**Rape of the lock Canto 2: Alexander Pope**

Belinda arises to prepare for the day’s social activities after sleeping late. Her guardian sylph, Ariel, warned her in a dream that some disaster will befall her, and promises to protect her to the best of his abilities. Belinda takes little notice of this oracle, however. After an elaborate ritual of dressing and primping, she travels on the Thames River to Hampton Court Palace, an ancient royal residence outside of London, where a group of wealthy young socialites are gathering for a party. Among them is the Baron, who has already made up his mind to steal a lock of Belinda’s hair. He has risen early to perform and elaborate set of prayers and sacrifices to promote success in this enterprise. When the partygoers arrive at the palace, they enjoy a tense game of cards, which Pope describes in mock-heroic terms as a battle. This is followed by a round of coffee. Then the Baron takes up a pair of scissors and manages, on the third try, to cut off the coveted lock of Belinda’s hair. Belinda is furious. Umbriel, a mischievous gnome, journeys down to the Cave of Spleen to procure a sack of sighs and a flask of tears which he then bestows on the heroine to fan the flames of her ire. Clarissa, who had aided the Baron in his crime, now urges Belinda to give up her anger in favour of good humour and good sense, moral qualities which will outlast her vanities. But Clarissa’s moralizing falls on deaf ears, and Belinda initiates a scuffle between the ladies and the gentlemen, in which she attempts to recover the severed curl. The lock is lost in the confusion of this mock battle, however; the poet consoles the bereft Belinda with the suggestion that it has been taken up into the heavens and immortalized as a constellation.

Belinda issues forth, admired by everyone. She glances and at them all, but gives particular attention to none. Belinda has two locks of hair, which entrap the hearts of all (line 19-28). The baron plans to seize "the bright locks"( 29-33). He had prayed early to all the powers that be, it especially to Love, that he might possess the prize. He had to Love an altar of French romances and had laid on it ferings from "his former loves." Half his prayer is granted (lines 34-46).  
  
 Belinda smiles and makes the world gay, unaware that , her guardian sylph, has summoned "squadrons" of his fellows to protect her from impending danger, He address them (lines 47-72). Spirits are assigned their special and various tasks, from guiding the stars to guarding the throne (lines 73-90). One humbler task is to watch over and inspire fair maids (lines 91-100). Some dire but as yet unknown disaster hangs over their charge. Ariel assigns special duties, such as caring for the fan or the watch (lines 101-116). He assigns fifty sylphs to protect the petticoat (lines 117-122). Ariel promises terrible punishment for any sylph who fails in his duty (lines 123-136). The spirits descend and tremblingly await "the birth of Fate"(lines 137-142).

Belinda sails along the river Thames, and everyone is dazzled by her beauty. She is wearing a bejewelled cross which is so sparkling that even “Jews” and “infidels” would want to kiss it. She smiles at everyone and her eyes are luminous, “Bright as the sun.” She is so beautiful that any “female errors” she might make would be instantly forgotten when anyone looked on her face.

Belinda’s hair, “to the destruction of mankind,” is styled into two beautiful curls. These [**locks**](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/the-rape-of-the-lock/symbols/the-lock) of hair are so attractive that any man who looks on them is overcome with desire for her—the curls are “labyrinths” in which Love “detains” his “slaves,” binding men’s hearts in “slender chains.” The [**Baron**](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/the-rape-of-the-lock/characters/the-baron) is one such man, and he resolves to take one lock, either through trickery or by force.

Earlier that day, before the sun rose, the [**Baron**](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/the-rape-of-the-lock/characters/the-baron) prayed to Love for success in gaining his “prize” by building a pyre out of various objects associated with love, including volumes of French romances, “garters,” “gloves,” and love letters.

Back on the boat, everything seems to be going perfectly and everyone is happy—except for [**Ariel**](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/the-rape-of-the-lock/characters/ariel) who is still troubled by the idea that something terrible is going to happen. He summons an army of [**sylphs**](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/the-rape-of-the-lock/terms/sylph), which descends down onto the boat. The army is made up of sylphs in an array of different forms and dresses. Ariel addresses them, calling out: “Ye Sylphs and Sylphids, to your chief give ear, / Fays, Fairies, Genii, Elves, and Daemons, hear!” He then continues by enumerating all the different roles spirits can have—some guide the planets, others create the weather—and he reminds them of the sylph’s role in guarding the beautiful.

Ariel explains to the assembled group that he just can’t shake the feeling that something terrible is going to happen. He doesn’t know what it is, but he’s worried that it could be anything from [**Belinda**](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/the-rape-of-the-lock/characters/belinda) losing her virginity to staining her new dress to losing her heart or a necklace at a ball.

To protect [**Belinda**](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/the-rape-of-the-lock/characters/belinda), [**Ariel**](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/the-rape-of-the-lock/characters/ariel) assigns various [**sylphs**](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/the-rape-of-the-lock/terms/sylph) different tasks.  [**Zephyretta**](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/the-rape-of-the-lock/characters) will look after her fan, [**Brillante**](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/the-rape-of-the-lock/characters) will look after her earrings, [**Momentilla**](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/the-rape-of-the-lock/characters) will look after her watch, [**Crispissa**](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/the-rape-of-the-lock/characters) will look after her [**lock**](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/the-rape-of-the-lock/symbols/the-lock), and Ariel himself will look after her [**Shock.**](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/the-rape-of-the-lock/characters) Fifty [**sylphs**](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/the-rape-of-the-lock/terms/sylph) will look after [**Belinda**](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/the-rape-of-the-lock/characters/belinda)’s petticoat, which is described as the “sevenfold fence” “stiff with hoops” and “armed with ribs of whale,” “the silver bound” with a “wide circumference.” [**Ariel**](https://www.litcharts.com/lit/the-rape-of-the-lock/characters/ariel) completes his speech by explaining that, should anyone fail to look after their charge, they shall be severely punished. Quickly, all of them fall in line and await the dreaded event Ariel has predicted.

Most epic poems include a sea voyage, so Belinda’s travelling by boat emphasizes her role as a parody of an epic hero. Her bejewelled cross, which is so beautiful that even “Jews” and “infidels” would be attracted by it, suggests Belinda’s lack of religious conviction—the cross is a beautiful ornament rather than a symbol of her faith, a point Pope underscores by noting its appeal to non-Christians. But Pope does suggest that perhaps her vanity is not all bad. The phrase “female errors” suggests that, as a woman, Belinda’s behaviour is criticized more harshly than a man’s. So, if her beauty means that these “errors” are instantly forgotten when gazing on her face, it seems only fair and wise that she cultivate her beauty to escape unfair moral scrutiny.

Pope once again appears to suggest that there might be something liberating about Belinda’s vanity. Her hair has the power to make “slaves” of the men who would treat her as an inferior person for being a woman, so depicting her curls as prisons for suitors who are dazzled by love suggests that her beauty evens the playing field a bit at the patriarchal court.

The pyre is a reference to both pagan religious tradition and the epic tradition. Pyres were normally built for funerary purposes, but here the Baron is using his pyre to burn trivial items like “garters” and “gloves” in order to pray to the god Love. In this way, Pope continues his parody of court life. This moment also recalls the female vanity of Belinda’s own pagan altar, fashioned from her dressing table. In Pope’s time, men were expected to be morally and intellectually superior to women, but the parallel between the Baron’s frivolous pyre and Belinda’s dressing table altar paints the two as being morally equivalent in their frivolity.

Pope complicates the sylphs’ influence even further. He has previously created echoes between Ariel and Satan in “Paradise Lost” to imply that the sylphs may be more devilish than they appear. Here, Pope echoes Milton again, but this time mimicking the voice of God himself, who calls out to the angels, “Hear all ye Angels, Progenie of Light, / Thrones, Dominations, Princedoms, Vertues, Powers, / Hear my Decree.” The effect is to suggest that Ariel’s motivation is somewhere between angelic and devilish, but Pope keeps this mysterious.

Ariel lists ostensibly important things (the loss of Belinda’s virginity or heart) alongside trivial ones (a stain on a dress or the loss of a necklace), which once again emphasizes the absurd fixation on appearances in the world of the court. This also calls into question again how much Ariel really cares for Belinda’s virtue.

Belinda, rivalling the sun in her radiance, sets out by boat on the river Thames for Hampton Court Palace. She is accompanied by a party of glitzy ladies (“Nymphs”) and gentlemen, but is far and away the most striking member of the group. Pope’s description of her charms includes “the sparkling Cross she wore” on her “white breast,” her “quick” eyes and “lively looks,” and the easy grace with which she bestows her smiles and attentions evenly among all the adoring guests. Her crowning glories, though, are the two ringlets that dangle on her “iv’ry neck.” These curls are described as love’s labyrinths, specifically designed to ensnare any poor heart that might get entangled in them.

One of the young gentlemen on the boat, the Baron, particularly admires Belinda’s locks, and has determined to steal them for himself. We read that he rose early that morning to build an altar to love and pray for success in this project. He sacrificed several tokens of his former affections, including garters, gloves, and billet-doux (love-letters). He then prostrated himself before a pyre built with “all the trophies of his former loves,” fanning its flames with his “am’rous sighs.” The gods listened to his prayer but decided to grant only half of it.

As the pleasure-boat continues on its way, everyone is carefree except Ariel, who remembers that some bad event has been foretold for the day. He summons an army of sylphs, who assemble around him in their iridescent beauty. He reminds them with great ceremony that one of their duties, after regulating celestial bodies and the weather and guarding the British monarch, is “to tend the Fair”: to keep watch over ladies’ powders, perfumes, curls, and clothing, and to “assist their blushes, and inspire their airs.” Therefore, since “some dire disaster” threatens Belinda, Ariel assigns her an extensive troop of bodyguards. Brillante is to guard her earrings, Momentilla her watch, and Crispissa her locks. Ariel himself will protect Shock, the lapdog. A band of fifty Sylphs will guard the all-important petticoat. Ariel pronounces that any sylph who neglects his assigned duty will be severely punished. They disperse to their posts and wait for fate to unfold.

**Commentary**

From the first, Pope describes Belinda’s beauty as something divine, an assessment which she herself corroborates in the first canto when she creates, at least metaphorically, an altar to her own image. This praise is certainly in some sense ironical, reflecting negatively on a system of public values in which external characteristics rank higher than moral or intellectual ones. But Pope also shows a real reverence for his heroine’s physical and social charms, claiming in lines 17–18 that these are compelling enough to cause one to forget her “female errors.” Certainly he has some interest in flattering Arabella Fermor, the real-life woman on whom Belinda is based; in order for his poem to achieve the desired reconciliation, it must not offend (see “Context”. Pope also exhibits his appreciation for the ways in which physical beauty is an art form: he recognizes, with a mixture of censure and awe, the fact that Belinda’s legendary locks of hair, which appear so natural and spontaneous, are actually a carefully contrived effect. In this, the mysteries of the lady’s dressing table are akin, perhaps, to Pope’s own literary art, which he describes elsewhere as “nature to advantage dress’d.”

If the secret mechanisms and techniques of female beauty get at least a passing nod of appreciation from the author, he nevertheless suggests that the general human readiness to worship beauty amounts to a kind of sacrilege. The cross that Belinda wears around her neck serves a more ornamental than symbolic or religious function. Because of this, he says, it can be adored by “Jews” and “Infidels” as readily as by Christians. And there is some ambiguity about whether any of the admirers are really valuing the cross itself, or the “white breast” on which it lies—or the felicitous effect of the whole. The Baron, of course, is the most significant of those who worship at the altar of Belinda’s beauty. The ritual sacrifices he performs in the pre-dawn hours are another mock-heroic element of the poem, mimicking the epic tradition of sacrificing to the gods before an important battle or journey, and drapes his project with an absurdly grand import that actually only exposes its triviality. The fact that he discards all his other love tokens in these preparations reveals his capriciousness as a lover. Earnest prayer, in this parodic scene, is replaced by the self-indulgent sighs of the lover. By having the gods grant only half of what the Baron asks, Pope alludes to the epic convention by which the favour of the gods is only a mixed blessing: in epic poems, to win the sponsorship of one god is to incur the wrath of another; divine gifts, such as immortality, can seem a blessing but become a curse. Yet in this poem, the ramifications of a prayer “half” granted are negligible rather than tragic; it merely means that he will manage to steal just one lock rather than both of them.