

The Rape of Lock as a Mock Epic Poem

The Rape of Lock is a universally recognised mock-epic or mock-heroic poem, composed by a very talented poet and translator of the Neo- Classical Age Alexander Pope. Alexander pope is a great satirist of the 18th century along with John Dryden. He is a great satirist who has got the excellent skill of using the heroic couplet in his poems. He was a great follower of the great ancient masters of Greek and Rome. He translated several works of the ancient masters into English language. He is also known as one of the most correct and accurate poets of English language in the world.

A mock- epic or mock- heroic poem is a kind of narrative poem which deals with a very trivial theme in a lofty, sublime and grand style with a purpose to satirising, ridiculing and reformation. It is considered to be a parody of the epic.

The present poem is a satire on the contemporary society of upper class, it is also a satire on the fashionable and artificial decoration of those upper-class people who think themselves superior to others in terms of their artificial beauty.

This poem is actually based on a true incident involving actual persons and invokes the Muse. Thus, we can say that this poem is based on social as well as literary context. But as we know that Homer's or Virgil's subjects were grand and serious, Pope's epic

is about the cutting of a lock of a society lady. So, the object of the poem is mockery but it is civilized.

“Slight is the subject, but not so the praise,

If she inspires and approve my lays”.

Now let's discuss the poem as a mock-epic. First, an epic always begins with an invocation. The theme of the poem is also pointed out in the invocation. This poem “The Rape of the Lock” also begins with the invocation and the theme is also suggested in the invocation.

“Say, what strange motive, Goddess! could compel

A well-bred lord to assault a gentle belle?”

Second important point which makes the poem a mock-epic is its title. We know that rape is a very serious and alarming crime in which the chastity of a woman is violated by force. But Pope has used this term in an amusing manner. The title evokes nothing but fosters mock-heroic sensation. In so far as the action of the poem is concerned, it opens in a mock-heroic manner with the awakening of Belinda. She is portrayed as the goddess of beauty. Her beauty outshines the sun which peeps through the white curtains of Belinda's room.

“Sol thro' white curtains shot a tim'rous ray,

And opened those eyes that must eclipse the day.”

Fourth mock-epic element is the comparison between Belinda's dressing and the arming of an epic warrior like Achilles. She dresses herself and uses cosmetics to kill her followers with her beauty.

*“Now awful beauty puts on all its arms;
The fair each moment rises in her charms,
Sees by degrees a purer blush arise,
And keener lightning quicken in her eyes.”*

Fifth important feature of an epic is that an epic contains episodes also. Pope in “The Rape of the Lock” has introduced the epic of the game of Ombre. In true mock-epic style, fans and snuff are used in battle instead of swords and spears. Sixth striking feature of an epic is the use of supernatural machinery which in epics controls the affairs of human beings. Therefore, Pope has also introduced machinery in the poem. The gods of the epics are heroic while Pope's machinery is tiny. Pope himself describes his four creatures as *“the light militia of the lower sky.”* All the sylphs are guided by Ariel. It also makes lofty the mock-heroic effect of the poem. Another mock-epic element is coffee party which is the parody of meals discussed in Homer. Belinda screams after the cutting of the lock in the following words. *“Restore the lock, restore the lock.”* Her screaming reminds us the screams of Homeric heroes. One of the most interesting parallels takes place when Ariel finds an earthly lover lurking at Belinda's heart. He retires with a sigh and resigns to his fate.

“Sudden he view’d, in spite of all her art,

An earthly lover lurking at her heart.

Amaz’d, confus’d, he found his pow’r expir’d,

Resign’d to fate, and with a sigh retir’d.”

This situation can be compared to the situation in the Paradise Lost when after the fall of Adam and Eve, God’s angels retired feeling helpless before man’s own free will.

There is no doubt in the fact that “The Rape of the Lock” is a true mock-epic. However, certain objections have been raised against it. First objection is its length. An epic is long narrative poem but “The Rape of the Lock” is a very short poem as compared to any other epic. Second objection is that the story of an epic covers long periods of history whereas “The Rape of the Lock” does not meet this feature as it covers hours. Third objection is Pope’s use of inadequate machinery. The machinery in all the great epics is a stupendous creature whereas Pope’s machinery is tiny and ineffectual.

The first objection may be acceptable but the other two can be rejected. In reply to the second objection, I would like to say that we need not the stories which cover long periods of history to write a mock-epic. In so far as the third objection of Pope’s futile and tiny machinery is concerned, it can also be denied because if the poet had used the machinery as we see in Iliad and Paradise Lost, I think the poem would have lost its flavour as a mock-epic.

To conclude, Pope has employed the mock-heroic form not to mock the epic form but to display the triviality of mean things comparing them with great things. No doubt, it is a true mock-heroic style. We fully agree with the remarks of Hazlitt who says: “*The balance between the concealed irony and the assumed gravity is nicely trimmed, the little is made great and the great made little. It is the triumph of insignificance, the apotheosis of foppery and folly. It is the perfection of mock-heroic.*”

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