

K. Waddington

M. Nemiroff

Satire: 283/3

July 21, 2005

Mock Epic and Horation Influence in *The Rape of the Lock*

1500 Words¹

Clearly, Pope demonstrates two quite separate influences in *The Rape of the Lock*: mock epic and Horation satire. But since these two are quite antipodal—at least in terms of style and conventions—we shall examine not only instances of their presence, but the manner in which they are combined.

Just as history provides the most suitable material for the epic poem, Pope's use of a *contemporary* history—necessarily of lesser import—is equally befitting the mock epic. Accordingly, rather than depicting kings or majestic men and their distinguished deeds, intending to provoke our admiration, with perfect irony, Pope takes for his mock epic a vain female as hero, displaying her lowly trials and provoking our scorn. Here then we find our first common element, for Horace also is concerned with contemporary issues, though he certainly chooses an entirely different form for its exposition. Indeed, When Trebatius warns him away from satire, suggesting, “. . . if such great love of writing grips you, think

¹Please avoid every third word in order to bring this paper down to the required size.

big;/sing about unbeaten Caesar's deeds, and be rewarded," (S.25)² which certainly smacks of contemporary epic, Horace politely declines: "I'm insufficient; we all can't write of battle lines." (S.25)

Another instance in which *The Rape of the Lock* makes use of epic convention and differs from Horace's *Satires*, is the introductory invocation of the Muse. Though this has no parallel in the *Satires*, Horace does begin the first epistle, in Book I of *Epistles* with: "My very first Muse sang of you." It's inclusion, by Pope, is not only necessitated by the mock epic form, but also by the ending of the work: Belinda wins immortality by means of the poem itself—muse related—as well as by the lock rising to form a new heavenly body: "But trust the Muse—she saw it upward rise,/Tho' mark'd by none but quick Poetic Eyes," (N.1157) which is essentially saying the same thing: her immortality is owing to poetry. Even Horace himself acknowledges, also in the *Epistles*: "It is the Muse who gives immortality." (S.54)

Pope also uses the initial reference to the Muse to establish the presence of the supernatural, though instead of the classical gods providing the machinery, inciting to battle and protecting the mortal hero—as would be the case in epic convention—we find the Sylphs of Rosicrucian Philosophy. The Sylphs, of course, proved a perfect choice, for not only do they lack the reverence of classical gods, thus proving more suitable protectorates of our unworthy hero, but they also brought with them a literary connection with erotica, particularly in *Le Comte de Gabalis*.

²Quotations will be differentiated by the following: S=*The Satires*; N=*Norton Anthology of English Literature*.

The foulness of language, in *Book I Satire 2* is in no way indicative of Horace's other satires, but it does, nevertheless, demonstrate by exaggeration—just as *Book II* teaches by exaggeration—that the language of Horace is the language of the street: “. . . my things are more like conversation,” (S.10) as well as “. . . talk is all it is.” (S.10) This is Horace himself speaking, in *Book I*, of his own work. In the final Satire of that book, written at a later date, this idea had been slightly modified:

The work must be concise . . .

The language should be grave at times, but often funny,
sometimes rhetorical and poetic, sometimes urbanely
smooth. (21)

Here we see something slightly more reminiscent of *The Rape of the Lock*, but nevertheless, the style of language found in Horace's *Satires*—even in the most poetic instance, is far below that of Pope's mock epic. This is hardly surprising, for the foundation of the former is Old Greek Comedy and the latter Greek Epic. If there is no similarity in diction, the low, mundane content described by that diction, in *The Rape of the Lock*, is certainly reminiscent of Horace.

We might now turn to Belinda. We have already said that she is a character whose heroic propensities are a belittlement of the epic hero, and thus ideal for the mock epic, but now we shall examine her thematic importance.

“Still, false desires fool a large proportion of mankind,/ they'll tell you,
'Nothing's enough. What we own we are.” (S.1) Although here Horace refers to money, it seems wholly appropriate to see this as applicable to Belinda, for her lock represents not only her vanity, but the vanity of women, and so “what we own we are” clearly explains the importance of

the theft. And yet, since that importance is but shallowness, the reader is witness to the irony of the affair. Likewise, those guilty of the numerous foibles exposed by Horace are often ignorant not only of their guilt but of the foibles themselves. It is this *exposure* which is key to Horace's method, and which we find also in *The Rape of the Lock*. Certainly, Belinda—and the general woman she represents—is as much ignorant of her own guilt as of the crime itself.

Indeed, the stand Pope seems to be taking is one which can be seen all through both books of Horace's *Satires*, namely that happiness comes not from external but internal sources—and only then when the doctrine of *moderation* is present: "Eating's highest pleasure lies in you,/not in the flavour of your food." (S.26) In fact, the "simple life," (moderation in all things) take on great thematic importance for it unifies all eight satires of *Book II*. And it is Belinda's vanity, her concern with the pleasures of the external world which ties, thematically, *The Rape of the Lock* with the *Satires* of Horace.

Another connection which Belinda brings to mind between *The Rape of the Lock* and the *Satires* is the idea that bad example teaches. This is essential to both Pope and Horace.

Because of the implicit nature of the lesson in *The Rape of the Lock*, the poem itself must stand as testament to the above maxim. Horace though, in typical conversational and autobiographical clarity, declares:

. . . if perhaps I laugh too much at people, grant me my right
and your indulgence. The best of father's made me this way.
By the use of bad examples he taught me how to live. (S.11)

We should also bear in mind that Belinda is young, and that Pope, in the introductory letter to Mrs. Arabella Fermor—the real life Belinda—says of his poem:

. . . it was intended only to divert a few young ladies, who have good sense and good humour enough to laugh not only at their sex's unguarded follies, but at their own. (1139-1140)

Certainly, Pope is being extremely diplomatic here, for if the young ladies had good sense, then the source of *The Rape of the Lock* would never have existed. The point though is that Pope speaks of “*young ladies*,” (my italics). This satire not only targets the young as its subject, but also the young as its audience, who should learn from the work. This too is reminiscent of Horace: “if someone now decreed the tastiness of roasted gull,/Rome’s youth, docile students of debauchery, would obey.” (S.27) Here Horace not only depicts the young as being impressionable, but logically, because of that impressionability, they are in most need of moral lesson; and Horatian satire—with its aim not so much to attack vice but to present vice and thus the lesson, as well as the absence of causticity—is the perfect vehicle for that lesson, as well as for that group of people.

As we have seen, even though style and conventions separate mock epic from Horace’s satires, Pope has managed, in *The Rape of the Lock*, to fuse the two. From epic we have high language, supernatural machinery, battle and war, the journey to the underworld and all the rest, transported down to the level of mock epic and becoming, there, high language-low content, Sylphs, drawing room wars of the sexes and a battle of frowns, snuff and a bodkin, and a journey to the Cave of Spleen.

From Horace we have the exposing of folly not with malice or anger, but with an authorial smile: “But tell me, what law is violated if someone laughs/while speaking truth?” (S.1) Secondly, though *Book I* of *Satires* is almost obtuse in its directness, *Book II*, representing a more artistically mature Horace—and so best exemplifying his style, demonstrates a more indirect and more comic method of teaching. This is achieved by exaggerating the moral instruction, and by using comic sometimes absurd characters to voice those lessons.

We might conclude, at risk of oversimplification, that *The Rape of the Lock* is composed of mock epic *elements* and *style* and the Horatian *attitude*.

Works Cited

Pope Alexander "The Rape of the Lock" Norton Anthology of English Literature

5th Avenue, New York. W.W. Norton & Company. 1975.

Horace Satires

5th Avenue, New York. W.W. Norton & Company. 1977.