The Rape of the Lock: A Complex Mock Epic

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Abstract: The Rape of the Lock is a mock heroic epic by Alexander Pope. The poem is a result of feud between Lord Peter and Miss Aabella Fermor. Lord Peter had cut a lock of hair from the head of Miss Fermor causing a fight in their families. Pope was entrusted the task of writing a brilliant piece about the incident so that the families could laugh together and peace be restored. Pope chose to write a mock epic treating this trivial incident in a heroic manner. In “The Rape of the Lock” he has glorified the trivialities of the youth, the degeneration of society with prosperity unaccompanied by sensibility. Pope is trying to hit hard at excess of affectations, too much of self-indulgence and self-importance. Pope’s mock epic heals with morals what it hurts with wit. It is not a poem to be dismissed lightly but it eminently succeeds in its purpose of entertaining and offers criticism for contemporary morals and models. The present study is an attempt to analyze the mock epic characteristics in “The Rape of the Lock” and how Pope has parodied the true epic characteristics in his witty narration.

Index Terms: mock epic, heroic, trivial, society, youth, parody, self-indulgence

The first principle of criticism is to consider the nature of a piece, and the intent of its author. In “The Rape of The Lock” neither is in doubt. The incident on which the poem is founded had caused a breach between the two families of the Peters and the Fermors, and it was suggested to Pope that he should help to make a jest of it and make them laugh together again.

The writing of a witty narrative poem was one of the most obvious methods and the most eligible species of narrative was mock heroic. It had been evolved for the very purpose of diminishing petty quarrels and Pope combined the two forms, epic and satire. The technical brilliance of the poem “The Rape of the Lock” is largely due to the careful handling of Pope who had studied the great epics very carefully along with the remarks of the critics keeping in mind writing his own epic. In mock epic, a dignified genre is put to witty use without being demeaning it in anyway. The poet has an opportunity to ridicule through incongruity and of offering his reader the sophisticated pleasure of recognizing ironic parallels to familiar passages in Homer and Virgil. A mock heroic poem is a parody of an epic and not the ridicule of a literary form as some critics believe it to be.

The first version of 1912, consisted of 334 lines taking only a few characteristics of the epic makes it clear that Pope was more concerned about Miss Fermor and Lord Peter rather than with Homer and Virgil. The style is heroic but the invocation of the muse, the proposition of the subject, the descriptions, the moralizing all aside, only the speeches and the battle are practically the only structural features that are modeled on the epic. The purpose of the poet was neither to ridicule the heroic genre nor to provide a humorous parallel but to diminish the affair of the lock of hair. This remains true in the 1914 version as well in which Pope increased the length of the poem from two cantos to five and added further allusions to the epic as the visit to the Cave of spleen [parodying the epic visit to the underworld], the game of Ombre [parodying the heroic games], the adorning of Belinda [parodying the arming of Achilles] and above the use of machinery of Ariel and the Sylphs.

Although the supernatural machinery plays practically no part in the action but it crowns the whole work. Lord Peter prays to love and its scales decide the issue of the battle between the beaux and belles, while the muse, sole, Phoebus, Powers, winds, the just Gods, Time and fate. Cupid’s flames and Heaven are all mentioned. They are a little more than rhetorical lightening figures of speech used to lend emphasis at various points in the action of this mock epic.

By a stroke of genius and luck, Pope hit on the notion of basing his machinery on the Rosicrucian spirits. The creatures in which they believed had a suggestion about them which was fanciful and farfetched and made them particularly suitable for the mock epic. The identification of the Sylphs, Gnomes, and Nymphs by the Rosicrucian gave great scope of description with pagan deities, this enabled Pope to parody the use of Guardian Angels in heroic verse. The erotic quality of the Rosicrucian spirit is important as every epic poem has a peculiar passion which distinguishes it from the other epic poems. This singular passion corresponds to the character of the epic Hero. The peculiar passion of “Iliad” is anger, soft and tender passion reign in Aeneid because that is the character of Aeneas so coquetry is the reigning passion in Pope’s epic of Belinda’s lock. The principal object of the Rosicrucian spirits is to carry on love affairs with human beings. The supernatural agents of “The Rape of the Lock” are essentially his own creation. In Pope’s poem, they figure primarily as the allies of women in their unceasing war with men. The main thing that he took over was merely the license to invent a fantastic race whose presence would make every trivial incident appear utmost important in his poem. The Sylphs are mirrors added to the scene. Sylphs are responsible for reflecting the central action and multiplying it a hundred fold thus gaining in subtlety and mystery as well as the ironical importance.

The creation of the Sylphs allowed Pope’s imagination a much wider scope. Arousing admiration is a task of the epic poet particularly with the use of supernatural machinery. In the description of Sylphs and their actions Pope made a wonderful attempt
to rouse admiration. English poetry contains no more beautiful and exquisite description than that of the Sylphs in Canto II of The Rape of the Lock. Of the four “elementary nations”, Pope concentrates on the Sylphs, whose region is the air, and it is only through this element every line of the description is informed. After their ethereal beauty Pope describes some of the colors displayed by the Sylphs. The display of colors is only one aspect of the poem. Throughout the poem, the senses are flattered as delicately as they are in Belinda’s world. The punishment inflicted on the negligent Sylphs is the quintessence of torture for the senses. The machinery has given its author an unrivalled opportunity to indulge his descriptive powers. The descriptive passages in the poem are by no means confined to dealing with Sylphs and their elemental colleagues. Mock heroic poem describes a quarrel; Pope is concerned with a quarrel in the beau monde. The nature of his subject leads to an immense difference between his mock epic and those of Homer and Virgil.

Pope deserves equal praise as Homer and Virgil for the pomp and luster of his language on so trivial a subject. The pomp and luster of the idiom in which The Rape of the Lock is written is evident from the opening lines onwards. One notes the inversion of the order of the words and epithets, the use of the relatively pompous word ‘contests’ and the dignified march of the verse. The similarity of idiom between the Rape of the Lock and homer is nowhere more obvious than in the descriptions of the battles between the beaux and the belles and between the opposing cards in the game of ombre. It is because the idiom of Pope’s mock epic differs from that of an epic only in being more brilliant and more labored that he was able to work into the texture of his verse such numerous and successful parodies of a classical epic. Even a heroic poem was not expected to maintain the same elevation throughout. If bombast is to be avoided the diction is to follow the images to take its colour from the complexion of thoughts.

Many of the speeches are amongst the most elevated passages in The Rape of the Lock. Pope divides the speeches of Homer into classes, the exhortatory or deliberative, the vituperative, the narrative, the pathetic and the sarcastic. Examples of each class are readily found in The Rape Of the Lock. The cumulative figures are so prominent in the speeches and occur with dignified colors of rhetoric. They are introduced at points where there is a structural demand for increased elevation and solemnity, wittily emphasize the poet’s high seriousness and serve as remarkably effective transitions.

Pope was right when he said that the usage of pompous expression for low actions is the perfection of The Rape of the Lock. This mock epic passes the test of the statement with highest honors. Periphrases, for example, is one of the manifestations of the eighteenth century poetic diction, which has been attacked frequently, is skillfully used. Pope uses many periphrases and uncommon appellations for the scissors with which Lord Peter performs the rapé – “two edg’d weapon”, “little engine”, “glittering forfex”, “fatal engine”, “shears”, “meeting points”.

At every point in The Rape of the Lock, the epic methods of heightening are reproduced and have been subtly used by Pope to meet his own end; they have certainly not been ridiculed. This may be noticed in the oath sworn by Lord Peter. Pope has used the classical formula here with a witty appropriateness, to fill the picture of Belinda’s world. The carefully and delicately given details describe artificiality of the milieu. The yoking together of ideas belonging to different levels of seriousness has satirical effect. Just as it is uncertain what disaster is imminent in Canto II.

The game of ombre is dignified by several elaborate similes, such as the comparison of the scattering of cards to the dispersal of a routed army, as it is the battle of beau and belles. Agame of romps was never so well dignified before. The comparison drawn between sun and Belinda is quite paradoxical.

“Belinda smil’d, and the World was gay…”

There is an element of incongruous in comparing a pretty girt to the sun and describing her life in a style appropriate to the adventure of a hero. The heroic idiom of this poem has its measure of appropriateness. It is not a poem against anyone but a moral fault the same elevation

The success of this complex mock epic lies in the way the in which the sense is expressed by means of a fable and made more vivid by narrative and description. The full complexity of his attitude can be seen in the lines where Belinda’s dressing table and painting is made as pompous as Achilles arming. In the description of her toilet table, Pope shows Belinda lavishing adoration on herself which should have been preserved for a higher objective.

The moral judgment of Pope is implicit throughout: he added the speech of Clarissa in 1717, to express more clearly the oral of the poem. One of the basic components of the Augustan heroic theory was to have a moral in the piece of writing whether implicit or explicit. If The Rape of the Lock lacked a moral then it would have failed as an impressive poem. A heroic poem having only beautiful imagination and diction without a moral was looked down upon by the critics of that period. A good poem or a play always carried a moral and had a deep sense of meaning.

“Charms strike the sight, but merit wins the soul”
References


