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The Rape of the Lock (Paper: II) [1688 - 1784]

Q.) Comment on the function of the supernatural machinery in 'The Rape of the Lock'. (2007) / Do you think that the introduction of Ariel and the sylphs heightens the artistic effect of 'The Rape of the Lock'? Give reasons of your answers. (2009)

Ans.) In order to make The Rape of the Lock a perfect mock-heroic piece of writing, Alexander Pope had to parody the Greek epics along with the Olympian gods and goddesses. Evidently, he makes use of the process of diminution (= decrease) by making things smaller in size. [The sylph-machinery is, as Brower says, "**probably the largest single way in which Pope imparted (= add) the qualities of splendour and wonder to his actors and action in The Rape of the Lock**"]. It is also the unique means of fusing together the sharply opposite qualities, those of satire and imagination, and thereby to give his poetry a new additional dimension.

[Pope took the idea of the sylphs from a French book Le Comte de Gabalis by Abb-de-Villars. It was an account of the Rosicrucian mythology of spirits. According to this mythology, there are four elements — air, earth, water and fire inhabited (= occupied) by four spirits — sylphs, gnomes, nymphs and salamanders.] In the original version of Pope's The Rape of the Lock, there were only 334 lines, divided into two cantos in the 1712 version. There was no supernatural machinery in the first version. But later in 1714 Pope enlarged his poem to five Cantos by adding the supernatural machinery of sylphs and gnomes and also the episode of the cave of Spleen.

Pope introduced the sylphs — the delicate spirits of the air as benevolent protectors of the charms of fashionable ladies. They presided over their toilet and watched against any harm that might befall them. Their chief, Ariel (probably Pope was borrowed the name 'Ariel' from Shakespeare's The Tempest) was as it were the guardian spirit of Belinda. He whispered into her ear when she was in sleep, about some mischance that might befall her, but when mischance (= misfortune) falls — i.e. the rape of the lock, he was unable to be of any use of her. He also introduces gnomes and invents equally novel (= strange) functions. There are wicked spirits and their chief Umbriel visited the cave of Spleen and brought a bag of sorrows and sighs to overwhelm Belinda as she sat mourning for the loss of her lock.

Ariel is chief of the sylphs who supplies all vital information regarding the nature and function of the airy crew (= squad / troop) to Belinda in his famous speech while she is dreaming through her morning sleep. The speech begins, "**Fairest of mortals, thou distinguished (= famous) care**", and it allows us to deduce (= realize) with conviction that the sylphs are related to the traditional beliefs, both trivial and profound. Ariel imitating the role of heroic leaders like Jove, the Greek king of Heaven, and Satan in Milton's epic, orders his followers to perform their allotted duties.

The delicate flirtation, which coloured and flavoured the sophisticated social life of the C18 England, is accounted for and sustained through the fanciful conception of the relation between sylphs and maidens. The service of the busy sylphs in the toilet of Belinda has rightly been called the climax of the mock-heroic in The Rape of the Lock:

*"The busy Sylphs surrounded their darling-Care;
These set the Head, and those divided the Hair,
Some fold the Sleeve, whilst others plait Gown;
And Betty's praised for Labours not her own."* (Canto I; 145-48)

[The sylphs are not only an illustration of Pope's art of description, but also contain certain symbolic qualities making comment on the world over which they preside. Ruben A. Brower has given us a list of what we understand

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for: feminine honour, flirtation and courtship, the necessary rivalry between men and women and preoccupation with the insignificant. **Geoffrey Tillotson** reads an allegorical and moral meaning in the sylphs.]^x

The Rape of the Lock is not only a poem, it is a serious stricture (= parameter) on the habit and fashions of the contemporary society. It is to show the essential worthlessness of such habits that Pope makes sylphs so miserably helpless and inactive, even at the moment when their protection to their living care was so urgent. When the sylphs warn Belinda of the imminent clipping of her lock and the shear (= the instrument using to cut off) gets cut along with the lock. Their intervention is not at all like the intervention of Pallas Athena in Homer or Venus in Virgil. How distant indeed is the world of the mock-heroic from the truly heroic!

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