

# Metamorphosis in *The Rape of the Lock*

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THE character of Clarissa in *The Rape of the Lock* has been the subject of sharp modern criticism, though she has not lacked spirited defenders. She has been pilloried both as a hypocrite and as the common-sensical, spoil-sport destroyer of the poem's toyshop world.<sup>1</sup> Perhaps Pope thought, as Jane Austen would later, that he had written a work too "light and bright and sparkling" and wanted in 1717 to bring in another tone. According to his own account, he added Clarissa's speech to the 1717 version of *The Rape of the Lock* in order "to open more clearly the Moral of the Poem."<sup>2</sup> His was a problem in the rhetoric of fiction. How could he convey a positive ideal through the presentation of negative instances? This is always the satirist's problem, but in a poem which had to serve at once as satire and panegyric the problem was particularly acute.

"The stealing of Belle Fermor's hair," said Pope to Spence, "was taken too seriously . . ."<sup>3</sup> *The Rape of the Lock* takes its terms from Arabella Fermor's behavior. Her over-reaction to the cutting of her lock becomes the normal scale for every action in the poem, as its hyperbolic title suggests; and since all the other actions are of even less consequence, their heroic elevation measures her distance from reality. The mock-heroic is not used in this poem primarily to judge modern society by the standards of a more heroic age.

*The Rape of the Lock* is not *To Augustus* before its time, satire masquerading as panegyric. Pope solved his problem through an implied critique within a texture of praise. The satire becomes sharper, as Earl Wasserman has demonstrated, when we probe the contexts of Pope's allusions.<sup>4</sup> Yet Pope, as his "Dedication" to Arabella Fermor with its

explanation of the most rudimentary terms of epic criticism reveals ("The *Machinery*, Madam, is a Term invented by the Criticks . . ."), did not expect her to apprehend this level of the satire; indeed, he seems to count on the sharpest thrusts being missed by her, if not by the *cognoscenti*.<sup>5</sup> Pope conveys what even Arabella Fermor could apprehend through his use of metamorphosis.

*The Rape of the Lock* is Pope's most Ovidian poem. Pope creates, as has been remarked, a dazzling world of beautiful surfaces with which he is half in love himself; but he knows that one cannot simply love them, for, as he implies through his use of metamorphosis, they cannot last. The poem starts with the rising sun but ends with a star that will remain when all suns set, including the mortal Belinda, who is compared to the sun throughout. Hence the mixture of wise sadness and amusement along with love and sympathy.

The use of metamorphosis is double-edged. On the one hand it seems to imply a conservation of matter — beautiful things merely change into different beautiful things, giving us a world of kaleidoscopic glitter; on the other hand we have permanent transformations: the vase shattered, the lock cut (the possibility of its growing back is deftly left out of consideration), virginity lost, beauty gone, death. The unnatural metamorphoses, supernatural or artificial, while often attractive, are always delusive. The natural metamorphoses are permanent and hardly welcome, but they are real. The burden of the poem is to show Arabella Fermor, and by extension all young ladies and all of us — the beauty is a more poignant example of the general condition — the true state of affairs.

The sylphs, beautiful and charming — transparent in several senses of the word — hold out a promise not only of narcissistic pleasure but also of immortality. They once were women themselves. This is one of the metamorphoses which sends the moral sense on holiday and moves the poem from the real world to a fairyland. Ariel, by re-

collecting the sylphs' transformations, leads us to expect a world where a lovely thing changes into something else, different but equally delightful :

As now your own, our Beings were of old,  
And once inclos'd in Woman's Beauteous Mold;  
Thence, by a soft transition, we repair  
From earthly Vehicles to these of Air. (I, 47-50)

There are overtones here of the voice from beyond the grave. We may also notice that "beauteous Mold" is oxymoronic, perhaps suggesting the Biblical image of the potter's clay.<sup>7</sup> Our strongest sense, however, is of "soft transition."

The sylphs are not only metamorphic beings but also the cause of metamorphosis in others: "With varying Vanities from ev'ry Part, / They shift the moving Toyship of their Heart" (I, 99-100). There is such a whirligig of motion in these lines that we can hardly keep them in focus. Ariel claims, in an argument analogous to one Pope was to advance seriously in *An Essay on Man*, that the seeming disorder of women is actually caused by the invisible activity of the sylphs:

Oft when the World imagine Women stray,  
The *Sylphs* thro' mystick Mazes guide their Way,  
Thro' all the giddy Circle they pursue,  
And old impertinence expel by new . . . .  
This erring Mortals Levity may call,  
Oh blind to Truth! the *Sylphs* contrive it all.  
(I, 91-4, 103-4)

"All Chance, Direction, which thou canst not see:" Ariel's topsy-turvy morality makes moralists err. They seem not only wrong but sinful. The sylphs, substituting for the Homeric gods and Miltonic angels, absorb and pervert the ostensible religious standards in the poem.<sup>8</sup>

Under such tutelage what wonder that Belinda acts as high priestess to bring a deity — herself — into being? As she cosmetically converts herself into a goddess, and a warrior goddess at that, we are treated to the microcosmic world in her boudoir:

This Casket *India's* glowing Gems unlocks,  
 And all *Arabia* breathes from yonder Box.  
 The tortoise here and Elephant unite  
 Transform'd to *Combs*, the speckled and the white.  
 Here Files of Pins extend their shining Rows,  
 Puffs, Powders, Patches, Bibles, Billet-doux. (I, 133-8)

The minuscule is aggrandized, and the impressively large appears diminished. As in the later transmogrifications of the three seal rings from buckle to whistle to Belinda's bodkin, the tortoise and elephant — together a symbol of the world — are reduced in meaning as well as size.<sup>9</sup> The slightly blasphemous cast of the whole scene is set off by the incongruous "Bibles", incongruous, that is, until we see them as jeweled bibelots.

The sylphs' disarming interpretation may hold the stage at this point, but we have a number of other suggestions as to the real end of metamorphosis. The cave of Spleen, Pope's adaptation of the epic underworld, is clearly a demonic vision of metamorphosis, full of up-dated Ovidian grotesqueries. In this fantastic world, the return of the repressed ("Maids turn'd Bottels, call aloud for Corks") is accompanied by the unpleasant side of conventional feminine mutability: the spleen and headache, affectation and tears. If the tone of the early cantos can be summed up in the line "*Belinda* smil'd, and all the world was gay," here the tone is signaled by the gnome's prayer:

Hear me, and touch *Belinda* with Chagrin;

Though we would be reducing the poem to see Belinda as a manic-depressive, the cutting of the lock transforms her entirely from one mode of being to another. Pope's hyperbolic praise early in the poem insures that her fall will be extreme.

Even before we enter the Cave of Spleen, however, the comparisons Pope makes at the moment the lock is cut are intimations of mortality. Among the things which are permanently transformed, we find the china vessel, last item in an anticlimactic catalogue which moves down the scale of being from husbands to lap dogs. But this vase, whose

religious and sexual overtones have received much comment,<sup>10</sup> is the heroine of a couplet tragedy:

Or when rich *China* Vessels, fal'n from high,

The image is Aristotelian in its depiction of a fall from a high and prosperous state. And the oxymoronic status of the tragic hero (compare Othello's "an honorable murderer") is brilliantly conveyed by the second line's connotations of beauty and destruction. The *hubris* which links the china and Belinda is present in the "painted Fragments," for Belinda had earlier converted herself into a goddess by painting her face. After these "sacred Rites of Pride" at the end of Canto I, Belinda sails down the Thames:

But now secure the painted Vessel glides,  
The Sun-beams trembling on the floating Tydes,  
While melting Musick steals upon the Sky,  
And soften'd Sounds along the Waters die. (II, 47-50)

Martin Price, who notes that the phrase "painted vessel" applies equally well to Belinda and her boat, compares the passage of Dalila's arrival in *Samson Agonistes*,<sup>11</sup> and perhaps with Eliot's combined allusions in *The Waste Land* to *Antony and Cleopatra* and *The Rape of the Lock* in mind, we can see another tragic temptress on her barge.

The anaphoric lines which describe Belinda's emotions when her lock is cut also contain hints of Belinda's ultimate fate:

Not youthful Kings in Battel seiz'd alive,  
Not scornful Virgins who their Charms survive,  
Not ardent Lovers robb'd of all their Bliss,  
Not ancient Ladies when refus'd a Kiss, . . .  
E'er felt such Rage, Resentment and Despair,  
As Thou, sad Virgin! for thy ravish'd Hair. (IV, 3-6, 9-10)

The effects are partially muted through anticlimax (Not *Cynthia* when her *Manteau's* pinn'd awry"), but the lines which refer to women otherwise insinuate a life history, the same basic response at stages in a misspent life. The scornful virgin *will* survive her charms, and what the virgin denies the "ancient lady" may beg for.

Up to this point in the poem, every explicit statement has been favorable to Belinda. All criticism has been by implication. In 1717, however, Pope decided that he needed his norms voiced as a way of bringing the implicit criticism into prominence.

Clarissa explicates the values at heart of the poem.<sup>12</sup> Belinda is concerned solely with appearances, but Clarissa inquires after essence: "Say, why are Beauties prais'd and honour'd most . . .?" The adoration they receive should have some stability:

How vain are all these Glories, all our Pains,  
Unless good Sense preserve what Beauty gains:  
That Men may say, when we the Front-box grace,  
Behold the first in Virtue, as in Face! (V, 15-18)

The options are quickly canvassed. If one could live in a world of rapidly changing beautiful appearances, Belinda's ethics would be sufficient:

Oh! if to dance all Night and dress all Day,  
Charm'd the Small-pox, or chas'd old Age away;  
Who would not scorn what Huswife's Cares produce,  
Or who would learn one earthly Thing of Use?  
To patch, nay ogle, might become a Saint,  
Nor could it sure be such a Sin to paint. (V, 19-24)

As elsewhere in the poem, religious terms evoke larger ideals which can not come fully into the structure. Sin is brought lightly into conjunction with painting and serves to evoke the overtones present in the fall of china, as Clarissa indicates the metamorphosis which will take place regardless of Belinda's protean changes:

But since, alas! frail Beauty must decay,  
Curl'd or uncurl'd, since Locks will turn to grey,  
Since painted, or not painted, all shall fade,  
And she who scorns a Man, must die a Maid;  
What then remains, but well our Pow'r to use,  
And keep good Humour still whate'er we lose? (V, 25-29)

The possibilities considered are presented as mutually exclusive and exhaustive. Clarissa sees variety as reducible to an either/or situation which leads to a final impasse: "all shall fade" in any case. "Whate'er we lose" puts the lock in its place among things great and small which are

of less importance than Belinda's attitude towards them. Clarissa's logic is similar to that of many *carpe diem* poems ("If to dance . . ." "but since . . ." "What then remains . . ."), but it is adapted to other ends. This speech with its playfulness and posturing would not instruct Belinda to seize the day, but to remember that there is a tomorrow. Clarissa's speech parodies, as Pope revealed in a footnote, "The Episode of Sarpedon." Sarpedon urges death in battle; Clarissa wants Belinda to call off the fight.<sup>13</sup> Given the difference in circumstances, equanimity replaces magnanimity as a virtue.

Belinda is spared the full harshness of the alternative. Pope suggests in another tone what Hamlet tells the skull of Yorick, "Now get you to my lady's chamber, and tell her, let her paint an inch thick, to this favor she must come." Pope's own famous depiction of what old coquettes become appears in the "Epistle to a Lady":

As Hags hold Sabbaths, less for joy than spight,  
So these their merry, miserable Night;  
Still round and round the Ghosts of Beauty glide,  
And haunt the places where their Honour dy'd.  
See how the World its veterans rewards!  
A Youth of frolicks, an old Age of Cards,  
Fair to no purpose, artful to no end,  
Young without Lovers, old without a Friend,  
A Fop their Passion, but their Prize a Sot,  
Alive, ridiculous, and dead forgot. (239-48).

This ferocious vision is too strong for *The Rape of the Lock*. There we have not the living-dead hags but the charming sylph who, "though she plays no more, o'erlooks the Cards" (I, 54). Pope hides his terrors through the strategic use of metamorphosis.

Reuben Brower has commented with characteristic intelligence and tact on the closeness in tone of *The Rape of the Lock* and Pope's "Epistle to Miss Blount, with the Works of Voiture." "The lady," he observes, "is offered the same consolation and defence in both poems."<sup>14</sup> What we should notice in the following lines is the emphasis on what can be achieved in the mutable world in which human beings actually live:

Trust not too much your new resistless Charms,  
 Those, Age or Sickness, soon or late, disarms;  
*Good Humour* only teaches Charms to last,  
 Still makes new Conquests, and maintains the past . . .  
 (59-62)

Belinda does not think in terms of a tomorrow, but Pope's perspective allows him his urbane ironic tone, because it takes in more time than the single day on which the rape occurs. Tragic theory may have had something to do with limiting his action to one day, but his consummate artistic sense led him to see the ironic implications of presenting one day in a life. The identity of Clarissa's advice to Belinda and Pope's to Martha Blount should be no surprise, for within the context of *The Rape of the Lock* Belinda is being invited to do on a human level what Pope does on an artistic level by turning her lock into a star (and by extension her being into his poem): this metamorphosis with its Ovidian echoes turns the changeable into the timeless. Belinda cannot stave off time's final triumph, but within her life she can create a being with duration, a self which, in Clarissa's words, "preserves what beauty gains."

The emphasis is not on the process of character formation, as it would be for the Romantics, but on the product, the formed and steady character. Such a character, once attained, would be in a sense static, but it must be actively maintained despite the temporal dangers to which it will be subjected. Once the transformation which Clarissa recommends has been completed, radical metamorphosis will be an external phenomenon against which the good-humoured character preserves a balance. Metamorphosis has been central to Belinda's life without her being conscious of it. Clarissa tries to make her aware that metamorphosis, even of one's own person, must be seen as external to human consciousness. This is an attempt to create a kind of consciousness for Belinda which she does not have and which, in the context of the poem, she refuses.

Pope's metamorphosis of the lock into a star at the end of the poem is an Ovidian device: a way of saving his

heroine at a point when, on the level of experience, she is unable to get out of her predicament. This is, however, an ironic redemption; although unable to create a consciousness for herself, Belinda will be able to illuminate others. The poem begins with a warning from a sylph, but the entire poem is an admonition from the poet. It is also a gift. As the dedication and the poem's conclusion make clear, Pope offers Arabella Fermor more than a *quid pro quo*. He gives her a better lock to take the place of the one she has lost; and her acceptance of the poem in the spirit it was given will be at once a recognition of its truth and an action which will show she has the character Belinda lacks.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Rebecca Price Parkin, *The Poetic Workshop of Alexander Pope* (Minneapolis, 1956), pp. 127, 171-2; Murray Krieger, "The 'Frail China Jar' and the Rude Hand of Chaos," *Centennial Review*, 5 (1961), 176-94.

<sup>2</sup>The words may be Warburton's rather than Pope's. *The Rape of the Lock and Other Poems*, ed. Geoffrey Tillotson (London, 1962), II, 199 n. All references in the text will be to canto and line of this edition (hereafter referred to as Twickenham). In addition to Tillotson's comments and notes, the most important work on metamorphosis in *The Rape of the Lock* appears in Rueben Brower's *Alexander Pope: The Poetry of Allusion* (Oxford, 1959) and two recent articles, Ricardo Quintana, "'The Rape of the Lock' as a Comedy of Continuity," *Review of English Literature*, 7 (1966), 9-19; Ralph Cohen, "Transformation in *The Rape of the Lock*," *Eighteenth-Century Studies*, 2 (1969), 205-25.

<sup>3</sup>Joseph Spence, *Observations, Anecdotes, and Characters of Books and Men, Collected from Conversation*, ed. James M. Osborn (Oxford, 1966), I, 43.

<sup>4</sup>Earl R. Wasserman, "The Limits of Allusion in *The Rape of the Lock*," *Journal of English and Germanic Philology*, 65 (1966), 425-44.

<sup>5</sup>Twickenham, II, 142.

<sup>6</sup>See Brower, *Pope*, p. 150.

<sup>7</sup>One thoroughly traditional epitaph would be: "Stranger, as you pass me by, As you are now, so once was I. As I am now, so you will be. Prepare for death and follow me." The potter's clay as a symbol of frail humanity in the hands of God appears in Jeremiah 18:1-6, 19:1, 10-11; Isaiah 29:16; Romans 9:20-21, etc. See Gisela Zick, "Der Zerbrochene Krug als Bildmotiv des 18. Jahrhunderts," *Wallraf-Richartz-Jahrbuch* 31 (1969), 149-204. And for similar imagery see Aubrey Williams, "The 'Fall' of China and *The Rape of the Lock*," *Philological Quarterly*, 41 (1962), 412-25.

- <sup>8</sup>In a footnote Pope draws a connection between the sylphs and the fallen angels (I, 145 n.). It is also worth noting the frequency with which variations on the word "mortal" appear (I, 27, 103; III, 101; IV, 93; V, 44). Together with the oft-noted sexual euphemism "die" they suggest possibilities which the sylphs ignore.
- <sup>9</sup>For Pope's probable knowledge of the symbol, see Martin Price, *To the Palace of Wisdom* (Garden City, New York, 1964), p. 151.
- <sup>10</sup>See especially Cleanth Brooks, "The Case of Miss Arabella Fermor" in *The Well Wrought Urn* (New York, 1947), pp. 80-104.
- <sup>11</sup>Martin Price, *Palace*, p. 153.
- <sup>12</sup>There is perhaps something unpleasant in Pope's economical decision to have the woman who assisted the Baron point the moral. She is not in any way hypocritical, but in retrospect her action in producing the "glitt'ring Forfex" smacks a bit of teaching Belinda a lesson rather than educating her. Pope trusts that the tone of her speech — its genuine sympathy — will carry its own weight. And since Clarissa existed merely as a bit player before Pope conceived her speech, her motivation as the Baron's accomplice may not bear too much looking into.
- <sup>13</sup>See Ralph Cohen, "Transformation," 214-7, for a close comparison.
- <sup>14</sup>*Pope*, p. 149.