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"Whatever is, is Right": Celebrating Colonialism in the Rape of the Lock

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Abstract:
This paper explores The Rape of the Lock as an ideological artefact that both reflects and reinforces the mercantile imperialism of the 18th century. By positing Alexander Pope's mock-epic poem within the context of the wider socio-economic and imperialist trends of the Enlightenment, the paper highlights the role of literature in shaping public discourse on trade, morality, consumption, and empire. The poem's extravagant catalogue of imported commodities, ranging from Arabian perfumes to Indian jewels, foregrounds the superficial, consumerist culture that accompanied Britain's imperial expansion. The Rape of the Lock simultaneously engages in satirizing the trivialities of patrician life and normalizing the material conditions of Britain's developing commercial empire. The talismanic objects on Belinda's dressing table represent the commodification of both material wealth and human relations. By using Edward Said's theory of 'contrapuntal reading,' the study seeks to unravel the unacknowledged labour and exploitation underpinning these luxuries. Furthermore, Pope's ambivalent position is examined, wherein he both criticizes and implicitly endorses the amoral ethics of an emergent capitalist society. This contradiction and duality in Pope extend to the woman question as well, since he metaphorically aligns the objectification of women with the imperialist logic of conquest and possession. By focusing on the uncomfortable nexus between gender, empire, and imperialism, a critical revisiting of Pope's poem allows for a more complex and nuanced understanding of the ideological currents that fashioned the eighteenth century. The interplay of satire and jubilation, criticism and complicity, marks it as a text deeply entangled in the economic and political turmoil of its time. Ultimately, the paper argues that The Rape of the Lock embodies the contradictions of its age — celebrating commercial expansion while masking the structures of oppression that sustained it, thereby offering a complex lens through which to examine the intersections of literature, economics, and empire in the long 18th century.

Keywords: Colonialism, Enlightenment, Gender, Mercantile Capitalism, Postcolonial Theory.

No work is as innocent as it seems, it is in fact a literary and imaginative space for the practice and free play of cultural and ideological politics. The process is a mutual one where both culture is informed by ideology and ideology influenced by culture. Thus, the prime concern of the readers is not what to read but how to read. Edward Said, in Culture and Imperialism (1993), calls this the "contrapuntal reading": the interpretation of works of literature not only for their artistic merit but also with a cognizance of their historical, cultural, and political associations, which he calls "structures of attitude and reference."[1] Thus the 'great canonical texts' of the Western imperial age should be read in the broader context of imperialism: "In practical terms, 'contrapuntal reading' as I have called it means reading a text with an

understanding of what is involved when an author shows, for instance, that a colonial sugar plantation is seen as important to the process of maintaining a particular style of life in England [as occurs in Austen's Mansfield Park]."[2] The 'particular style of life' mentioned here finds a perfect reflection in Belinda's toilette, the site of luxury and profusion, the private sphere that was shaped and maintained by the mercantile exploits of the future colonialists.

The Enlightenment[3] steered a transition from homo civilis to homo economicus, introducing a rationalization of selfishness and self-interest as the enlightened ideology, along with the privatization of virtue and the demoralization of luxury, vanity, selfishness, and avarice.[4] Merchants and voyages, were the two dominant tropes that were used in the 17th and 18th centuries poems to bring out the exuberance and proliferation of overseas trade and expansion which existed at that time. Margaret Anne Doody argued for the "unconscious presence in poetry (and poetics) of the same qualities or mental dispositions that made, in the practical or historical sphere, for England's expansion and domination of trade."[5] She also made some equally pertinent observations on style:

the stylistic qualities of 'Augustan' poetry are metaphorically and more than metaphorically related to the qualities and activities of that energetic and greedy time, and the qualities of appetite and expansiveness can be seen in the poetry of the period, along with the desire to mix, to import, to remake and remodel. The vices and virtues of Augustan poetry are the vices and virtues of buccaneering millionaires, intelligent, ingenious and insatiable.[6]

Thus, the poems in this period flaunt with their catalogues of circulating commodities and their accounts of overseas riches; they also themselves enter the mercantile circuit with the development of the print culture in London. The sense of imperial possibility that accompanies mercantile expansion was translated into a consensual vision of a manifest national destiny, as poet after poet, writer after writer participated in the massed chorus singing odes of praise to trade and empire. Alexander Pope wrote in "Windsor Forest" (1713):

The time shall come, when free as Seas or Wind Unbounded Thames shall flow for Mankind, Whole Nations enter with each swelling Tyde,And Seas but join the Regions they divide; Earth's distant Ends our Glory shall behold, And the new World launch forth to seek the Old.[7]

Thus, the poets of this century played an important role in the consolidation of the ideology of imperialism. They recognized the latent ideological schema of mercantile expansion and examined, celebrated, looked forward to, worried about and, in a sense, demanded and made imperialism possible.

English imperialism did not begin in the 18th century. It began as early as 1650, but especially after 1713, it underwent a rapid expansion and an increasing orientation towards the trade or commercially based version that served the interest of a pre-industrial capitalist society. The wars of this period fought by England, were essentially commercial struggles, out of which England emerged as the dominant commercial power in the European as also the extra-European world. By the early 18th century, the East India Company was England's biggest business, and its mercantilist strategies served as a prelude to future colonization and the setting up of exclusive monopolies and administrative control over the exotic East. By the 'Peace of Utrecht' of 1713, the War of the Spanish succession concluded and England attained equality with France in matters of trade with Spain. It gradually supplanted France in holding a monopoly contract to supply slaves to the Spanish New World. As a result of this, England replaced Holland as a major European slave-trading nation. No wonder trade, the praise of trade, and the effects of trade became a dominant motif in the literary space of this era. Literature thus became a viable and vital way of intervening in and moulding public discourse.[8]

Pope's poem The Rape of the Lock (1712), too, could not overlook the profound change that has occurred in human relations because of the new science of political economy concomitant to the development of and proliferation in overseas commerce. In this new economic and social order, "mighty Contests" cannot rise from human passions, but from "trivial Things."[9] Thus, Stewart Crehan claimed that "The Rape of the Lock is a poem in which things, not people, are the heroes."[10] So, Pope's Baron is completely driven by the acquisitive tendency of the times. What he wants is not a woman's love, but an object, a valued thing: "He saw, he wish'd, and to the Prize aspir'd."[11] What brought prosperity and greatness were fraud, luxury, and pride, especially when profit was gained from buying cheap and selling dear. The Enlightenment alienated itself from pious precepts and insisted that the economic activity be guided by its own self-made amoral laws. The exorbitant human appetites preached that the moral economy, the Christian commandments against greed and the just price were admirable things theoretically, but fundamentally flawed in practice. Instead, it secularized, privatized, and valorised the reckless pursuit of gain and glamour. Explaining this, Roy Porter, in his book, Enlightenment: Britain and the Creation of the Modern World, wrote, "Man was, if not nakedly rapacious a la Hobbes, at least an accumulative creature ─ and therein lay the motivation for economic activity, rooted as it was in the human desire for self-improvement. Ignoring or expecting to override such omnipresent motives would end in failure."[12] Thus, "acquisitiveness, pleasure-seeking, emotional and erotic self-discovery, social climbing and the joys of fashion slipped the moral and religious straitjackets of guilt, sin and retribution."[13]

The interconnected issues of the development of capitalism and mercantile imperialism can be rampantly traced in Pope's works. But this capitalism is different from the phenomenon understood in the true Marxian sense of the term. Both the conditions and the effects of capitalism were present in a stunted and undeveloped form in the 18th century. Laura Brown pointed out: "In its classic form as it appears after the industrial revolution, capitalism is perhaps best understood strictly as a process of production. In eighteenth century England, however, this system is not yet fully in force though many of the necessary preconditions and some of the actual productive relations are certainly present."[14] What was prevalent during that time was a system of generalized commodity exchange and not really a system of capitalist production, though a distant resemblance between some of its effects, as these occurred at this point and those that would develop at its later, complete avatar, can be identified. In the words of Brown: "Imperialism, especially as it arose in seventeenth-and eighteenth-century England, can be seen as the international dimension or extension of early capitalism, in which the exploitation of less developed societies, through trade and investment and backed by military force, becomes the source of profits and of commodities from around the world."[15]

In the unprecedented flood of imported finished goods and raw materials that were transforming human life, in uncertain and unpredictable ways, it is not contentment but exuberance that is first noticed. So, the talismanic objects on Belinda's dressing table are ascribed to the huge importation of goods accompanying overseas expansion and trade:

Unnumber'd treasures ope at once, and here The various Off'rings of the World appear; From each she nicely culls with curious Toil, And decks the Goddess with the glitt'ring Spoil. This Casket India's glowing Gems unlocks, And all Arabia breathes from yonder Box. The Tortoise here and Elephant unite, Transform'd to Combs, the speckled and the white. Here Files of Pins extend their shining Rows,
Puffs, Powders, Patches, Bibles, Billet-doux."[16]

Conforming to the consumerist ethic of the time, Belinda, even before she adores herself in the mirror,

she "intent adores/…the Cometic Pow'rs,"[17] The nascent capitalism with imperialism working in tandem, increasingly prioritized commodities over human beings and relationships. So, the "trivial Things,"[18] no longer remain so trivial as they could be exchanged for other little trifles and even wars could be waged to procure these if necessary. Hence, differences between things were levelled out, exchange-value was asserted over use-value and, a new amoral kind of order was established where "Puffs, Powders, Patches, Bibles" and "Billet-doux"[19] could be remorselessly juxtaposed. Tillotson brilliantly puts this into words as "the bathetic and alliteratively peppered disorder on Belinda's dressing table is fundamentally a moral disorder."[20]

The coarseness of demand created a bluntness of thought and in such a state Belinda's cross could bear no religious significance but could only bear a mere decorative value, "which Jews might kiss, and Infidels adore."[21] Her image when she emerged from the dressing room, dressed in the white robe with the sparkling cross at her breasts symbolized the British nation embellished with the colonial spoils. Laura Brown, loosely identifying Belinda's situation with the post-industrial capitalist situation, remarked that "The poem identifies her in terms of the products of mercantilist expansion, and it begins to develop a rhetoric of the commodity through which she and her culture can be described ─ a language of commodity fetishism where objects become the only reality."[22] So according to her The Rape of the Lock is an imperialist poem, which aestheticizes the products of mercantile capitalism, obscuring "the actual production of the commodities so glowingly evoked."[23] In Homer's epics objects never acquire a life of their own, but are firmly connected with the particular people who made them and who use them. We know the name, the home of the maker of the bow and the bed, and of the shield. But in The Rape of the Lock, said Crehan, "the origin and history of manufactured objects and their connection with particular persons are points that are either not mentioned at all or are made absurdly irrelevant."[24] Of Belinda's petticoat Ariel says: "Oft have we known that sev'nfold Fence to fail, / Tho' stiff with Hoops, and arm'd with Ribs of Whale."[25] Unlike the shield of Achilles, Belinda's petticoat has no maker, no history, and no relation with the wearer. Even the bathetic statement of: "The Tortoise here and Elephant unite, / Transform'd to Combs, the speckled and the white"[26] ignores the huge task of hunting, then killing elephants and turtles, cutting of their tusks, and removing their shells, transporting the ivory and tortoise shells, and marketing them. All this is trivialized and reduced to a single word 'transform'd' and the entire Arabia is captured and contained within the confinement of a single box. Thus, the unabashed pursuit and celebration of wealth led to the invisibilisation of many questions and people. This is of course, a phenomenon common to all imperial and monarchical systems that have been operative ever since the beginning of the human civilization. Even the modern version of a king, that is, a ruler like Hitler or the leader of a communist regime betrays the same tendency of casual invisibilization of people involved in the production of the amenities of life. But at the turn of the 18th century, England evinced a remarkable enhancement of that tendency, the impetus for it originating from forces of the 'new' mercantile imperialism, early pre-industrialist capitalism and a hitherto unprecedented materialistic outlook towards life. So, the labour that is necessarily exploited overseas to procure the "glitt'ring Spoils"[27] on Belinda's dressing table is essentially obliterated. Hence, what needs to be explored is the relations between ideology, gender, race, and class, as also the functions of the oppressed and excluded in texts and cultural formations.

The Rape of the Lock is built upon some of the central images of a prominent contemporary vision. The poems recurrent reference to tea, coffee, silk, China, chocolate, and tobacco successfully locates it in a mercantilist context. The seemingly endless lists of treasures obtained from all over Europe and from

around the world give a new material meaning to the celebrated Popean principle of concordia discors ─ a classical and Renaissance notion that found implicit unity in difference, wholeness in contradiction.[28] This ambiguity is the very foundation on which the Enlightenment premises were erected and this ambiguity constitutes the very persona of the poet Alexander Pope. Pope's ambiguity could have also been due to his own ambiguous and marginalized position in the society. Dwarfish, deformed, sickly and probably impotent from having contracted spinal tuberculosis in infancy, his manhood was continually called into question by his literary competitors and by the women in his life. The frequent rejections in love did not deter him from falling in love repeatedly. Though he criticized Belinda and her superficial age, he could not resist extending a tender affection and indulgence at the same time. His poems also dealt with the interconnected issues of colonialism and capitalism and in his poems, agency was transferred from the people to the things. A close reading of his poems from the "Windsor Forest" to "The Dunciad" revealed the conflicting impulses of early English mercantile capitalism: its fascination with the prizes of expansion and at the same time its partial awareness of the violence that imperialism unleashed. So however much Pope may have been satirizing the conspicuous display of the seductive array of exotic cosmetics at Belinda's toilette, the rare gem collection at his own grotto soon shifts part of the critique on himself as well. His famous "Whatever is, is right,"[29] expresses the 18th century's liberal humanism, empiricism, or Enlightenment ideals ─ including hope, progress, and the pursuit of individual happiness ─ as the ultimate rational position, deliberately ignoring the evil effects that such individual pursuits may generate. He valorised Belinda, the product of mercantile imperialism, deliberately overlooking the serial acts of oppression and injustice that went in to the procurement of those imperial 'spoils.' So, the inherent ambivalence of the poem can attack 'commodities' and their cultural implications, and at the same time also extol imperialism. The ambivalence in his attitude towards both the female sex and the colonial mission produced a mixed response through his aesthetic act, causing him to celebrate the thing he condemned the most. Pope, in celebrating the wealth that colonialism amassed, thus proved himself, despite his endeavour of 'mockery,' to be a true "Most Obedient / Humble Servant" (Pope's letter to Arabella Fermor)[30] of the British Empire!

Pope's ambivalence can be extended to the 18th century attitude to the woman question as well. The misogyny in his poem can be traced in the problematic issue of his victimization of women in his ideological dilemma. Apart from the physical colonization of the exotic lands, the gender colonization of the fair sex comprises a conspicuous chapter in the 18th century British history. Feminist critics have isolated the representation of women's experience and the ideologies of gender at work in the major authors of the period. They urged that the category 'woman' must be read as a culturally and historically manufactured construct which can be situated within specific material conditions. The patriarchal 18th century displaced its obsession with accumulation, luxury, and acquisition completely on the female community.[31] For the empowered and vocal male of this society, it is the women alone who decked themselves up with the commodities yielded by an expansionist culture and thus for a Pope became the displaced focus of the attack on a commodified society. Scott C. Holstad wrote: "Pope's masterpiece, while on one level sympathetic towards the lack of women's opportunities in a patriarchal society, on the other perpetuates the commodification of women and, in doing so, violates the reader as well, by including the reader as an implied accomplice to the rhetoric of misogyny."[32] Pope is aware of the cultural limitations imposed on women and is sympathetic to some extent. He knows that "she who scorns a Man, must die a Maid"[33] and it is not only the female but also the male who deserves to be criticized. Yet it is his own male identity that ultimately wins; undermining all sympathy and

consciousness regarding women's limited opportunities within a dominant power structure, he inscribes Belinda into the text as the object of ridicule and criticism. His initial attempts to approach Belinda with fond admiration fade in the background and what concretizes is the trivialization and critique of Belinda, implicitly the entire woman community. He thus engages in an unabashed celebration of gender colonization and contributes to its amoral ethics by relentlessly dehumanizing a flesh and bone human Belinda into a glittering and glowing cosmetic doll.

In his letter to Arabella Fermor, Pope 'apologizes' to her before the actual text of the poem begins by stating that the poem "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 little unguarded Follies, but at their own."[34] Pope's misogynistic 'apology' subverts his stated intention. As Kate Beaird Meyers illustrates, "the choice of 'divert' is perfect: Pope hopes to divert attention away from his act of misogynous judgement and focus it on what he calls the Folly' of female nature."[35] Pope successfully trivializes Belinda throughout the poem, as Laura Brown claims, by "the ironic juxtaposition of her [insignificant] story with classical epic." Further, the heroic material of the epic style Pope emulates, also trivializes Belinda. "Her trivial, commodified and amoral world is castrated," as Brown notes, "with grandeur of epic, a world of gods and goddesses, of heroes larger than life, where history is made and great nations find their identity."[36]

Pope's use of terminologies to describe the female and the male in this poem is essentially informed by his patriarchal prejudices. While men are 'Peers' women are often either 'coquettes' or 'Prudes.' Women suffer from 'faults' and 'female errors.' Women are 'degraded,' men 'The Victor.' Men have 'Wits' which are measured against 'the Lady's Hair,' but as women's brains are 'vacant,' there is little surprise that the "Wits mount up, the Hairs subside."[37] Pope's Belinda, the representative of the woman community, is, as Ellen Pollak articulates, "an empty vessel laden down with a cargo of disembodied object" (432) and the reader too is made a participant in Pope's criticism of her materialistic superficiality.

The "painted Vessel," Belinda, boarded up with the wealth of mercantile imperialism, "Launch'd on the Bosom of the Silver Thames" to travel to 'Hampton' court, the heart and centre of British politics. The image of the "Silver Thames,"[38] as the agent of imperialism is not an 18th century innovation but it was transmitted as early as the middle of the seventeenth century through John Denham's "Cooper's Hill." Denham glorifying the Thames noted that "God-like his [Thames] unwearied bounty flows" irrespective of time and place:

Nor are his Blessings to his banks confin'd, But free, and common, as the sea or wind; When he to boast, or to disperse his stores Full of the tributes of his grateful shores, Visits the world, and in his flying towers Bring home to us and makes both Indies ours; Finds wealth where 'tis, bestows it where it wants Cities in deserts, woods in Cities plants. So that to us no thing, no place is strange, While his fair bosom is the worlds exchange.[39]

The mercantile exploits of the 18th century English people were no less valorous than the wars fought by Homer's heroes, though the kind and intensity of the wars varied. Now no longer the dictums of the Gods run the world, it is the norms dictated by the 'Culture Industry,' as Adorno and Horkheimer puts it in The Dialectics of the Enlightenment (1944), which makes the world, twist and turn, reel and run, at the mere pulling of its cords.[40]

The 'Culture Industry' challenges the basic precepts on which the Enlightenment premises were erected. "The total effect of the culture industry is one of anti-enlightenment" as Adorno noted – "enlightenment, that is the progressive technical domination of nature, becomes mass deception and is

turned into a means for fettering consciousness. It impedes the development of autonomous, independent, individuals who judge and decide consciously for themselves." Now in the heyday of the 'Culture Industry,' the heroic generation of yore has disappeared and what are produced instead, are, malformed, stunted individuals (unlike a well-built Odysseus) who engage in a 'heroic' struggle to choose amidst a sea of commodities that the "Silver Thames" brings in and end up in a pathetic condition of metonymic reductions and metaphoric substitutions. This is illustrated by Pope when, while describing the battle of the cards he in fact refers to the colonial encounter, using an epic simile:

Thus when dispers'd a routed Army runs, Of Asia's Troops, and Africk's Sable Sons, With like Confusion different Nations fly, Of various Habit and of various Dye, The pierc'd Battalions dis-united fall, In Heaps on Heaps; one Fate o'erwhelms them all.[41]

The economy of the 'trivial Things' can be well understood when one reads the petty card game as the world scenario in the 18th century ─ England guised in the garb of a merchant, went out to fight wars all over Asia and Africa and bring "Asia's Troops, and Africk's Sable Sons," under the fold of the expanding British Empire but somewhere, deep down, Pope was aware ─ "Sudden these Honours shall be snatched away, / And curs'd forever this Victorious Day.[42] Unfortunately, such a thought was momentary and the materialist Pope dismissed it in favour of the luxury of the 'silver Lamp,' 'China's Earth,' 'fuming Liquour,' 'rich Brocade' and 'coffee,' which "Sent up in Vapours…/ New Stratagems . . . to gain."[43]

The source of all gain was in the East and it was by imperial rights that the British were the masters of whatever, wherever was produced. The domination of the seas allowed the English to 'harvest' commodities not available in England, even without suffering the climatic inconveniences. Waller's verse weaving this fantasy rhymed:

The taste of hot Arabia's spice we know, Free from the scorching sun that makes it grow; Without the worm in Persian silks we shine; And, without planting drink of every vine.[44]

All celebratory poems, meditating on the genesis, expansion, and devolution of empires in history, are haunted by a constant reminder that empires rise and fall and it is probably from this fear that Pope allowed Belinda's 'shining Ringlets' to be castrated. In her desire, to leave the private sphere of safety and luxury, and travel to the public sphere of 'Conquests' and 'Fame,' Belinda destabilizes the norms created by patriarchy. She dresses herself with labour and care and "The fair each moment rises in her Charms,"[45] but only to reject her wooers and cause the 'Destruction of Mankind.' Such women are termed as subversive women by the patriarchal forefathers and they seem to pose a threat to the very male foundation. The 18th century characterized by a developed penitentiary, gave the sentence of a severe punishment to such overstepping women.

The game of Ombre, apart from being a representation of the colonial encounter, also symbolized the battle between the sexes. Belinda in her quest for fame, transgressed the periphery imposed around her by the chauvinistic conduct books; she travelled from the private to the public sphere. In her attempt to reverse the prescribed norms, it is no surprise that her locks were snipped off, she suffered a symbolic 'rape,' a nemesis to her climactic amorous desires. She received no sympathy at such a ruthless treatment but instead became the butt of the joke and ridicule. Pollak rightly explains that Pope is not only critical of Belinda but much more:

though Pope criticizes the sterility of a world in which the signs of things have actually become substitutes for the things themselves, where virtue has been reduced to reputation and men themselves to swordknots, where in effect people live in a materialistic and metonymic void, he never does controvert

the premise that female sexuality is a material property over which man has a natural claim.[46]

The female space was thus subsumed under the dominant patriarchal space and in turn the embryonic capitalist space engulfed and manipulated both these spaces as Pope highlighted Belinda's commodity status, both in terms of her gender and as a receptacle of commodities. What the entire incident of the 'rape' enacts is the scene of violence ─ whether it be practiced on the women or on the Oriental 'other.' What is common to both encounters are violation, aggression, trivialization, and commodification. The violent act of a virtual rape is trivialized, the humiliation becomes an absence and Belinda, the 'other,' both from the colonial and gender perspectives, becomes a commodity to be handled in whichever way Pope pleased.

Pope, the propagandist of the agenda of 'the cult of passive womanhood,' justifies the 'rape' and further makes Belinda a laughing stock in the 'Cave of Spleen' episode, where she is found in the state of a 'degraded Toast':

Unnumber'd Throngs on ev'ry side are seen Of Bodies chang'd to various Forms by Spleen. Here living Teapots stand, one Arm held out, One bent; the Handle this, and that the Spout: A Pipkin here like Homer's Tripod walks; Here sighs a Jar, and there a Goose-pye talks; Men prove with Child, as pow'rful Fancy works, And Maids turn'd Bottles, call aloud for Corks.[47]

Taking Pope's misogyny to the extreme extent Holstad contends that "Pope's exploration of Belinda's psycho-sexual longings seems suspicious. The implication that Belinda is a waiting vessel, anticipating the Baron's immanent (sexual) arrival is disturbing." She is the victim of a rape, she is the victim of the ultimate humiliation that may happen to a woman, however symbolic it may appear to be, yet "Pope's hinting at Belinda's unconscious desire of sexual fulfilment presumably at the Baron's hands, strikes one as perhaps too closely resembling the rhetoric of 'Blame the Victim' syndrome: the idea that the Baron should be exonerated because Belinda must have wanted it." [48] Pope persisted in insisting that Belinda "wanted it" by further using statements like: "Oh hadst thou, Cruel! been content to seize / Hairs less in sight, or any Hairs but these!"[49] As if Belinda wanted to be ravished sexually rather than parting with a 'thing' which contributed to her beautification. But Myers, reads a more complex dynamics in Belinda's thought process than that done by Pope, which may be noted at this juncture. Belinda, whose locks give her a great deal of power in their phallic symbolism is, as Myers explains, is "figuratively castrated," and in the process, "the 'hero' regains control of his society."[50] She has been thoroughly taught a lesson by Pope (representing the dominant ideology) and is not actually willing to give up her virginity to regain her power.

The model that Pope provides the transgressive women to follow is Clarissa, Pope's spokesperson, who moralises thus: "But since, alas! Frail Beauty must decay, / Curl'd or uncurl'd, since Locks will turn to grey", what matters and needs to be retained is "our Pow'rs to use, / And keep good Humour still whatev'r we lose?."[51] Claridge points out that Clarissa is ― a man, in gender, of course, not in sex…. [She] reads as a male in this text because she is too simple, in the world and context which Pope creates, to be female…. Thus marriage, which is what Clarissa really urges…allows for the kind of control and heroic closure to chaotic desire that Belinda… represent[s]: marriage defines a hero's endeavours by conferring meaning upon the chaos of sexual energy.[52]

But Belinda, conforming to the amoral ethic of the 18th century society, is found to lament not for her lost honour but for the public knowledge of it. She is afraid that her lock "On that Rapacious Hand for ever blaze" and all her honour would be "in a Whisper lost."[53]

This being an era with a metonymic mindset, Belinda suffered from a variety of mood fluctuations

ranging from anger, despair to melancholy at the loss of a mere lock of hair. Her varied moods were fetched from the 'Cave of Spleen' and herein lies another subtext of The Rape of the Lock. It is the text of the binary opposition between the Occident and the Orient, that is ideologically perpetrated by the canonical writers and Pope is no exception. Edward Said in his controversial work Orientalism (1978) argued that the representations of the Orient in the European travel narratives, texts, poetry and travelogues were part of a strategy evolved by a socio-politico-economic paradigm that aimed at the creation of a discourse of dichotomy between Europe and its 'others,' a dichotomy that was essential to the construction of the European culture as well as to the perpetuation and extension of European hegemony over other lands. Said's project was to show how 'knowledge' about non-Europeans was a part of the process of maintaining power over them; thus, the status of knowledge was demystified, and the lines between the ideological and the objective blurred. So, the knowledge of the East can never be innocent, or 'objective,' but rather:

a political vision of reality whose structure promoted the difference between the familiar (Europe, the West, 'us') and the strange (the Orient, the East, 'them') …. When one uses categories like Oriental and Western as both the starting and the end points of analysis, research, public policy … the result is usually to polarize the distinction ─ the Oriental becomes more Oriental, the Westerner more Western ─ and limit the human encounter between different cultures, traditions and societies.[54]

So, the basic thesis of Orientalism, or the 'study' of the Orient, was ultimately a political vision of reality whose structure was to reinstate certain stereotypical opposition between the West and the East which are essential to the European self-conception, as Ania Loomba puts it: "if colonized people are irrational, Europeans are rational; if the former are barbaric, sensual, and lazy, Europe is civilization itself, with its sexual appetites under control and its dominant ethic that of hard work; if the Orient as static, Europe can be seen as developing and marching ahead; the Orient has to be feminine so that Europe can be masculine."[55]

The Rape of the Lock oozes with the dialectics of this contradiction. Belinda is the 'Fairest of Mortals' and her world is a world of fun, frolic, and gaiety. Her materialized world is coloured by the 'purpled Main.' 'Silver Thames,' the vibrant 'sylphs,' "thin glitt'ring Textures of the filmy Dew; / Dipt in the richest Tinctures of the Skies,"[56] and warmed by the glorious sun and the 'Pyre' of 'Billet-doux,' flamed by amorous sighs. In sharp contrast the 'dreaded East' is where all the wind blows, after the dismemberment of Belinda's lock. The 'Cave of Spleen' is posited as the dialectical opposite of Belinda's coloured world and its location down the 'Central Earth,' makes it possible to be read as a Tropical locale. As opposed to the coloured sylphs, Umbriel has 'sooty Pinions' and an air of darkness and melancholy. The West always constructs the East as a place of mystery and 'haunted Shades.' It is in this 'dismal Dome' that "A constant Vapour o'er the Palace flies; / Strange Phantoms rising as the Mists arise," and beastly animals move all about the place: "Now glaring Fiends and Snakes on rolling Spires." The reference to the "Lakes of liquid Gold"[57] creates the idea that the 'Cave of Spleen' is really an Eastern locale, studded with the rich petroleum mines where the Europeans initially reached as traders and then gradually became the masters. When viewed from this perspective the surrealistic Freudian passage, mentioned earlier, on the deformed bodies, living Teapots, the walking Pipkin, sighing Jar, talking Goose-pye, pregnant men and maids transformed to bottles calling out for corks, can also be seen as a crucial category of the East / West binary. Orientalism constructs the West as a place of sexual control, restrain and abstinence, while the east is essentially noted for its sexual abnormalities, aberrations, and excesses. But the point is, Orientalism constitutes a body of pseudo-knowledge. This is

established from the fact that the English Baron, unable to keep his sexuality under restraint engages in a crude and brutish act of metaphorically raping Belinda. Such an act, according to the terms of the binary, is supposedly expected from an Oriental person. Pope's ambivalence comes in at this point. Having apparently presented the binary opposition in imaginative terms at his disposal, as starkly as possible, he seems to overthrow the 'knowledge' associated so assuredly with it by turning the scales upside down. The reader cannot but raise the question: does Pope mock at, interrogate the said binary opposition which provides a strong motivation for the possession, domination and then civilization of the inhabitants of the distant Eastern spaces?

Whatsoever, by virtue of the rape, the subversive Belinda is brought back on to the accepted and expected tracks but that is not all, Pope has more to laugh at her expense. Belinda, a commodity, solely because of her gender, heightens her commodity status by endorsing the products of mercantile imperialism. Even her lock of hair (symbolizing her chastity) is turned into a commodity when the lock rises in the air and turns into a constellation. Thus, what gains life is a commodity, the constellation, which becomes permanent while everything else remains transient and 'laid in Dust.' Scott remarks: "In the end, the woman is unable to regain / retain the power available to her and she remains the butt of the joke. Within the paradigms of gender consciousness, she is seen as a clownish object, cosmetically enhanced, reeking of commodification."[58] Pope attempts to placate both Belinda and women in general by promising to write Belinda into textual immortality. However, as Claridge shows, he simply "reappropriates generative power through his anxious claim to superiority over the female…. He will contain the female by inscribing her."[59] Thus, the chauvinist Pope, finds a perverse pleasure and satisfaction in metaphorically raping an everywoman, Belinda, putting the blame entirely on her, removing all sympathy away and reducing her to a glittering, glowing constellation to be greedily ogled by all. Celebrating the colonization of the women, relegating Belinda to the status of a commodity, basking in the glory of belonging to the owner class of the commodity, he inscribes an immortal text in the History of English Literature, dripping with the ideology of male domination, female commodification and, nascent capitalism. Pope thus undisputedly valorises both the issues of gender and geographical colonialism in his text.

It is not that the poets of this time were the only ones responsible for constituting the imperial vision, nonetheless their role cannot be overlooked in the phenomenon of the consolidation of the imperialist discourse. Pope's position is that of a poet not going completely against the mainstream of this discourse while deliberately choosing at the same time to steer the beaten track of mirroring the consensus vision. This results in a complex, intriguing communication by Pope. He does critique the consumerist culture throughout the poem, but the criticism is ever diluted with joviality, merriment, and aesthetics. Moreover, by inscribing the ideology of import in The Rape of the Lock, and simultaneously exuding a pleasure in belonging to the proprietor class of the commodity, he himself, engages in a subconscious consumption of the commodities imported and embodied in the commodified female figure, Belinda. Pope thus implicates himself both in the colonial exploitation and the consumerist culture and brings on to himself a charge of a devaluation of the labour that went in to the procurement of the said commodities too. But impervious to everything, the narcissistic Pope, after greedily devouring the imports of imperialism, violating the sanctity of femininity, and finding no fault with himself or his age, unhesitatingly pronounces the words ─ "Whatever is, is right."[60] Or can one read in his statement, a dig at the so called 'rightness' of the amoral ethics of the Enlightenment? Pope keeps his position ambiguous again and the reader finds his declaration as enigmatic, as intriguing, and as challenging as

Monalisa's smile. It is a special aesthetic pleasure for the reader to accost the Pope whom he finds in The Rape of the Lock: is he laughing at his age, at the female members of the community, or at himself?

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