



Alexander Pope and the mock-heroic poem

ORIGINS

Mock-heroic poetry was a remarkable genre of English neo-classicism in the 18th century. Derived from French models, it combined the features of various types of writing: epic, comedy, parody, satire and poetry. As a result, the **mock-heroic poem** ironically **contrasted with the ideals of decorum and balance** that characterised the Augustan Age.

THE RAPE OF THE LOCK

The masterpiece of this genre was *The Rape of the Lock* (1712) by **Alexander Pope** (1688-1744), a humorous **denunciation of the vanities and idleness of 18th-century high society**. In the classical period the epic had been applied to the elevated subjects of love and war. Pope's poem wanted to mock his society in its failure to rise to epic standards, exposing its pettiness through a comparison with the grandeur of the traditional epic subjects and the bravery of epic heroes. Pope underlined that in his society **values had lost all proportion, and the trivial was handled with the solemnity** that should be given to really important issues.

PLOT AND SOURCES

The Rape of the Lock is a poem in which every element of the contemporary scene reminds the reader of some image from epic tradition; the **transformations** are numerous, striking, and rich with moral implications. The great epic battles become **card games and flirtatious quarrels**. The Greek and Roman gods are turned into ineffectual fairies and gnomes. **Cosmetics, clothing and jewellery** replace armour and weapons, and the rituals of religious sacrifice are moved to the dressing room and the altar of love. This poem is based on a **real incident between families** Pope knew and that he wanted to encourage to laugh at their own folly. It was written to reconcile Arabella Fermor (Belinda in the poem) and her family with the family of Lord Petre, who had cut off a lock of her hair. In Italy the poet Alessandro Tassoni had written *La Secchia Rapita* (1621), in which war breaks out because of a stolen bucket; Giuseppe Parini's poem *Il Giorno* (1763-65) reflects a similar mood.

Key idea

The heroic couplet

The verse form of *The Rape of the Lock* is the **heroic couplet**, which consists of rhymed pairs of iambic pentameter lines (lines of ten syllables each, alternating stressed and unstressed syllables). The balance of the couplet form is well suited to a subject matter

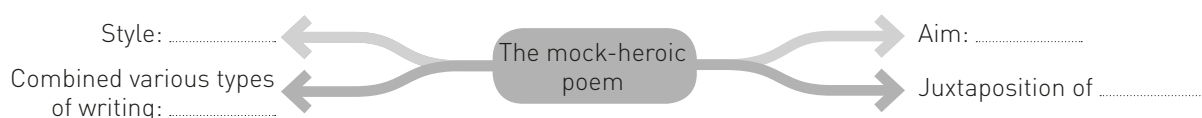
that draws on comparisons and contrasts in which two ideas or circumstances are balanced, measured, or compared against one another. It is thus perfect for the evaluative, moralising premise of the poem.

COMPETENCE: READING AND UNDERSTANDING INFORMATION

1 ANSWER the following questions about mock-heroic poetry.

- | | |
|--|--|
| 1 What were the origins of mock-heroic poetry? | 4 What is <i>The Rape of the Lock</i> based on? |
| 2 Who was its main exponent? | 5 What does every element of this work remind the reader of? |
| 3 What was his aim? | 6 What does the heroic couplet consist of? |

2 COMPLETE this diagram about the mock-heroic poem.





Belinda's toilet

At the end of Canto I of The Rape of the Lock, the main character, Belinda, has just awoken from a peaceful slumber. She is in her dressing room and is getting herself ready to go out with her friends.

Alexander Pope
The Rape of the Lock
(1712)

Canto I

- And now, **unveiled**, the toilet stands displayed¹,
Each silver vase in mystic order laid².
First, robed³ in white, the nymph **intent** adores,
With head uncovered, the cosmetic powers.
5 A heavenly image in the glass⁴ appears,
To that she bends⁵, to that her eyes she rears⁶;
The inferior priestess⁷, at her altar's side,
Trembling, begins the sacred rites of **pride**.
Unnumbered treasures ope⁸ at once, and here
10 The various offerings of the world appear;
From each she nicely culls with curious toil⁹,
And decks¹⁰ the goddess with the **glittering** spoil¹¹.
This casket¹² India's **glowing** gems unlocks,
And all Arabia breathes from **yonder** box.
15 The tortoise here and elephant unite,
Transformed to **combs**, the speckled¹³ and the white.
Here files of pins extend their shining rows,
Puffs, powder, patches, bibles, billet-doux¹⁴.
Now **awful** beauty puts on all its arms;
20 The fair each moment rises in her charms,
Repairs her smiles, awakens every grace,
And calls forth all the wonders of her face;
Sees by degrees a purer blush arise,
And **keener** lightnings quicken¹⁵ in her eyes.
25 The busy Sylphs¹⁶ surround their darling care;
These set the head, and those divide the hair,
Some fold the sleeve¹⁷, whilst others plait the gown¹⁸;
And Betty's praised for labours not her own.

- 1 displayed. In mostra.
- 2 laid. Disposto.
- 3 robed. Vestita.
- 4 glass. Specchio.
- 5 she bends. Si piega.
- 6 she rears. Alza.
- 7 The inferior priestess. La sacerdotessa di grado inferiore, cioè la cameriera.
- 8 ope. Si aprono.
- 9 culls with curious toil. Sceglie con premurosa cura.
- 10 decks. Agghinda, ricopre.
- 11 spoil. Spoglie, bottino.
- 12 casket. Cofanetto.
- 13 speckled. Screziato.
- 14 Puffs ... billet-doux. Piumini, cipria, nei posticci, bibbie, biglietto galante.
- 15 quicken. Brillano.
- 16 Sylphs. Silfidi, spiritelli.
- 17 fold the sleeve. Ripiegano la manica.
- 18 plait the gown. Pieghettano la veste.

READING COMPETENCE

1 READ the text and match the highlighted words in the text with the following.

- | | |
|---|------------------------------|
| 1 self-respect | 5 sharper |
| 2 giving off bright light | 6 over there |
| 3 toothed strips of some hard material used to arrange or hold the hair | 7 unpleasant, terrible |
| 4 fascinated | 8 revealed |
| | 9 brilliantly showy |

2 READ the text again and do the following activities.

- 1 The rhyme scheme is
A ABABAB.
B AABBCC.
C ABCCDD.
- 2 Mark the stresses in the first two lines.
- 3 Identify the kind of verse used by Pope.



- 4 Complete the table below with examples from the passage which parallel epic poetry and the meaning achieved thanks to the juxtaposition of the epic with the trivial.

<i>The Rape of the Lock</i>	Epic Poetry	Meaning
.....	The goddess of nature worships the divinities presiding over the battle.	Belinda worships the cosmetics she sees on the toilet table.
'Now... arms' (line 19).	Belinda's beauty is increased by the aggressive power of the arms of make-up.
'The busy Sylphs surround their darling care' (line 25).	The air spirits protect the hero.

- 5 Underline the words referring to Belinda and her behaviour.
- 6 Decide how she is described.
- A She is described with heroic characteristics, as a warrior.
 - B She is described as a mean person.
 - C She is described with divine attributes, as an object of cult.
- 7 Circle some examples of religious language. What does this language reinforce?
- A The parody of the rite of the toilette.
 - B The importance of Belinda who is represented as a goddess.
 - C The physical description of the protagonist.
- 8 Re-order the main events of the text. Then write down the lines they refer to.
- A Betty uses perfumes, combs, pins, puffs, powder and patches.
 - B Everything is ready for Belinda's daily make-up.
 - C Belinda and Betty are in front of the dressing table.
 - D The Sylphs help Betty arrange Belinda's hair and dress.
 - E Belinda looks at herself in the mirror while Betty is getting things ready for her toilette.
 - F Belinda's beauty is emphasised by the make-up, which ends with a touch of blush and some drops in her eyes.
- 9 Report what you have learnt about the mock-heroic poem *The Rape of the Lock*.