

## **The Rape of the Lock as a Mock Heroic poem**

The Rape of the Lock is a mock-heroic narrative poem written by Alexander Pope. One of the most commonly cited examples of high burlesque, it was first published anonymously in Lintot's *Miscellaneous Poems and Translations* (May 1712) in two cantos (334 lines); a revised edition "Written by Mr. Pope" followed in March 1714 as a five-canto version (794 lines) accompanied by six engravings. Pope boasted that this sold more than three thousand copies in its first four days. The final form of the poem appeared in 1717 with the addition of Clarissa's speech on good humour. The poem was much translated and contributed to the growing popularity of mock-heroic in Europe.

The poem satirises a small incident by comparing it to the epic world of the gods. It was based on an actual event recounted to the poet by Pope's friend, John Caryl. Arabella Fermor and her suitor, Lord Petre, were both from aristocratic recusant Catholic families, at a time in England when, under such laws as the Test Act, all denominations except Anglicanism suffered legal restrictions and penalties. (For example, Petre, being a Catholic, could not take the place in the House of Lords that would otherwise have been rightfully his.) Petre had cut off a lock of Arabella's hair without permission, and the consequent argument had created a breach between the two families. The poem's title does not refer to the extreme of sexual rape, but to an earlier alternative definition of the word derived from the Latin *rapere* (supine stem *raptum*), "to snatch, to grab, to carry off" —in this case, the theft and carrying away of a lock of hair. In terms of the sensibilities of the age, however, even this non-consensual personal invasion might be interpreted as bringing dishonour.

Pope, also a Catholic, wrote the poem at the request of friends in an attempt to "comically merge the two" worlds, the heroic with the social. He utilised the character Belinda to represent Arabella and introduced an entire system of "sylphs", or guardian spirits of virgins, a paradised version of the gods and goddesses of conventional epic. Pope derived his sylphs from the 17th-century French Rosicrucian novel *Comte de Gabalis*. Pope, writing pseudonymously as Esdras Barnivelt, also published *A Key to the Lock* in 1714 as a humorous warning against taking the poem too seriously.

Pope's poem uses the traditional high stature of classical epics to emphasise the triviality of the incident. The abduction of Helen of Troy becomes here the theft of a lock of hair; the gods become minute sylphs; the description of Achilles' shield becomes an excursus on one of Belinda's petticoats. He also uses the epic style of invocations, lamentations, exclamations and similes, and in some cases adds parody to imitation by following the framework of actual speeches in Homer's *Iliad*. Although the poem is humorous at times, Pope keeps a sense that beauty is fragile, and emphasizes that the loss of a lock of hair touches Belinda deeply.

The humour of the poem comes from the storm in a teacup being couched within the elaborate, formal verbal structure of an epic poem. It is a satire on contemporary society which showcases the lifestyle led by some people of that age. Pope arguably satirises it from within rather than

looking down judgmentally on the characters. Belinda's legitimate rage is thus alleviated and tempered by her good humour, as directed by the character Clarissa.