape of the Lock” by Alexander Pope



Pope: The Mock Satire

- *Rape of the Lock*
- Mock epic based on true events
- Petre family and the Fermor family dispute over a lock of hair is spun into a fantastical adventure tale

What is a mock epic?

- A Long, humorous narrative poem that treats a trivial subject in the grand style of a true epic like Homer's *Iliad* or Milton's *Paradise Lost*.
- For example, in *The Rape of the Lock*, Pope applies to the theft of a lady's lock of hair such epic elements as these:
 - Boasting speeches of heroes and heroines
 - Elaborate descriptions of warriors and their weapons
 - Involvement of gods and goddesses in the action
 - Epic similes, or elaborate comparisons in the style of Homer that sometimes use the words like, as, or so
 - Antithesis—placing side by side, and in similar grammatical structures, strongly contrasting words, clauses, sentences, or ideas.

Pope's Form

- Heroic Couplet:
 - 2 rhymed lines of iambic pentameter
 - “closed” if they represent a complete sentence.
- Epic elements
 - Boasting speeches of heroes and heroines
 - Elaborate descriptions of warriors and their weapons
 - Involvement of gods and goddesses in the action
 - Epic similes, or elaborate comparisons in the style of Homer that sometimes use the words like, as, or so
- Written in Canto's:
 - A canto can be defined as one of the sections into which certain long poems are divided.

Keep in mind while you read the poem...

Important Elements of the mock epic:

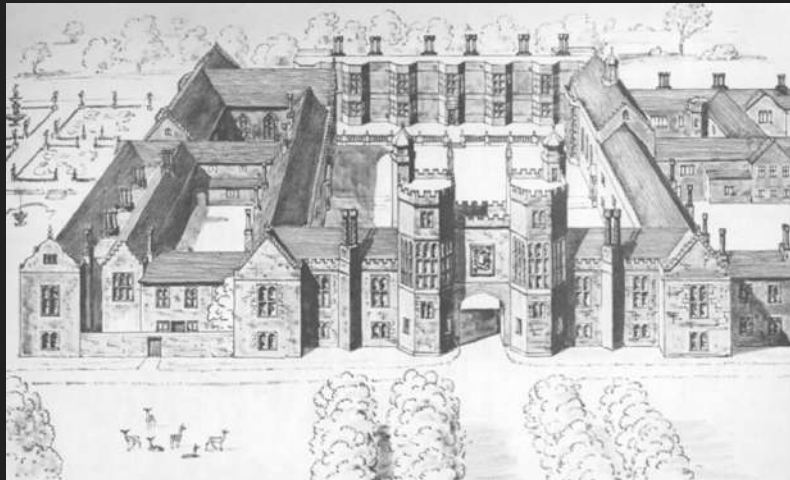
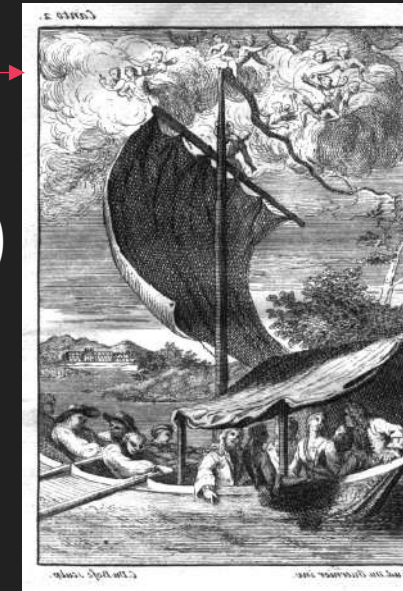
- Boasting speeches of heroes and heroines
- Elaborate descriptions of warriors and their weapons
- Involvement of gods and goddesses in the action
- Epic similes, or elaborate comparisons in the style of Homer that sometimes use the words like, as, or so
- Antithesis—placing side by side, and in similar grammatical structures, strongly contrasting words, clauses, sentences, or ideas.

Elements of a Mock Epic



Setting of the Poem

- London; Early 1700's
- ONE DAY: start as NOON
- Canto I: Belinda's residence
- Canto II: Belinda on a boat traveling up the Thames
- Canto III-V: Hampton Court—a former residence of King Henry VIII (brief scene in Canto IV in the cave of the Queen of Spleen)



Characters

- Belinda Beautiful young lady with wondrous hair, two locks of which hang gracefully in curls.
- The Baron Young admirer of Belinda who plots to cut off one of her locks.
- Ariel Belinda's guardian sylph (supernatural creature).
- Clarissa Young lady who gives the Baron scissors.
- Umbriel Sprite who enters the cave of the Queen of Spleen to seek help for Belinda.
- Queen of Spleen Underworld goddess who gives Umbriel gifts for Belinda.
- Thalestris Friend of Belinda. Thalestris urges Sir Plume to defend Belinda's honor.
- Sir Plume Beau of Thalestris. He scolds the Baron.

The Poem “In a Nutshell”



○ Picture this...

You're sitting there, having a perfectly lovely day, when someone you thought was your friend betrays you in the worst way possible.

Do they copy your homework? Well, no. Do they spread a vicious rumor about you around school? Nope, not that either. It's worse.

They cut off a lock of your hair!

○ Okay, so that situation has a bit of the ridiculous about it. But Alexander Pope is nothing if not a bit ridiculous. And he uses just such an occasion—someone cutting off a friend's lock of hair—to craft this long, funny, famous poem, The Rape of the Lock.

Why “*rape*” of the lock?

- We know: nowadays the word “rape” usually describes a horrific situation at which laughing is strictly—and rightly—forbidden. But back in 1714, when Pope published *The Rape of the Lock*, the term “rape” had a broader definition. Sure, they used it as we do, but it could also refer to the act of seizing or taking anything by force (you can see where our more specific use of the word today comes from—and both meanings, as you’ll also see when we dive into analysis, are active in this poem).

Introduction to the Poem:

Based on a true story

- Two years earlier, at a very fancy party just outside of London, the young Lord Petre had snuck up behind a young lady, Belle Fermor, and snipped off a lock of her hair (literally seizing it by force) without her consent. That actually happened. Neither Belle nor her parents appreciated this assault on her hairstyle, especially since they had been considering Lord Petre as a potential husband for her.
- Yeah, that marriage didn't exactly pan out. Instead, the two families fell out hard with each other. You could call it a feud, Capulet-Montague style.
- After a while things got so bad between them that a mutual acquaintance asked the young poet Alexander Pope (who was also good friends with both families) to write a poem that might make the whole affair into something funny. The idea was to end the feud with laughter and good humor.

The Popularity of Pope

- Pope was pretty young at this point—twenty-four years old—and at the very beginning of his career. Still, he was already getting a name for himself as one of the hottest young poets in London. Back in those days, before radio, television, and the Internet, poets were full-on celebrities. You could call them the rap stars of their culture, writing catchy political and social satire that everyone who knew how to read, did.
- Poetry was the social media of its time: imagine Facebook in verse, or a rhyming Twitter feed. A poem might tell you everything about the extramarital affairs of the King of England, or the money troubles of his Prime Minister, or the bad clothing choices of his oldest son. Pope was ambitious for this kind of celebrity and eager to advance his career, so he took the request to write this poem about what happened between two personal friends as an opportunity to show off his education and his considerable talent with meter, rhyme, and allusion.



A little bit more about the poem...

- *The Rape of the Lock* describes what happened just before (the heroine waking up and getting dressed for the party), during (the card game at the party that she plays, which distracts her) and just after (the heroine and her friends completely freaking out over her unwanted new do) Lord Petre snips off Belle Fermor's hair, but in the most elaborate language and fanciful style possible. You might even say that the poem is more about its own style and language than it is about the actual event it describes.
- Pope takes the trivial crisis of a spoiled society girl losing a piece of her hair to a rich boy's prank, and makes it larger than life by adding in supernatural beings (the Sylphs, fairy-like critters who oversee and comment on the action), and by comparing it to major Classical epics like Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey* and Virgil's *Aeneid*. Belle's obsession with her own looks; Lord Petre's obsession with Belle's hair; Pope's obsession with showing off his mad poetry skills, imagination, and intellect: put it all together, and you'll find the *Rape of the Lock* is a seriously obsessive poem.

Why should I care about this poem?

- Don't be put off by the poem's length and its incredibly formal language: stay patient, resist the temptation to go back to that email full of cute guilty-pet pictures your aunt just sent you, read the poem slowly (with our help of course), and prepare yourself for a big payoff. Alexander Pope's *The Rape of the Lock* delivers on many levels: social, poetic, political, and aesthetic. All that is to say: this poem is awesome.
- How often in your own daily life do people (your friends, your brothers or sisters, your parents, your teachers) seem to blow up over completely trivial things? How many times have you gone off the deep end over something silly and then felt kind of dumb about it later? Have you ever wished you could just sit everyone down and have them put things into perspective? Or that someone could do that with you sometimes?

Relevance of the poem

- The Rape of the Lock looks at tempests in teapots from a uniquely double perspective. On the one hand, the poem recognizes that for some people, an event so slight as the loss of a piece of hair can be a Big Freaking Deal. And that's understandable if you look at it from their point of view. But then the poem also shows how important it is to keep perspective and a sense of humor about all of those little things that can really (and sometimes literally) get us down.
- This social attitude spills over into the poem's politics as well. Think about all of the times our representatives in Congress bog themselves down in arguments about trivial points while the larger issues they should worry about (children going hungry, schools going downhill, the rising cost of living) get ignored?
- What The Rape of the Lock finally shows you is how important it is to look at the bigger picture. Yep, that's right: don't sweat the small stuff. At the same time, though, the poem is busting at the seams with small stuff: perfect rhymes, detailed allusions, gorgeous imagery. What gives?
- Here's a deep thought for you: Pope uses the small stuff (a beautifully written poem) to make his readers get over their own small stuff (a petty fight over a lock of hair). The takeaway point? Even small stuff has its place. But you have to keep it in its place. Got it?

Resources:

- Shmoop: Provides an easy to understand summary of each Canto and analysis of poem!
<http://www.shmoop.com/the-rape-of-the-lock/poem-text.html>