

Mrs. Kristen Small

Humanities: Section E

13 December 2024

The Older the Cash, The More Hands It's Seen

Both “The Rape of the Lock” by Alexander Pope and “The Lady’s Dressing Room” by Johnathan Swift are keen criticisms of the vanity and superficiality of aristocratic society. That said, the gentle irony of Pope’s writing stands in stark contrast to the gratuitous and often grotesque imagery that characterizes Swift’s piece; for this reason, it is easier to misconstrue “The Rape of the Lock” as playful comedy and overlook its satirical purpose. Johnathan Swift’s use of disdainful tone and harsh mockery make its message clearer and therefore renders “The Lady’s Dressing Room” the more effective satire of the two.

The upper class in Georgian England, 1714-1830, was characterized by its opulence, taste for leisure, and an elaborate code of conduct that emphasized decorum and “keeping up appearances” (English Heritage). Despite the burgeoning Industrial Revolution beginning to reshape the socioeconomic landscape, the aristocracy clung to its traditional privileges, distinguishing itself from the rising middle class through overconsumption and the perpetuation of excessive social refinement – especially for women (Meyers, et al.). This was a period when titles, land ownership, and inherited wealth determined social standing. However, beneath this polished exterior lay deep inequalities and moral complacency. The upper class often distanced itself from the realities of labor and production, fostering patterns of entitlement and frivolity regarding serious matters. Such behaviors prevail in the upper class today. Writers like Alexander Pope and Johnathan Swift were unique members of this elite cultural milieu, using their works to

expose the vacuousness of their peers in a manner similar to the Dickens-es and Hugo-es that modern society is more familiar with. Due to the extreme class disparities experienced by the English in the early 1700s onwards, the juxtaposition of superficial elegance with underlying decadence became a central theme in satirical critiques of the time (Meyers, et al.).

Upper-class women in pre-Victorian England held a paradoxical role within this deceitful social framework. On one hand, they were venerated as paragons of beauty – as Goddesses; on the other, their value was often reduced to these very traits (Pope). Women were expected to embody idealized femininity, which was often viewed in the lens of divinity and therefore reinforced the strong relationship between religion and a woman’s place in the household and in society (Broad). Duties included maintaining a flawless appearance, demonstrating social refinement, and performing domestic roles within the perceived confines of their gender (Broad). Thus, the intense pressure to uphold these standards was both a source of privilege and oppression. For instance, beauty rituals—as satirized by Swift in “The Lady’s Dressing Room”—highlight the performative nature of idealized femininity, where elaborate efforts to appear flawless masked the natural human realities beneath (Swift). Similarly, Pope’s “The Rape of the Lock” critiques the culture of superficiality that too-often consumed women’s lives, as Belinda’s worth is tied to worthless facets of her appearance. These expectations, coupled with limited-to-nonexistent educational and professional opportunities, confined upper-class women to concern themselves solely with their appearance. The modern view of an aristocratic woman from this time is one of vanity largely for this reason. Thus, while aristocratic women wielded influence within their social circles, they were simultaneously subjected to societal ideals that rendered them objects of both obsession and admiration, but objects, nonetheless.

The central conceit of Pope's "The Rape of the Lock"—elevating the trivial theft of a lock of hair to the level of epic grandeur—offers a gentle mockery of aristocratic priorities that is well written, but not quite severe enough to reprimand its target. In Canto I, Pope opens the entire poem by humorously juxtaposing the petty with the grand. He writes, "What dire offence from am'rous causes springs / What mighty contests rise from trivial things" (Pope). This line mocks the human propensity to overplay the importance of trivial matters. In the context of the poem, this pertains specifically to the higher echelons of society; the characters are nobility and are therefore afforded the luxury of time. They are idle, indulgent, and can spare the time to be affronted by "trivial things" (Pope). In "The Rape of the Lock", "mighty contests" manifest in the form of battle scenes, card games, and sylphs protecting Belinda's hair, emphasizing the absurdity of the conflicts that aristocrats choose to focus on. Pope's intention is to expose the pointlessness of aristocratic vanity without alienating his audience, as shown in Canto III, often referred to as "The Battle of the Cards". This scene humorously frames a simple card game as a heroic battle, with Belinda strategizing like a general on the battlefield. Pope describes the players' moves with mock-seriousness, parodying the style of classical epic warfare as he implores his reader to "Behold, four Kings in Majesty rever'd / With hoary Whiskers and a forky Beard / And four fair Queens whose hands sustain a Flow'r / Th' expressive Emblem of their softer Pow'r" (Pope). The language, while lofty and poetic, creates a comedic dissonance because it exaggerates the importance of something utterly mundane. This playful treatment of the scene can make readers perceive the poem as a comedy, glossing over its satirical undertones.

Swift, on the other hand, opts for brutal candor in "The Lady's Dressing Room", making for a more direct and impactful criticism. The unrelenting Juvenalian nature of his writing makes the entire piece an invective. He does not utilize pretense in the way Pope's sarcasm and parody

do; rather, he draws attention to the points he makes by exaggerating them with vivid imagery and caricature. His depiction of Celia's dressing room, for example, is that of a space filled with "A paste of composition rare, / Sweat, dandruff, powder, lead, and hair", meant to dismantle illusions of status-based beauty by exposing the grotesque reality beneath the surface (Swift). Unlike Pope's playful tone, Swift's visceral language choice – such as the "stinking sprats" Strephon finds in line 118, or the "Arm-pits well besmeared" in line 12 – forces readers to confront the truth: that human beings are all the same when they are stripped down and that any "appearance" wealth takes on is but a façade (Swift). Both poems are satirical, but Swift plays more cleverly to the insensitivity of aristocracy by being direct, while Pope simply invites amusement to those not careful enough to read through the lines. Another example lies in the passage about the gloves and moisturizer made from Celia's household pets. Swift writes of the dogs, "There Night-gloves made of *Tripsy's* Hide / Bequeath'd by *Tripsy* when she dy'd / With Puppy Water, Beauty's Help / Distill'd from *Tripsy's* darling Whelp" (Swift). Once again, Swift takes a real-life scenario, the thoughtless use of animals in the process of obtaining commodities for the rich and exaggerates its components in a skillful use of caricature. The excerpt reinforces the idea that the wealthy are disconnected from the often-inhumane methods by which their luxuries are produced – the idea that the wealthy are insensitive to reality. Since one may naturally be revolted by the idea of treating one's pets in the way that Swift describes Trixie and her puppy's demise, it is easier for the audience to make the connection to the actual treatment of animals on behalf of the aristocracy. Swift's straightforward approach to the condemnation of his target is better suited to the subject material, thus making it a more efficient satire than "The Rape of the Lock".

Similarly, both poems critique the superficiality of appearances, but their methods lead to differing levels of impact that favor Alexander Pope's method. In "The Rape of the Lock," Pope ribs his audience in order to suggest that society's obsession with trivial matters – a foible that can easily be applied to the vanity that is also prevalent in "The Lady's Dressing Room" – is inherently ridiculous. In Canto I, Ariel warns Belinda to "Beware of all, but most beware of Man!", subtly critiquing both male entitlement and the societal overemphasis on female beauty (Pope). However, the satire in Pope's writing is heavily padded by characterization and light-hearted humor. Much of the entertainment value of "The Rape of the Lock" lies in its story, so it is easy to oversimplify the warning that Ariel gives Belinda as an eccentricity in her character. In contrast, Swift's tone is confrontational and unflinching. By focusing on the grotesque realities of Celia's daily routine, Swift directly attacks the idealization of women without having to define the Celia's and Strephon's personalities. His critique becomes unavoidable and applicable to high society as a whole.

Ultimately, while "The Rape of the Lock" and "The Lady's Dressing Room" both target aristocratic vanity and touch upon the female experience, Swift's Juvenalian satire proves more effective in delivering its critique. Pope's Horatian approach entertains well, but risks being glossed over as less deliberate than a satire is intended to be. In contrast, Swift's visceral imagery and scathing use of caricature leave no room for complacency. He forgoes the need for subtlety by knowing his audience and their vulnerabilities. By confronting readers with the unsavory, ultimately natural, realities behind societal illusions, "The Lady's Dressing Room" delivers a more impactful and enduring condemnation of vanity and superficiality.

Broad, G. (2014, April 21). How the other half lived: Rich and Poor Women in Victorian Britain.

History Is Now. Retrieved December 13, 2024, from

<https://www.historyisnowmagazine.com/blog/2014/4/21/how-the-other-half-lived-rich-and-poor-women-in-victorian-britain>.

Meyers, A., Bilotti, K., Wigley, J., & Kummer, K. (n.d.). *The Victorians*. British Literature Wiki.

<https://sites.udel.edu/britlitwiki/the-victorians/>

Pope, Alexander. *The Rape of the Lock*. Edited by Jack Lynch, Rutgers University,

<https://jacklynch.net/Texts/rapelock.html#32>. Accessed 13 Dec. 2024.

Power and Politics. English Heritage. (n.d.). [https://www.english-heritage.org.uk/learn/story-of-](https://www.english-heritage.org.uk/learn/story-of-england/georgians/power-and-politics/)

[england/georgians/power-and-politics/](https://www.english-heritage.org.uk/learn/story-of-england/georgians/power-and-politics/)

Swift, Jonathan. "The Lady's Dressing Room." Edited by Jack Lynch, Rutgers University,

<https://jacklynch.net/Texts/dressing.html>. Accessed 13 Dec. 2024.