

Machinery as Mere Ornaments in *the Rape of the Lock: A Critical Analysis*

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Abstract:

In his engaging dedicatory letter to Mrs. Arabella Fermor, Alexander Pope writes, “the machinery was entirely wanting to complete it.” That is, he was ‘forced to’ use it as ornaments. When it was first published in 1712 with two cantos, *the Rape of the Lock* did not have any machinery in it. In the new version of 1713, it included the machinery. In 1717, with the addition of Clarissa’s speech on good humor, the poem assumed its final form. Besides, Pope raised the machinery, “on a very new and odd foundation, the Rosicrucian doctrine of spirits.” In line 5 of the text, Pope decided the style of the poem, “Slight is the subject, but not so the praise.” To make the style grand as an epic, the machinery is used as a decoration. Since an unimportant matter is described in a lofty tone, the purpose of mockery is achieved.

Keywords: Machinery, Mock-epic, 18th Century, The Rosicrucian Doctrine of Spirits

According to Pope, the machinery is, a term invented by the critics, to signify that part which the deities, angels, or demons are made to act in a poem. He has known about the Rosicrucian doctrine of spirits from a French book named *Le Comte de Gabalis* by the Abbe de Montfaucon de Villars. The Rosicrucians believe that four elements-Sylphs, Gnomes, Nymphs, and Salamanders are inhabited by spirits (Abrams, 1993:22-34). And Pope’s intention to engage them in his poem is entirely ornamental. The Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms describes machinery as the collective term applied since the 18th century to the supernatural beings—gods, angels, devils, nymphs, etc. who take part in the action of an epic or mock-epic poem or in a dramatic work (Baldick, 2008:193). Pope here fashions his machinery to give the poem a mock-epic shape.

The first activity of the machinery is noticed in Canto I when Ariel, Belinda’s guardian sylph prolongs her sleep when at around twelve she was about to wake up. That

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time Ariel appeared to be ‘more glittering than a birthnight beau’. Here Ariel gives a lofty introduction of himself and his band. “Of these am I, who thy protection claim, / A watchful sprite, and Ariel is my name.”(lines 105-06). The silly, minute, unnecessary detail of different supernatural agents has no significance at all. It has nothing to do with Belinda’s knowledge. Even the concluding message of Ariel here does not mark any effect on Belinda, “Warned by the Sylph, O pious maid, beware! / ...Beware of all, but most beware of Man!” (lines 112-14). When Belinda wakes up at last, all Ariel’s warnings in her dream vanish from her head. Thus, the lofty speech of Ariel proves mere ornament and nothing else.

In Canto II the machinery appears even more active. When Belinda starts her pleasure trip on the Thames, the impending danger sits heavy on the supernatural guards. Ariel again engages himself in a Kingly, figurative speech. He begins, “Ye Sylphs and Sylphids, to your chief give ear!”(line 73). Ariel bursts into a lengthy description of different assignments bestowed on the airy spirits. He refers to the fateful incident impending on Belinda which deserves a watchful spirits attentive care. He guesses a series of possible mishaps on Belinda and thus reassigns several tasks related to her safety to some of his chosen soldiers. The extravagant assignments are even notable, “To fifty chosen Sylphs, of special note, / We trust the important charge, the petticoat;” (lines 117-18). The style with which Ariel declares punishments for the ones who would neglect discharging his assigned duty is quite as astonishing. The Sylphs wait, “Anxious, and trembling for the birth of Fate.”(line 142). But we know that eventually their being anxious does not bear any fruit. They cannot protect Belinda from being raped off her favourite lock of hair.

In Canto III we notice Ariel and his band first when Belinda starts playing card at Hampton Court. “Th’ Aerial Guard / Descend, and sits on each important card.”(lines 31-32). Though her supernatural guards try to help her, we have to remember that she is a brilliant player. “The skilful Nymph reviews her force with care / Let Spades be Trumps, she said, and Trumps they were.” (lines 45-46). Thus Belinda continues winning. And the involvement of the machinery does not play any role. Being victorious, when Belinda shouts loudly, her ‘Airy Band’ extends their anxious care. The role of Clarissa, presenting the scissors, is questionable, of course. But it can be taken symbolically. Baron might have been unconsciously influenced by Clarissa to use the scissors to have his revenge. On the contrary, it is not quite tough for Baron to manage scissors to have his purpose served. The real irony appears to us when Ariel, in spite of his trying heart and soul fails to protect Belinda’s lock of hair. A thousand spirits try to blow back the lock of Belinda, but in vain. Ariel even tries to influence Belinda’s thought. But, “Amaz’d, confus’d he finds his Pow’r expir’d, / Resign’d to Fate and with a Sigh retir’d.”(lines 145-46) So all Ariel’s lofty activities prove finally to be mere talks.

The most funny, awkward, silly and unnecessary involvement of the machinery occurs in Canto IV. Losing her hair when Belinda is desperately shouting, ‘a dusky melancholy spirit’ Umbriel ventures out in his underworld journey to the Cave of Spleen. There is a grand description of how Umbriel advances forward through the cave and how the office of the Queen Spleen is decorated. Spleen is full of negatives. She is sickly. “She sighs forever on her pensive bed, / Pain at her side, and Megrim at her head.” (lines 23-24). She associates ‘Ill-Nature’, ‘wrinkled form’ and new disease with every new nightdress. Her head hangs aside in headache. She is ill tempered and curses each and everyone around. “Unnumbered throngs on every side are seen / Of bodies changed to various forms by Spleen.” (lines 47-48). That is why we see different absurd objects like ‘living teapots’, walking pipkins, sighing jars, talking goose pies, and maids turned into bottles around her. Even the two handmaids who wait upon her throne are different in shape because of her curse on them. Pope alludes to the golden bough that Aeneas and the Cumaean sibil carry with them for protection into the underworld in *Aeneid* 6. “Safe passed the Gnome through this fantastic band, / A branch of healing spleenwort in his hand.”(lines 55, 56). When Umbriel meets Spleen, he addresses her with kingly reverence, “Hail, wayward Queen!” She is praised as the ‘parent of vapors and of female wit’ and so on. Umbriel’s appeal to empower him for harming Belinda is equally silly. He wants to raise pimples on her face, or change her color, or sicken her lapdog, or to touch her with ill humor. Spleen’s allowance of his prayer is quite majestic. She presents him two bags full of ‘the force of female lungs’, ‘sighs, sobs, and passions’, ‘fainting fears’, ‘soft sorrows, melting griefs, and flowing tears,’ etc. Here Pope alludes Ulysses from *Odyssey*. The two bags by Spleen are compared to the bag that Aeolus, the god of winds gave Ulysses containing all the winds adverse to his voyage home. When his ship was in sight of Ithaca, his companions opened the bag and the storms that ensued drove Ulysses far away. With the involvement of lofty allusions the silliness of the machinery is further heightened.

Even Ariel’s warning of the ‘threats of fate’, which Pope states with colorful decoration, does not play any role. At the end of canto IV, Belinda recalls the ‘mystic visions’ of Ariel. But it is more than too late. Belinda’s favorite lock of hair has already been raped. So, the role of machinery proves further to be nothing more than mere ornament.

In Canto V, the self contradictory speech of Clarissa serves the ornamental purpose the most. It was Clarissa who tempted Baron to ravish the lock of hair. “Just then, Clarissa drew with tempting grace / A two-edged weapon from her shining case:” (Canto III, lines 127-28). And now she tries to console Belinda glorifying good humor:

And trust me, dear, good humor 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.

(Canto V, lines 31-34)

But it cannot stop Belinda from engaging herself in the mock-epic war. Finally, Clarissa ends her speech telling that the lost lock of Belinda has become a bright and shining star and it would continue brightening the name of Belinda. And still it does not cast any effect positive or negative on Belinda. Thus the machinery in *The Rape of the Lock* serves Pope's purpose of ornament to give it a perfect mock-epic shape.

What a poem says or means is the result of how it is said, a fact that poets are often at pains to emphasize. "All my life," said W. H. Auden, "I have been more interested in technique than anything else." (Allison, 1983:1403). Alexander Pope takes the mock-epic technique to satirize the silly quarrel between the two aristocratic families. Mock-epic, according to Cuddon, is a work in verse which employs the lofty manner, the high and serious tone and the supernatural machinery of epic to treat of a trivial subject and theme in such a way as to make both subject and theme ridiculous (Cuddon, 1999:514). And Pope's poem is a glaring example of using such machinery.

J. Long rightly calls Pope 'a unique figure'. He was a true reflection of the 18th century. "There is hardly an ideal, a belief, a doubt, a fashion, a whim of Queen Anne's time that is not neatly expressed in his poetry." (Long, 2002:264). The publication of *The Rape of the Lock* made him so famous that Voltaire called him "the best poet of England and, at present, of all the world." The poem is modeled after two foreign satires: Boileau's *Le Lutrin* (reading desk), a satire on the French clergy, who raised a huge quarrel over the location of a lectern; and *La Secchia Rapita* (stolen bucket), a famous Italian satire on the petty causes of the endless Italian wars (Long, 2002:265-67).

Andrew Sanders states *The Rape of the Lock* as Pope's savage verbal assaults on society and its shortcomings. To him, it is ostensibly an undercutting of the 'dire offence' which arose from 'trivial' things takes on the weight of a criticism of the manners of aristocratic society as observed by an amused friend. The mighty angels of *Paradise Lost* are diminished to the 'light Militia of the lower sky'. And the descent to the Cave of Spleen in Canto IV offers a sly and sexually knowing variation on classical visions of the Underworld (Sanders, 2005:293-94). George Sampson ranked the poem as one that established Pope. He argued that *The Rape of the Lock* became at Pope's hands a blend of the mock-heroic, the satirical and the fanciful, unmatched in English poetry (Sampson, 2014:384). In Pope's poem, Norman Callan opines, everything is kept in proportion, from the comparative importance of the quarrels themselves to the physical measurements of armour and costume. Thus the gods, whose Olympian indifference of the human predicament so heightens the pathos of the *Iliad*, become, in Pope's poem, the sylphs and

gnomes of Rosicrucian mythology derived from a frivolous French romance (Callan, 1997: 244).

The mighty, powerful, and noble angels those are used to carry out different serious tasks assigned to them by God Himself in the Bible; and the holy angels like Gabriel, Michael, Raphael, and Azrael referred in *the Noble Quran* are parodied in *The Rape of the Lock*. Gabriel is venerated as one of the primary archangels and as the angel of Revelation in Islam. He also descends with the blessings of Allah during the night of Laylat al-Qadr. Michael is the archangel of mercy, is often depicted as providing nourishment for bodies and souls while also being responsible for bringing rain and thunder to earth. Some scholars have pointed out that Michael is in charge of angels who carry the laws of nature. Raphael or Israfil is the angel who blows into the trumpet in the end time, signaling the coming of Qiyamah. Azrael and his subordinate angels are responsible for parting the soul from the body of the dead and will carry the believers to heaven and the unbelievers to hell (Wikipedia). They are noble creatures and carry out the duties bestowed on them by almighty Allah without fail. As Allah says in the noble Quran:

Believers, guard yourselves and your kindred against a Fire whose fuel is human beings and stones, a Fire held in the charge of fierce and stern angels who never disobey what He has commanded them, and always do what they are bidden.”
(Surah: Tahrim; Ayat: 06)

But comparing to them, the supernatural machinery in *The Rape of the Lock* are silly, awkward, feeble and unworthy of doing anything. Their seemingly lofty and hard intention to protect Belinda bears no fruit at all. Through their activities, they only prove that they are mere ornaments.

Conclusion

In *The Rape of the Lock*, nothing happens automatically or as a matter of fact. Giving it a mock-epic shape, narrating the silly subject matter in a lofty style, employing the supernatural machinery from an odd foundation of the Rosicrucian doctrine of spirits—all are parts of Pope’s design. And it is the unparalleled genius of Pope that he is successful enough to do what he wanted. Involvement of the silly machinery and allusions from the great ancient epics heightens the purpose of mockery. Lengthy and lofty description of the satirical activities of the supernatural beings vividly expresses their ornamental purpose.

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