

The Rape of the Lock as a Mock Heroic or Mock Epic Poem

The epic is a narrative poem, of supposed divine inspiration, treating of a subject of great and momentous importance for mankind, the characters of the story being partly human and partly divine, and the language and style in which the incidents are related being full of elevation and dignity.



Alexander Pope (1688-1744)

If a long narrative poem should satisfy all the tests of epic poetry, but if the subject which is celebrated be of a trivial nature, like the cutting off a lock of a woman's hair, which is the story that is related in Pope's *The Rape of the Lock*, then such a poem is called a mock-epic poem. A mock-epic poem is supposed to be the inspiration of a Muse, the characters are partly human and partly divine, and the language is stilted and grandiose, but the subject is of a very frivolous and commonplace nature. Pope called *The Rape of the Lock* a "heroi-comical poem", which is another name for a mock-epic. It belongs to the class of literature called "burlesque". A burlesque is a parody on a large scale, in which not a single poem, but a whole type of style of literature is parodied, the language and thought proper to a serious theme reproduced in setting forth something ridiculous or trivial.

Instead of grand passions and great fights between heroes in which the immortals take part, we have as the theme of *The Rape of the Lock* a petty amorous quarrel assisted by the spirits of the air. The epic portrays an age round the personality of a god or a semi-god, and its characters are heroes. The Rape of the Lock, on the other hand, gives us a picture of a fashionable society. The central figure in that picture is a pretty society girl, and the other characters are a rash youth, a

foolish dandy and a few frivolous women. Instead of deep and genuine passions as found in ancient epics, we come across a succession of mock passions in *The Rape of the Lock*.

The action of *The Rape of the Lock* turns on a trivial incident—the cutting off a lock of hair from a lady's head. Such a thing had taken place in reality. One lord Petre cut off a lock of hair from the head of Lady Arabella Fermor. There was a quarrel between the two families, and Pope was requested to make a jest of the incident, and 'laugh them together'. This was the occasion of the composition of the poem. Pope did give to the world a fine work of wit—the best mock-heroic poem in the English language, but we do not know whether the families were reconciled.

The theme of the poem is suggested in the invocation, as in an epic poem, but the theme is ridiculously trivial, in comparison with the grand theme of an epic. The action opens with a mock-heroic manner with the awakening of Belinda, the heroine of the poem. Belinda is the very goddess of beauty, and the luster of her eyes surpasses that of the sun, who peeped timorously through the white curtains in Belinda's room: "Sol through white curtains shot a timorous ray, / And opened those eyes that must eclipse the day." The whole structure of *The Rape of the Lock* is cast in the epic mood, but it could not be a serious epic because the incident is trivial—so we have the mock-heroic or heroi-comical poem. The poem is divided into Cantos like an epic poem, and there are ironic parallels to the main Incidents of the epic. The poem begins with an invocation in epic tradition: "Say, what strange motive, Goddess! could compel / A well-bred lord to assault a gentle belle?" As in epics, in *The Rape of the Lock*, too, divine beings are portrayed. Belinda is in the divine care of the sylphs: "Fairest of mortals, thou distinguished 'care, / Of thousand bright inhabitants of air". But then the sylphs are fragile, airy beings and they are helpless before the caprices of men. Despite all their concern for Belinda, her beautiful lock of hair is raped by the naughty Baron. There is the mischievous gnome who, like Milton's Satan, is intent upon making Belinda miserable and thereby all her admirers. The gnome, addresses the wayward Queen who rules the sex from fifteen to fifty, thus: "Hear me, and touch Belinda with chagrin, / That single act gives half the world the spleen."

The epic always uses the supernatural element. In *The Iliad* there are gods and goddesses; in *The Rape of the Lock*, there are the sylphs and gnomes. These aerial spirits are small and insignificant things, and are, therefore, exactly in keeping with the triviality of the theme. They guard the person of the heroine and when there is a fight between the followers of Belinda and those of the Baron; they take part in the fight, like the gods and goddesses in the Trojan War: "Propped on their bodkin spears, the spirits survey, / The growing combat or assist the fray."

An epic poem must contain some episodes also. In keeping with this practice Pope has introduced the episode of the game of Ombre which is described in great detail. There is also the hazardous journey of Umbriel to the Cave of Spleen. Then there is the battle between the lords and ladies just like the battles in epic poetry. But in the true mock-heroic style this battle is fought with fans and snuff instead of with swords and spears.

There are single combats also between Belinda and the Baron and between Clarissa and Sir Plume. Belinda's toilet is another engaging account in which Pope has attributed in a perfect mock-heroic manner, the solemnity of a religious observance to the luxurious toilet of a lady of fashion and frivolity. Puffs, powders, patches, bibbles, billet-doux, are all brought to the same table and the slight and the serious are all strangely synthesized.

The Rape of the Lock is a rare instance in which the slight theme is given an exalted treatment for satirical purposes. All through the poem, a pose of importance is given to all that is thoroughly unimportant and insignificant and practically meaningless and farcical. The very conception of writing an epic on the rape of a lock of hair is funny and bears testimony to the poet's effort to make the little great and the great little.

In *The Rape of the Lock* the balance between the concealed irony and the assumed gravity is nicely trimmed: the little is made great and the great made little. It is the triumph of insignificance, the apotheosis of foppery and folly.