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**A Rough Patch of Language: Satire and Pope’s *Rape of the Lock***

As the English language transitioned from its middle to modern stage, it became the subject of many fears and frustrations. During this transition, a paranoia began to crystallize in the minds of the educated male aristocracy around an idea that English was being corrupted by outside languages and pseudo-intellectual words added by foppish aristocrats looking to sound smarter and separate themselves from the lower class. In this social and linguistic environment, Alexander Pope wrote his satirical mock-epic “The Rape of the Lock” with a keen eye on the language of a (mostly) fictional stuck-up aristocracy. Pope advances these fears throughout the poem through the character Umbriel, whose language, in particular his strong sexual innuendo and using French words like “chagrin”, shows not only the changing face of English but also the elite patriarchal fear of their language becoming effeminate, muddled, and impure.

Much of Pope’s satire stems from his use of Rosicrucian lore. It is easy to forget that there are humorous intentions behind *The Rape of the Lock,* and often more recent readings can forget the lightness Pope is using by delving so deep into the ideology of the poem. (Latimer 685) To understand this humor, it is important to understand the source material Pope claims to use, *La Comte de Gabalis* byNicolas-Pierre-Henri de Montfaucon de Villars*,* and how it adds intimations of sexual innuendo to the fantasy of the poem*.*

*Gabalis* is set up as a socratic discussion between the Count of Gabalis and two pupils, but is not a truly serious treatise on Rosicrucian lore. At one point, the Count tells the narrator of the story that he must read fairy tales in order to prepare himself for philosophy, and the narrator responds by accusing the Count of being possessed by a demon. (690) Yet the satire isn’t simply coming from the Count’s strange behavior; his ideas aren’t even really based on Rosicrucian lore, but Paracelsian lore. Most of the major Rosicrucian treatises talk very little about spirits and sylphs, but the lore of a man named Paracelsus fits perfectly into the mold that Pope and *Gabalis* present. Paracelsian lore focused heavily on the intermarriage between elementals (not spirits) and humans, often with lurid undertones. Villars uses this repressed sexual ideology in *Gabalis,* emphasizing its hidden lasciviousness. What this makes clear is that both works are intended as satires, but not just satires of particular events. They are satires with a strong sexual influence that keep the eroticism only thinly veiled behind innuendo and comedy. (699) Pope’s decision to use such a risqué French treatise that doesn’t truly take its subject matter seriously underscores exactly what the English elite feared so much about the francophonic influence on the language. Rather than being a straightforward attempt to communicate an idea, the elite perceive French to be obscuring and overly concerned with sexuality and excess. Pope, by satirizing this content, is asserting the importance of keeping English pure and an effective utilitarian communication tool.

The obvious sexuality on display in *Gabalis* sheds new light on several characters, in particular Umbriel the gnome. Much of what Umbriel says seems innocuous, but to look at his dialogue with an eye toward sexuality opens up a satirical interpretation of erotic discomfort. Umbriel journey’s to the “Cave of Spleen” brings him to a wayward Queen who has the mystical control over the emotions of women. The spleen is the seat of melancholy and “vapours”, and so the queen of such an organ would be able to cause feelings of weakness and anxiety. (Belling 44) The gnome enigmatically declares that the Spleen Queen has the ability to “send the godly in a pet to pray” (l. 64) in a boastful flattery of her abilities. There are two ways to direct this: on one hand the turn of phrase “in a pet” at the time meant to be offended or in a fit of peevishness. This fits easily into the paradigm of a queen of raw emotion. At the time Pope was writing, pet also had a more physical meaning. Around the turn of the 18th century, pet started to attain its modern English meaning as an animal kept for companionship. Also, around the same time, pet came to mean to treat someone like a pet, or to touch them. Pet also, therefore, began to be used to emphasize a sexual touch. Sending the “godly in a pet” works in this sense as a satirical inversion of piety by juxtaposing religious devotion with sinful touching.

The gnome’s impropriety as it relates to sexuality comes out in full force as he begs the queen to allow him the benefit of being able to upset Belinda, and says that if he were ever able to plant “airy horns” on heads, or ruffle petticoats and tumble beds, he would be able to give “half the world the spleen” (Pope 4.71-78). Each of these phrases is loaded with sexual imagery: horns are a symbol of being a cuckold but the fact that they’re airy emphasizes the idea that the gnome is mischievously planting these emotions in people. The ruffled petticoats and tumbled beds further serve to falsely accuse a lover of impropriety, and incite jealousy and negative emotions.

In his last statement, the gnome appeals to the queen again by drawing her attention to touch. He implores her to “touch Belinda with chagrin / that single act gives half the world the spleen.” This time, several layers of meaning in the word chagrin act to emphasize the idea that the gnome is trying to make Belinda feel like she’s been violated, or touched in a sexual way that she did not desire. Originally, the definition of Chagrin relates to rough patches of animal hide. Commonly, these patches were used to polish objects and were very rough. This word was being introduced to English from French several decades before Pope wrote “The Rape of the Lock”*,* and the implication of using a word emphasizing coarseness by way of French raises an implication that this fear of sexual impropriety is something experienced by a vain, upper middle class in particular.

Touching has changed connotation dramatically from the beginning of the poem. It carries a gentle connotation early in the poem, where her protector sylph whispers in her ear that

If e'er one Vision touch'd thy infant Thought,

Of all the Nurse and all the Priest have taught,

Of airy Elves by Moonlight Shadows seen,

The silver Token, and the circled Green,

Or Virgins visited by Angel-Pow'rs,

With Golden Crowns and Wreaths of heav'nly Flowers (1.31-34).

Yet now, by juxtaposing soft touch with the roughness of chagrin and petting to piety and chastity, Pope reframes gentle contact into a context of discomfort and unwanted sexuality. The hand that pets comes to be one of chagrin: coarse, irritating, and a generator of discomfort.

The word *chagrin* had already gained its metaphorical and ultimately most lasting sense before coming to England. The idea of constant physical irritation became a metaphorical representation of a continuous mental agitation, something that grinds away at your mind and puts you in a state of melancholy. An incessant, slow irritation seems to be the main game that the gnome plays, as he describes himself doing minor tricks in order to get people upset: by putting a little pimple on a beautiful face: a constant reminder and irritant, borne directly into your skin (4.68-69). In a way this relates directly to Pope’s irritation with the new influence of French, as if its use in English acts as a continual aggravation that operates only on a skin-deep level.

This emphasis on surface is amplified through the French origins of the word. Using French encourages a reading of foppishness, and in doing so encourages us to understand the importance of surfaces to this group of people. This was a real fear during the late 17th and 18th centuries. John Dryden, in his essay *Dramatic Poetry of the Last Age,* claims to routinely meet “fops who value themselves on their travelling, and pretend they cannot express their meaning in English, because they would put off on us some French phrase...” (Dryden 221) By crafting Umbriel’s language with an eye on foppish facade, Pope is directing the poem toward making Belinda and her colleagues into vain characters, and the gnome understands the best way to irritate a vain person is to make them look bad.

This ties together an important theme within *The Rape of the Lock,* in which Belinda views the cutting of her hair as not just an invasion of personal space, but a direct attack on her chastity and her sexual being. The gnome gets his wish, and Belinda flies into an uncontrollable fury, inciting her fellow partygoers as well. Pope is projecting fears about superficial language and culture onto Belinda’s hair. Pope writes that Belinda’s hair “In equal Curls, and well conspir’d to deck / With shining Ringlets her smooth Iv’ry neck.” (2 21-22) Early in the poem it is clear that she is conscious of the beauty of her hair and carefully crafts it to be appealing, emphasizing its superficiality. The Baron then acts as a repository for similar anxieties about the French influence of hypersexuality by damaging Belinda’s coif with an unwanted touch.

It’s easy to fall into a trap of thinking that Pope writes from a sympathetic point of view toward Belinda: a man has been improper with her and she has some right to be upset. However, the satirical and comic nature of this poem is arguing against any sympathetic reading toward her. The content Pope draws from isn’t even a serious look at occult mythology; it’s a book written as a joke about such lore. He’s putting Belinda down as if she were over-reacting. The crux of the satire hinges on the idea that the only true affront to her chastity would be a real reason to get as upset as Belinda does. The silly piece of hair that the Baron clips from her hair is not an event worthy of starting an all out brawl between two of the biggest Catholic families in all of England. This may be a microcosm for how Pope feels about the language as well. Though he clearly pokes fun at the superficiality and foppishness of the francophile middle class and disagrees with the creep of foreign influences on English, ultimately it turns out to be something silly to get infuriated over. Just as Belinda can’t put her hair back, the damage is done to English, and cries of “*Restore the Lock!*” can’t get it back.

Umbriel, in the end, acts like a self-aware avatar for Pope as the poet. He can go in and toy with the emotions of characters, and as such he believes he has a true understanding of the inner machinations of Belinda’s female mind. He thinks he understands the ways that women become hysterical and have “vapors.” This is potentially why the gnome tells the queen that she is the giver of “poetic fit.” This may be why Pope is somewhat ambivalent toward the notion that feminizing language is what corrupts it. Umbriel seems to be telling us that in order to write poetry, one must become as sensitive and hyper-aware of emotions as a woman is. As a poet himself, even if he agrees with the sentiment of people like John Dryden, he can’t bring himself to be all that upset over it.

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