DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH

CBCS, SEM 3, CC7

A.Pope's *The Rape of the Lock*

Summary

The Rape of the Lock opens with an invocation of a muse and establishes the poem's subject matter, specifically a "dire offense from amorous causes" and the "mighty contests [rising] from trivial things" (1-2). The speaker concludes his invocation by asking the muse to explain first why a lord of good-breeding would assault a lady and, secondly, why a lady would reject a lord.

The action of the poem begins with the rising sun awakening the residents of a wealthy household. Though everyone, including the lapdogs, has risen, Belinda remains asleep. She dreams of a handsome youth who informs her that she is protected by a "thousand bright inhabitants of air:" spirits that were once human women who now protect virgins.

The youth explains that after a woman dies, her spirit returns to elemental form; namely, to fire, water, earth, and air. Each element is characterized by different types of women. Termagants or scolds become fire spirits or Salamanders. Indecisive women become water spirits. Prudes or women who delight in rejecting men become Gnomes (earth spirits). Coquettes become Sylphs (air spirits).

The dream is sent to Belinda by Ariel, "her guardian Sylph" (20). The Sylphs are Belinda's guardians because they understand her vanity and pride, having been coquettes when they were humans. They are devoted to any woman who "rejects mankind" (68). Their role is to guide young women through the "mystic mazes" of social interaction (92).

At the end of the dream, Ariel warns Belinda of an impending "dread event," urging her to "Beware of all, but most beware of Man" (109, 114). Belinda is then awoken by her lapdog, Shock. Upon rising, she sees that a billet-doux, or a love-letter, has arrived for her, causing her to forget the details of the dream.

Now awake, Belinda begins her elaborate toilette. Pope endows every object from combs and pins to billet-doux and Bibles with significance in this ritual of dressing: "Each silver vase in mystic order laid" (122). Belinda herself is described as a "goddess," looking at her "heavenly image" in the mirror (132, 125). The elegant language and importance of such objects thus elevate the process of dressing to a sacred rite. The Sylphs assist in Belinda's dressing routine, setting her hair and straightening her gown. Fully arrayed, Belinda emerges from her chamber.

Analysis

The opening of The Rape of the Lock establishes the poem's mock-heroic tone. In the tradition of epic poetry, Pope opens the poem by invoking a muse, but rather than invoke one of the mythic Greek muses, Pope leaves the muse anonymous and instead dedicates the poem to John Caryll, the man who commissioned the poem. The first verse-paragraph also introduces Pope's epic subject matter: a war arising from "amorous causes" (1). Unlike Menelaus' fury at Paris' theft of Helen or Achilles' quarrel with Agamemnon over Briseis in The Iliad, however, the poem's "mighty contests rise from trivial things" (2).

Indeed, these “mighty contests” are merely flirtations and card games rather than the great battles of the Greek epic tradition.

The second verse-paragraph encapsulates Pope’s subversion of the epic genre. In lines 11-12 Pope juxtaposes grand emotions with unheroic character-types, specifically “little men” and women: “In tasks so bold can little men engage, / And in soft bosoms dwells such mighty rage.” The irony of pairing epic characteristics with lowly human characters contributes to Pope’s mock-heroic style. Furthermore, the “mighty rage” of women evokes the rage of Achilles at the outset of The Iliad, foreshadowing the comic gender-reversal that characterizes the rest of the poem. Rather than distinguish the subjects of the poem as in a traditional epic, Pope uses the mock-heroic genre to elevate and ridicule his subjects simultaneously, creating a satire that chides society for its misplaced values and emphasis on trivial matters.

Belinda’s dream provides the mythic structure of the poem. In this segment, Pope introduces the supernatural forces that affect the action of the poem, much the way that the gods and goddesses of The Iliad would influence the progress of the Trojan War. Just as Athena protects Diomedes and Aphrodite supports Paris during the Trojan War, Ariel is the guardian of Belinda. Unlike the Greek gods, however, Ariel possesses little power to protect his ward and preserve her chastity. In this initial canto, Belinda forgets Ariel’s warnings of impending dangers upon receiving a billet-doux. Though charged with protecting Belinda’s virtue, it seems that Ariel cannot fully guard her from the perils of love, unable to distract her even from a relatively harmless love letter. In the dream Ariel indicates that all women have patron sprites, depending on their personality type. Ariel explains that when women die, their spirits return “from earthly vehicles” to “their first elements” (50, 58). Each personality type—scolds, undecided women, prudes, coquettes—becomes a Salamander, Nymph, Gnome, or Sylph, respectively. These four types are associated with both the four humors and the four elements. Having been “light coquettes” as human women, the Sylphs are most closely affiliated with Belinda. Belinda herself is a coquette, and it is this aspect of femininity with which Pope is most concerned.

Pope explores the role of the coquette in this first canto. He demonstrates that womanly priorities are limited to personal pleasures and social aspirations. In his description of the Sylphs during the dream sequence, Pope enumerates coquettish vanities. As humans these women valued their “beauteous mold” and enjoyed frivolous diversions, which they continue to take pleasure in as sprites (48). The “joy in gilded chariots” suggests a preference for superficial grandeur and external signifiers of wealth (55). Similarly, their “love of ombre,” a popular card game featuring elements of bridge and poker, indicates a desire for fashionable entertainment (56). Through this love of finery and these trivial pastimes, Pope depicts a society that emphasizes appearances rather than moral principles. This focus on appearance extends to attitudes towards honor and virtue. Society dictates that women remain chaste while enticing suitable husbands. Of course, if a woman seemed to compromise herself, society would censure her as though she had lost her virtue. This concern about female sexuality represents the underlying anxiety in The Rape of the Lock: the theft of the lock (a metonymic substitution for Belinda’s chastity) creates the appearance of lost virtue.

At this point in the poem, however, Pope depicts Belinda not as a coquette but as a powerful figure, similar to the (male) heroes of epic poetry. Pope reimagines Belinda’s morning routine as a hero’s ritualized preparation before battle. Her toilette commences as a religious rite in praise of a goddess. Belinda’s reflection in the mirror becomes the image of the goddess while her maid is the “inferior

priestess," worshipping at the altar (127). These "sacred rites" perform a secondary purpose: once the sacraments are performed, the goddess should protect Belinda during her day's adventures (128). Upon completion of the morning's ceremony, Belinda begins to array herself, a scene which Pope figures within the epic paradigm as the ritualized arming of the hero. The combs, pins, "puffs, powders, patches" become the weapons and armor of this hero as the "awful Beauty [puts] on all its arms" (138, 139). This depiction of Belinda as an epic hero establishes the mock-heroic motifs that occur throughout the poem.