



‘WIT’S WILD DANCING LIGHT’
READING THE POEMS OF ALEXANDER POPE

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5. *The Rape of the Lock*

Examples: Canto 1, lines 1–3, 7–8; Canto 3, lines 45–46, 105–12;
Canto 2, lines 1–18; Canto 5, lines 9–34; Canto 3, lines 171–8;
Canto 5, lines 123–32

The Rape of the Lock began life as an occasional poem. The occasion that prompted its composition was a suggestion made to Pope by his lifelong friend, John Caryll (see Erskine-Hill 1975, pp. 42–102). A quarrel had broken out between the Petre and Fermor families following Robert, Lord Petre's cutting off a lock of hair from the head of Arabella Fermor. Caryll proposed that a comic poem, 'to make a jest of it', might 'laugh them together again' (Spence, I, 1966, p. 44). Pope ran off a two-canto poem of 334 lines, and sent it to Caryll in September 1711. This was, most probably, the version published by the bookseller Bernard Lintot in a miscellany on 20 May 1712.

Pope claimed that the poem 'was well received and had its effect' (Ibid.), though we really only have his word for this. The poem did not go unremarked, however, as Joseph Addison noted it in *The Spectator* (no. 523, 30 October 1712) as a sign of 'rising genius among my countrymen'. Something prompted Pope to further work, perhaps a recognition that the poem had the makings of a longer, fully 'mock-heroic', version. He worked on a revision for a year or so, completing it in December 1713. This new five-canto poem of 794 lines, accompanied by six plates by Louis Du Guernier (see Halsband 1980), was published on 2 March 1714 and proved at once to be a great success. Many of the most admired sections first appeared in this extended version: the whole machinery of Ariel and his fellow sylphs, whose task is to protect and look after Belinda; Belinda's dressing-table scene; her journey down the Thames; the game of ombre; the cave of spleen episode.

Yet still, it seems, Pope was not satisfied. When *The Rape of the Lock* appeared in the 1717 collection of his *Works*, it included an additional passage early in canto 5. This is Clarissa's speech, based on that of Sarpedon to Glaucus in Homer's *Iliad* (see note on terminology later in this chapter and in Chapter 9).

The story the poem tells may be briefly summarized. Belinda, a fashionable young lady, is warned in her sleep by Ariel, her guardian 'sylph', of some dire event that will take place that day. She wakes and, in the finale of the first canto, prepares herself at her dressing-table for the day ahead. Canto 2 begins with Belinda sailing down the Thames, sylphs hovering around the sails. A Baron, desirous of her twin locks of hair, implores the powers of love for success. In canto 3, Belinda, having arrived at Hampton Court Palace, engages in ombre (a card-game) with the Baron and a third player. Belinda triumphantly wins the game. Coffee inspires the Baron to a new stratagem. As Belinda bends her head over her coffee, he cuts off one lock of hair with a pair of scissors. In canto 4, Umbriel, another spirit, descends to the cave of spleen and brings back a bag of sighs, sobs, and passions, which he opens over Belinda. An enraged Belinda laments the loss of her 'favourite curl'. The fifth and final canto begins with Clarissa's speech. This is ignored by the belles and beaux, who instead engage in a mock-battle. The poem ends with the lock of hair being metamorphosed into a star.

The narrative structure of the five cantos is chiasitic. The outer cantos present reverse images of each other. The private order of Belinda's dressing in canto 1 is answered by the public disorder of canto 5's battle of the sexes. Each of these cantos has a lengthy speech at its beginning: Ariel on vanity and Clarissa on good sense. The description of the upper world inhabited by sylphs in canto 2 is matched by the underworld of gnomes in canto 4. In canto 2, beauty is powerful; in canto 4 its vulnerability is revealed. At the poem's heart, the third canto sets Belinda's triumphant victory at ombre against the loss of her lock of hair.

Canto 1, lines 1–3

Pope begins *The Rape of the Lock* with a couplet which cannot make up its mind or, perhaps more accurately, a couplet about which we cannot make up our minds. It seems to change shape depending on the angle

from which we look at it. When it first saw the light of day, in the two-canto 1712 version, it ran thus:

What dire offence from amorous causes springs,
What mighty quarrels rise from trivial things,
I sing

To a considerable extent, this carries the swagger of an epic opening. The two lines of the couplet march in step, locked together by the exclamatory anaphora ('What ...'), neither having time for a caesura. If they do allow an instant to take breath, it is before the parallel prepositional phrases ('from ...'), the change from a four/six syllabic form in line 1 to a six/four form in line 2 serving to enclose the couplet in a rhythmically satisfying four/six/six/four structure. The rhyme, of course, does the rest; save only that the final punctuation invites a pause before the unmistakably epic formula 'I sing', which carries on euphoniously from the rhymes. This deferral of the main verb until after the announcement of what is to be sung neatly occupies middle ground between the economical opening of Virgil's *Aeneid* ('arma virumque cano' [arms and the man I sing]) and the more expansive blank verse rhetoric of Milton's *Paradise Lost*, where the grand subject-matter fills out five lines before the poem releases its invocation ('Sing, heavenly muse').

The rhythmic majesty of the couplet is, at first, matched by equivalently assertive vocabulary. 'Dire' has at its etymological core a particularly rigorous meaning. The Latin adjective 'dirus' signifies something fearful, something awful in the proper sense of invoking awe; applied to the language of augury it meant ominous, ill-omened. As a plural noun, *dira* or *dirae*, the word was used as an appellation of the Furies, those who brought with them portents of disaster. Such connotations were maintained well into the eighteenth century. Samuel Johnson's *Dictionary* (1755) defined 'dire' as 'Dreadful, dismal, mournful, horrible, terrible, evil in a great degree'. These are 'mighty' signals, as Pope's second line's parallel adjective describes the outcome. The verbs in both lines are appropriately coupled in their forcefulness, and in their firm foundation in causality. The 'dire offence' and the 'mighty quarrels' erupt energetically from their sources.

And yet. Is there something a shade inadequate about the word 'quarrels'? A shade juvenile or, at least, immature? Would, say, 'strife'

seem more in keeping with the level of high seriousness conveyed by the other words? Or, given that we need a disyllable, 'contests'? Did such a thought occur to Pope himself when he came, in 1714, to raise his two-canto structure to a fuller, more crowded, five-canto narrative? Sure enough, in that rendition, we find that 'mighty quarrels' has become 'mighty contests'. Otherwise, the couplet remains the same.

And yet, what about the phrase 'amorous causes'? Does that really maintain the ominous level of 'dire'? It was in 1713, while Pope was busily upgrading the poem, that he committed himself to producing a verse translation of the whole of the *Iliad*. Put Homer's militaristic, not to say relentlessly violent, epic alongside *The Rape of the Lock*, and what ensues? Pope's version opens: 'Achilles' wrath, to Greece the direful spring / Of woes unnumbered, heavenly goddess, sing!'

The overlap in vocabulary is striking: the phrase 'direful spring' brings together the 'dire' and 'springs' of *The Rape of the Lock*, simply changing the grammatical forms. 'Wrath' maintains a level of high seriousness: more biblical than, say, 'anger'. 'Woes unnumbered' draws attention to consequences rather than causes through a Miltonic inversion of adjective and noun, and an impressive juxtaposition of monosyllabic and trisyllabic pitched at a solemn level. Pope repeats the word 'wrath' in the third line, and the seventh line expresses the poem's initial contest in the clause 'Since great Achilles and Atrides [that is, the Greek commander Agamemnon] strove'. The fifth couplet again uses repetition with grammatical variation for purposes of thunderous emphasis: 'Declare, O Muse! in what ill-fated hour / Sprung the fierce strife'. This is no mere 'quarrel', and there is no reference to anything like an 'amorous cause'. Instead, the range of reference is consistently masculine and aggressive.

And yet, the actual objects of the violent contest are revealed, beginning in the eighth couplet of Pope's translation, to be female prizes of war. As in the Homeric original, the name of the first is suppressed in favour of the 'captive daughter' of Chryses, so maintaining a wholly male emphasis. Agamemnon, as the narrative proceeds, refuses to release Chryseis (her proper name) to her father, and, when Achilles argues for her release, threatens to seize Achilles' own prize, Briseis. These great generals, then, have their female captives. When Agamemnon, obliged to

part with 'his' Chryseis, does indeed take Briseis from a furious Achilles, the latter retires from the field. All this, the action of the *Iliad*'s first book, takes place within a wider context: the convergence of Greek fleets and armies on plains before the city of Troy. Their aim is to force the release of Helen, wife of the Greek Menelaus, who has been seized by the Trojan Paris. Are these 'amorous causes'? In the context of mainstream epic and its masculine codes, would this be an understatement or a euphemism?

It is time to return to *The Rape of the Lock* and to complete the couplet. For, if 'amorous causes' is a questionable phrase, its equivalent in the second line, 'trivial things', opens up complete disparity. It is quite a descent from 'mighty' to 'trivial'; and 'things' is as hopelessly vague as 'causes' is logically precise. The vocabulary talks of rising, whereas Pope's placing of 'from trivial things' after the verb 'rise' weakens the grand rhythmic and syntactic parallel. Contrast, say, 'What mighty wars from trivial things arise.' The effect is to shake the structural relationship between the lines by introducing a chiasmus: 'from amorous causes springs' / 'rise from trivial things'. It is of the nature of chiasmus to ask the reader how the syntax constructs the meaning. Here, the first line uses an 'ab' structure and the second a 'ba'. Does the rhetorical device expose contradiction (ab *versus* ba), or does the ab/ba pattern satisfyingly bring the syntax back to where it began?

The Rape of the Lock is subtitled 'Heroi-Comical', in imitation of its principal model, Nicolas Boileau's *Le Lutrin* ('The Lectern': 'poème héroï-comique', 1674–83). Boileau's six-book satire casts a comic light on ecclesiastical politics by applying a high and serious style to a trivial dispute in order to expose the absurdity and vanity of its participants. The genre works by simultaneously belittling and inflating. The style looks down on the content; the content is puffed up by the style. But, as the opening couplet of *The Rape of the Lock* demonstrates, Pope adds a subtler and more nuanced treatment to his vocabulary and syntax by introducing variations that further destabilize the narrative and the social and personal attitudes being displayed. Readers are frequently challenged by the shifting sands of Pope's style, seldom quite sure of their foothold. We shall now look at some examples of Pope's questioning procedures.

Canto 1, lines 7–8

Having assured us that 'Slight is the subject' (line 5), an assertion that echoes the bathetic phrase 'trivial things' in the opening couplet, Pope completes his introduction by giving us a foretaste of the events the poem will unfold. So,

Say what strange motive, Goddess! could compel
A well-bred lord to assault a gentle belle?

Strange indeed it must be, the exclamatory rhetoric insists. After all, good breeding guarantees good behaviour, does it not? As Oscar Wilde's Lady Bracknell declares, 'Untruthful! My nephew Algernon? Impossible! He is an Oxonian.' (*The Importance of Being Earnest*, 1895) But there it is, in the middle of the line: 'assault'. Pope is, of course, playing with the tone of voice, attributing to it a quality of mock-surprise that only serves to highlight the reality of male actions. 'Trivial thing'? Well, actually, that phrase itself has been undermined from the very outset. The poem's title announces its subject in stark terms. And it is no use trying to hide behind etymology. The Latin 'rapere' did indeed cover a range of nuances around the central idea of 'seizing', but sexual violence was certainly included; and, in English usage, the sexual sense went along with other forms of aggression from the start.

The actual event the poem narrates is the Baron's cutting off a lock of hair. As such, it is a belittlement of the seriousness of 'assault' and 'rape'. But, conversely, the vocabulary used conveys the highest degree of moral condemnation and physical actuality. This simultaneous lowering and heightening is mock-heroic's destabilization of perspective. We are asked, indeed obliged, to consider how easily or uneasily the deed itself—a deliberate act of violation of a female body—sits alongside that instability.

Canto 3, lines 45–46

The skilful nymph reviews her force with care:
'Let spades be trumps!' she said, and trumps they were.

The chief set-piece in the third canto is the game played by Belinda and 'two adventurous knights' (line 26), one of whom is the Baron. Each player is dealt nine cards, and the winner is the one who takes the most

tricks. The ombre (*hombre* is Spanish for 'man') is the player who has the option of naming the trump suit—in this round, it is Belinda. She wins the first four tricks, then the Baron wins the next four. The decisive ninth trick is triumphantly won by Belinda with her king of hearts.

The running mock-heroic joke is that a banal game of cards is described as if it were an actual battle joined by real kings, queens, knaves, and their troops. Each action is therefore elevated to a level of significance out of kilter with the trivial reality. Pope fills his lines with as many such high-flown fancies as he can. So here Belinda's hand of cards is a 'force'; her choice about which suit to declare as trumps requires skill and studious attention; that decision is announced as if it were a divine fiat, such as that in Genesis 1. 3 ('And God said, Let there be light'); and the effect of her exclamation is expressed as a sublimely concise demonstration of her supreme power ('and there was light').

All this is playfully absurd. It is of a piece with the original purpose of the poem: to 'make a jest' of the trivial event which set off a real quarrel between the Petre and Fermor families. The mock war that is a game of cards resembles a ridiculous enactment of a battle of the sexes (both Belinda's opponents, the baron and the anonymous third party, are men) which in canto 5 will degenerate into a farcical combat between belles and beaux.

And yet Pope's vivid and imaginative rendering of the trivial minutiae of the ludicrously inflated events invests them all with vivacity and sheer delight. The cumulative result is a comic mini-epic of its own. Yes, the poem is a satirical portrait of a society taking itself too seriously, of human beings imagining themselves to be hugely more significant than they are. But the poem also enters into the spirit of those people and the world they inhabit with a gusto that carries the reader along with its energy and untiring display. Take, for example, the brewing and consumption of coffee, which follows the game of ombre.

Canto 3, lines 105–12

For lo! the board with cups and spoons is crowned,
The berries crackle, and the mill turns round;
On shining altars of Japan they raise
The silver lamp; the fiery spirits blaze:
From silver spouts the grateful liquors glide,

While China's earth receives the smoking tide:
 At once they gratify their scent and taste,
 And frequent cups prolong the rich repast.

Poetic style here presents a veritable cornucopia of elevation. Periphrasis (or circumlocution) expands the event, while linguistic register raises it and felicitous phrasing renders it as smooth as the drink itself. Lacquered tables take on the air of exotic locations and religious rites. Flames are invigorated with animation and vitality. Attractiveness and costliness are given impetus by verbal and positional repetition: 'The silver lamp' / 'From silver spouts'. Scale is heightened by hyperbolic vocabulary: 'blaze', 'tide'. The close verbal relationship of 'grateful' and 'gratify' (both words derive from the Latin adjective 'gratus', meaning 'causing pleasure') echoes the blended sensory delights of scent and taste. Everything takes on the grandeur and impressiveness of a ritual; and everything flows with graceful ease. The line 'From silver spouts the grateful liquors glide', with especial appropriateness, glides across the page with a steady euphonious flow. The whole event is a miracle of 'taste', in every sense.

This all reflects the social situation in which the event takes place. Hampton Court Palace stands by the 'silver Thames' (canto 2, line 4) and possesses the prestige and power of a royal residence: 'Here thou, great Anna! whom three realms obey' (canto 3, line 7). Coffee-taking was still, in the early eighteenth century, an experience imbued with the savour of the remote and the valuable. The word coffee derives from Turkish. The drink is made by literal infusion, which acts as a metaphor for one culture being instilled into another. Pope's stylistic 'elevation' is thus generous testimony to the excitement of a wonderful alternative to common native practices. It is all gratifyingly extravagant and so deserves, indeed demands, a dignified manner. The hyperbole may expose pretentiousness and conspicuous consumption, but it also produces a delicious surface, a flow of language luxurious to the tongue. The verse is suffused with the associated pleasures of the event. If to its share some human errors fall, take but the cup, and, to quote from Pope's expansive description of the launching of Belinda on her voyage down the Thames to Hampton Court, 'you'll forget 'em all'. Here is that passage, with its colloquial ending.

Canto 2, lines 1–18

Not with more glories, in the ethereal plain,
 The sun first rises o'er the purpled main,
 Than, issuing forth, the rival of his beams
 Launched on the bosom of the silver Thames.
 Fair nymphs, and well-dressed youths around her shone,
 But every eye was fixed on her alone.
 On her white breast a sparkling cross she wore,
 Which Jews might kiss, and infidels adore.
 Her lively looks a sprightly mind disclose,
 Quick as her eyes, and as unfixed as those:
 Favours to none, to all she smiles extends;
 Oft she rejects, but never once offends.
 Bright as the sun, her eyes the gazers strike,
 And, like the sun, they shine on all alike.
 Yet graceful ease, and sweetness void of pride
 Might hide her faults, if belles had faults to hide:
 If to her share some female errors fall,
 Look on her face, and you'll forget 'em all.

In a critique of what he saw as the monotony of Pope's versification, the nineteenth-century poet and essayist James Leigh Hunt cited this description of Belinda as an example of repetitive seesaw rhythm (Jones, Edmund D. 1916, p. 339).

Geoffrey Tillotson (1958, pp. 182–85) and Winifred Nowottny (1962, pp. 7–8) both defended Pope. The former noted that Leigh Hunt misrepresented the passage by ignoring some variations in punctuation. Nowottny added that such a (relatively) uniform passage runs contrary to Pope's customary attention to varied and astute versification, that the lines preceding and following do not share such sameness, and that the lines being criticized form a block that constitutes a single unit of meaning, a description of Belinda's person and demeanour. She further observed that the passage is narrating how 'beneath the outward animation of Belinda's looks there lies a level imperviousness, the even-handed indifference of the enthroned beauty to her rout of admirers'. So, the rhythmic repetition, which contrasts strongly with a high degree of linguistic vitality and variation in the lines, creates a sense of Belinda's bright vivacity—her inherent character—being contained and

constricted by the frame within which it is placed. The seventh couplet, indeed, precisely and explicitly defines this very point:

Bright as the sun, her eyes the gazers strike,
And, like the sun, they shine on all alike.

Pope appears to go out of his way to choose the commonest possible simile ('banal', Nowottny calls it (p. 8)) and it simply shines, not even making the effort to beam, blaze, or glow. Having chosen a familiar image, Pope then ensures that his verb drains it of whatever energy it has. One might add that Pope even repeats the same simile in the same place in each line: 'Bright as the sun', 'And, like the sun'. Also, the rhymes are conspicuously contrary in force: 'strike', 'alike'. Vigour meets utter blandness. Her admirers are hit by Belinda's shining eyes, with the odd result of being 'struck' into the most passive of observers, 'gazers'. Belinda has the power to reduce everyone to ciphers.

Pope's description recalls one of Shakespeare's famous set-pieces, Enobarbus's account of Cleopatra's first appearance to Antony, sailing down the Nile (*Antony and Cleopatra*, II, ii): 'The barge she sat in, like a burnished throne, / Burned on the water'. Pope's noun 'gazers' adapts Enobarbus's verb, which concludes the voyage with its most extravagant conceit: Antony 'did sit alone, / Whistling to the air; which, but for vacancy, / Had gone to gaze on Cleopatra too, / And made a gap in nature. 'Had it been allowed to by the laws of nature that prevent a vacuum, even the air would have left the shore and gone to join all the other gawping admirers of this ostentatious arrival. But there is one crucial difference between Shakespeare's purple passage and Pope's variation on it. Enobarbus draws out his description in order to make a point. To Maecenas' remark that Antony must now leave Cleopatra for good, Enobarbus famously retorts, 'Never! He will not. / Age cannot wither her, nor custom stale / Her infinite variety.' Cleopatra's dramatic, highly staged appearance is one aspect of her ability to contrive a self-image successfully designed to exercise complete mastery of her control of others. Her beauty is political. It is central to her statecraft, her manipulation of authority within an intensely patriarchal society, that of the Roman state and its empire. By contrast, Belinda—our modern Cleopatra—sails down the Thames towards a reversal of Cleopatra's power. Her brief moment of triumph is played out on a pathetically tiny

battlefield, a card table. Her real defeat follows when the poem's central and metonymic act takes place: the Baron's cutting off of her lock of hair. There, Belinda's beauty is a sign of her weakness. She lacks the power to withstand, or even sense the danger of, male violence towards her female appearance. She lacks the astuteness that might ensure her victory in the battle of the sexes. Her voyage down the Thames demonstrates how her potential for vital energy is constrained by her lack of self-awareness and recognition of the unshakeable realities which encase all human, especially all female, actions. Clarissa's speech in canto 5, Pope's last addition to his poem, spells out those inevitable facts, the ineluctable limits on human freedom.

Canto 5, lines 9–34

'Say why are beauties praised and honoured most,
 The wise man's passion, and the vain man's toast?
 Why decked with all that land and sea afford,
 Why angels called, and angel-like adored?
 Why round our coaches crowd the white-gloved beaux,
 Why bows the side-box from its inmost rows?
 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!
 Oh! if to dance all night, and dress all day,
 Charmed the smallpox, or chased old age away;
 Who would not scorn what housewife'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.
 But since, alas! Frail beauty must decay,
 Curled or uncurled, 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 power to use,
 And keep good-humour still whate'er we lose?
 And trust me, dear! good-humour can prevail,
 When airs, and flights, and screams, and scolding fail.
 Beauties in vain their pretty eyes may roll;
 Charms strike the sight, but merit wins the soul.'

Clarissa sets out her argument in twenty-six lines, the same length as Pope's translation of Sarpedon's speech to Glaucus in *The Iliad* (see Chapter 9). The structure is clear, measured, and rational, whereas it is surrounded by demonstrations of human irrationality culminating in the ludicrous battle of the belles and beaux that follows despite Clarissa's intervention. Four sections are readily identified (a–d).

(a) *lines 9–14 (i. e. six lines)*

Why do men so worship and adore beautiful women?

Male obeisance is rendered absurd by its excessive abasement, an affliction common to all men, from the 'wise' to the 'vain'. 'Vain' here carries its etymological sense of 'empty' (Latin 'vanus') as well as its general modern significance as a moral term. 'Wise' and 'vain' are thus antithetical: however full of knowledge or empty of sense men are, they all succumb. The extravagant absurdities of male behaviour fill the whole world. They scour the planet by land and sea in pursuit of all the precious resources they can find to adorn the objects of their adoration. They allocate to women semi-divine status. The rapid repetition of 'angel' in line four exposes the unthinking folly of such behaviour. They also treat women as special objects of attention in social situations, in perverse contradiction of the rationale of those situations. Surrounding coaches impede movement, which is their intended function. Theatre audiences ought to be looking at the stage. The absurdity is total: it is not only the front row that bows but all rows. To idolatry, then, we can add the madness of crowds. Clarissa's increasingly incredulous repetitions of 'why' dominate the lines: five times in six lines, four of them in the prominent position of the beginning of the line. Why on earth do they do it?

(b) *lines 15–18 (i. e. four lines)*

All this attention and glorification is in vain unless beauty is accompanied by good sense and virtue.

More vanity, again with the double sense: Clarissa is deftly driving home her principal 'moral'. Now she adds her approved alternatives to vanity in good sense and virtue, a judicious combination of the abstract ideal of the latter with the pragmatism of the former. But how realistic is this

advice? How many men, given the wry observation of their behaviour in the preceding lines, are likely to be struck as much by virtue as by beauty?

The first ten lines, then, divide into six for the absurd veneration of physical attraction, four for the accompanying moral. The order proposes the latter as a proper counter to the former, but the number of lines stack up conversely. The six/four ratio reflects one of the common rhythmic divisions of iambic pentameters, so that (a) and (b) act as an extension of an individual line into syntactic sections. Clarissa is indeed in control of her speech.

(c) *lines 19–24 (i. e. six lines)*

If devoting all one's time to pleasure could ward off disease and prevent aging, we would readily scorn humble diurnal tasks and ignore moral judgements of our behaviour.

The first couplet of this section ('Oh! if to dance all night, and dress all day, / Charmed the smallpox, or chased old age away') has been thoroughly and brilliantly analysed by A. D. Nuttall (1984, pp. 27–28) as a demonstration of Pope's mastery of multiple antitheses:

If we take the smallest contrasts first, vigorously active dancing is contrasted with night (normally a time for sleeping), dressing (usually done before the day begins) is contrasted with the day, 'Charmed'... is contrasted with the disgusting smallpox, and the nimbleness of 'chased' contrasts with 'slow old Age'. Then dancing all night is contrasted with dressing all day, and the insinuating gentleness of charming away the smallpox is contrasted with the rough expulsion of old age. Finally, the entire idea of dancing all night and dressing all day (the first line) is set against certain grim consequences with which it is unable to deal in the second line.

Thus, the four half-lines contain their own antitheses; the two full lines are themselves antithetical; and the entire couplet consists of two antithetical lines, an inter-relationship pointed and heightened by the consonance of its rhyming ('day' / 'away'). Pope—and Clarissa—have managed to pack seven instances of antithesis into two lines of poetry and eighteen words.

There is, some might feel, a risk that such intensity of rhetoric might render the lines over-mechanical and reiterative. Pope is too acute and

aware an artist to allow this to be the case. There are three ways in which he energizes, varies, and fills the lines with semantic vitality. Nuttall himself notes one of these: 'The terms of an antithesis may echo or contrast with one another. The poet has, so to speak, an unsymmetrical freedom within the formal symmetry of the method to vary echo with contrast or to conceal one within the other.' For example, the noun phrases 'all night' and 'all day', components of the linear antithesis of the full line 19, are in contrast; while the nouns in line 20 ('smallpox', 'old age') are more similar than different, as both bearing ill news for innocent, or naïve, youth: youth's a stuff will not endure, and disease can strike at any time. Pope writes in the knowledge that Lord Petre, whose treacherous act set the whole plot going, himself died of smallpox in 1713 at the age of twenty-three. Lady Mary Wortley Montagu, with whom Pope formed an ambiguous friendship about 1715 and fell out catastrophically in the 1720s, is famed for her importation from Constantinople of the method of inoculation against smallpox. A similar inoculation against old age has not been forthcoming, alas. Nuttall's crucial point is that antitheses can be formed of various shades of inter-relationship along a spectrum of possibilities, ranging from outright opposites to different nuances of similarity.

Pope's second procedure is metrical variety. Following on from the six/four structure of the first ten lines of the speech, the eleventh (line 19) begins with a half-line of six syllables and is completed by a half-line of four syllables: 'Oh! if to dance all night, / and dress all day'. The second line of the couplet reverses the pattern: 'Charmed the small pox, / or chased old age away'. He thereby produces a rhythmical chiasmus (six, four, four, six), a rhetorical variant on the simple antithetical patterns composing the meaning of the couplet. Further, the two lines demonstrate rhythmical fluidity in different ways. Line 19 can be spoken or read with a regular iambic beat, but the initial exclamatory 'Oh!' pulls some degree of stress towards itself ('Listen!'), and the repetition of 'all' invites another degree of stress to act in counterpoint to regular iambs. Line 20 opens with a strongly accented verb, 'Charmed' and proceeds through a disyllabic word, 'smallpox', in which both parts call for some—if not quite an equal—amount of stress; its second half then has a noun-phrase, 'old age', which again presents equal emphases. The entire couplet is an intricate and aurally stimulating dance.

The third energizing force in the couplet involves meaning and sounds. Nuttall reads the verbs 'Charmed' and 'chased' as an antithesis, describing the first as 'insinuating gentleness' and the second as 'rough expulsion'. However, the two actions are more closely bound together than his interpretation suggests. Pope hints at this through obvious alliteration and grammatical fluidity. The latter involves the adverb 'away', which concludes the line and includes the couplet's rhyme. It can be read as qualifying either just the verb 'chased' or both verbs: 'charmed the small pox / chased old age away', or 'charmed the small pox [away] / chased old age away'.

The *OED* compilers were sufficiently convinced that the latter is the correct, or at least a correct, reading to cite Pope's couplet as an illustration of the usage of the extended 'charm away' (*OED*, 'charm' v. 1c). Pope further intimates a semantic linking of the two actions by the repeated /l/ sounds in the objects of the verbs ('smallpox', 'old age'), which discreetly follow up the more emphatic 'all/all' repetition in the first line and help to bind the couplet together aurally. Also, the verbs in that first line are semantically linked: the reason that all day is spent in dressing is to prepare for the dance. This is not to contradict Nuttall's interpretation, but to add to it. Pope's couplet is resonant with multiple meanings. As William Empson observes when commenting on the slide in meaning from 'charmed' to 'charmed away', these slight variations of suggestion add vivacity to the line (1953, p. 72).

(d) *lines 25–34 (i. e. ten lines)*

But because our beauty will, however we try to enhance and
preserve it, fade with time, all we can do is to retain our good
humour and trust to merit rather than appearance.

Clarissa's emphatic opening conjunction, 'But', indicates the turn in her argument towards its principal conclusion. All dreams of eternal youth become insubstantial when we are obliged to confront waking reality. Her language brooks no qualification: 'frail beauty *must* decay', 'locks *will* turn to grey', 'all *shall* fade', '*must* die'. Her moral is sustained by emphatic repetition, both within these concluding lines ('good-humour' in lines 30 and 31) and in picking up on the earlier 'vain' (lines 10, 15,

and 33), 'beauties' (lines 9 and 33) and 'charm' (lines 20 and 34). The entire speech is thus carefully held together.

The rational clarity of its structure produces a clear weighting towards its real point, its 'moral'. These ten lines are set against six lines of wishful thinking (section (c)). The longest sub-section is the speech's conclusion. Clarissa's moral proposes an appropriate and dignified response to the grim but unavoidable fact: the inevitability of time's destructive power. Clarissa's speech here alters the shape and tone of Sarpedon's. But the divergence is not that stark. The premise, after all, is the same—we are all mortal—so that both speeches share an elegiac basis; and one could say that each is, in its way, a logical or at least understandable reaction.

Finally, though, Clarissa's speech is ethically distant from Sarpedon's. In the world of the *Iliad*, 'honour' is unrelenting in its demands on the warrior, and it is determinedly male-centred. Something very different is required in the modern world: a new and mature morality, and one that is female-centred. Men behave absurdly, but wise women will not be fooled into falling for short-sighted and shallow solutions. Men's attribution of 'honour' to superficial beauty (line 9) will not last. Were we to change the word slightly to 'humour', an extensive shift would be effected: a muted conclusion, perhaps, but a truer one.

Note on Terminology

A note on Clarissa's speech, added by Pope in later editions, calls it a 'parody' of Sarpedon's speech to Glaucus. The 1714 edition subtitles the poem an 'heroi-comical poem'. As we have noted, this echoes the subtitle to Boileau's *Le Lutrin*, 'Poème Héroi-Comique'. Boileau's poem was the most substantial model for *The Rape of the Lock*, and the strongest influence on what became a small-scale genre of similar poems, such as Samuel Garth's *Dispensary* (1699). In his prefatory address, 'Au lecteur', to the 1674 publication of the first four *chants*, or cantos, Boileau described his poem as 'un burlesque nouveau', in which, unlike earlier burlesques where the characters of epic (such as Dido and Aeneas) were belittled by being made to speak 'comme des harengères et des crocheteurs' [like fishwives and picklocks], ordinary or even low characters would be given the language and register of figures from heroic and epic verse.

A burlesque conventionally derides 'high' art by demeaning the speech and actions of its heroes and heroines. A parody, as normally defined, is also about ridiculing its victims—individual works or authors, or whole genres—by comic imitation of their style through exaggeration or application to inappropriate subjects.

It is all a little confusing, especially as Clarissa's speech can hardly be seen as mocking Sarpedon's. It may undermine Homer's ethos by implying that the heroic code his character enunciates is out of date or no longer ethically relevant, but Clarissa's speech is at least equally dignified and serious; and, as we have seen, remarkable for its rhetorical, structural, and stylistic richness. It is about transferring the ethos of one moral code to another, one that represents updated, eighteenth-century and enlightened ethics. Such a view presumably underlies Reuben Brower's assertion that Pope, when he uses the word to refer to the genre of 'imitation', must mean 'parody 'in the sense of 'more or less faithful reproduction of a writer's style without lowering or burlesquing it' (Brower 1959, p. 284).

Such slipperiness of terminology is a useful reminder that it is usually unwise to allow it excessive powers of definition. Rather, terminology often reflects nuances of usage, and is more a useful guide than an absolute decree. *The Rape of the Lock* and *The Dunciad* are Pope's two great essays in the art of mock-heroic, or mock-epic (another commonly used term), and they do share some generic and stylistic features, such as comic or ludicrous versions of the noble material of epic. In *The Rape of the Lock*, the battle of the belles and beaux in canto 5 is such an event. But the tone and register of *The Dunciad* are notably distinct: darker, more savage, less playful. Both are comic but to different ends and with different means. In *The Rape of the Lock*, a two-way process applies: epic action is miniaturized, while the language used ranges from near-slang to dignified. Clarissa's speech may be seen—fittingly for the poem's last passage in terms of the date of its composition—as the crown in the poem's evolution from occasional light comedy to full-scale comedy of manners.

Canto 3, lines 171–78

'What time would spare, from steel receives its date,
And monuments, like men, submit to fate!

Steel could the labour of the Gods destroy,
 And strike to dust the imperial towers of Troy;
 Steel could the works of mortal pride confound,
 And hew triumphal arches to the ground.
 What wonder then, fair nymph! thy hairs should feel
 The conquering force of unresisted steel?

These exultant lines spoken by the Baron conclude the central canto of *The Rape of the Lock*, where Belinda has conquered in the miniature battle of the cardtable, and has then lost her 'best', her 'favourite curl' (canto 4, line 148) to the rapacious Baron, armed with a 'glittering forfex' (canto 3, line 147): a pair of scissors. That event is rendered by an intensive reiteration of the idea of fate: scissors are a 'fatal engine', Ariel's loss of power to protect Belinda sees him 'resigned to fate', and 'fate urged the shears'. An appeal to fate lies at the heart of epic. Dryden translates the opening line of Virgil's *Aeneid* as 'Arms and the man I sing, who forced by fate'. And now in these final lines of the canto 'monuments, like men, submit to fate'. This is epic's ultimate tragedy. Whatever great deeds we perform, however heroically we act, our mortality is inescapable the end.

So, too, in the world of mock-epic time acts as the inescapable path to loss, to mortality; except, of course, that it is all reduced in scale: wars to card games, swords to scissors, bodies to locks of hair. What is not reduced is the human reaction: hence the mock-epic gap between language and action. The last couplet in canto 3 represents this divergence: the loss here acknowledged is the lock of hair. Surround it, as language can, with the grand register of 'conquering force' (cf. the 'force' renewed by our skilful nymph in the form of her hand of playing cards), and the outcome is distance between words and actions, the bathos we have seen to be characteristic of mock-heroic.

Yet that last couplet comes to rest on the passage's key word, 'steel'. Indeed, 'steel' resounds through the lines with the force of swords beating on shields, its harsh 'st' sound reflecting its martial object and the events of epic where steel 'strike[s] to dust the imperial towers of Troy'. Does mock-epic inevitably bring to mind epic itself, sharing its ground and its language? Or is this to take it—and life—all too seriously? The final paragraphs of the whole poem suggest the latter by reverting to another classical paradigm, metamorphosis.

Canto 5, lines 123–32

But trust the Muse—she saw it upward rise,
 Though marked by none but quick, poetic eyes:
 (So Rome's great founder to the heavens withdrew,
 To Proculus alone confessed in view)
 A sudden star, it shot through liquid air,
 And drew behind a radiant trail of hair.
 Not Berenice's locks first rose so bright,
 The heavens bespangling with dishevelled light.
 The sylphs behold it kindling as it flies,
 And pleased pursue its progress through the skies.

In this world of magical transformations, locks of hair are, like mythical heroes, elevated to something far grander and more beautiful than any mere earthly matters. Romulus, the supposed founder of the power of Rome, was transported to heaven and never seen again on earth save once to Julius Proculus (see Livy, *Ab Urbe Condita*, book 1). Berenice, the wife of Ptolemy III of Egypt, dedicated a lock of hair to ensure her husband's safe return from war. Her court astronomer let it be known that the hair had been metamorphosed into a constellation (*coma Berenices*). These myths, cognate with the transformative world of poetic licence, tell a very different story from those of dour martial epics. And they do so by another, far more attractive, form of elevation of language above mere reality. The 'Muse'—poetry itself—is imbued with the power of light and life. 'Poetic eyes' realize the force latent but imprisoned within Belinda sailing down the Thames. There, her 'lively looks' are 'quick as her eyes': quick in the sense of vitality, energy, rapidity, and of life itself. But, whereas Belinda's were fatally 'unfixed', poetry's eyes look on the beauty they create: a rising star, shooting through pure transparent ('liquid') air to form 'a radiant trail' in which 'bright' chimes with 'light' and 'flies' with 'skies'. This is the power of comedy, its creation of a world that is 'light and bright and sparkling', as Jane Austen characterized *Pride and Prejudice* (1813) in a letter to her sister Cassandra. At the same time, the best comedy uses 'shade ... anything that would form a contrast and bring the reader with increased delight to the playfulness and epigrammatism of the general style', as Jane Austen—playfully—went on to accuse her novel of lacking (Le Faye, letter 80, 1997, p. 203).

At the end, *The Rape of the Lock* has made up its mind. *The Rape of the Lock* is, wrote Samuel Johnson, 'universally allowed to be the most attractive of all ludicrous compositions' (Archer-Hind 1925, II, p. 220). It is so because of, not despite, its 'shades'. Its darkness is deeply disturbing. The epic world of male aggression and its direful codes of 'heroic' behaviour lurk behind the small-scale events of the poem. Like the goblins in Beethoven's fifth symphony as heard and interpreted by Helen Schlegel in chapter 5 of Forster's *Howards End* (1910), the poem's double focus—its radical generic uncertainty—keeps resounding in our ear before being swept away in the poem's finale. The goblins can always return. In the meantime, the comic Muse will prevail. Anyone for mock-heroic?