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Challenging a Stereotype: Female Nature in *Rape of the Lock* and "Saturday. Small-Pox. Flavia."

For England, the eighteenth century was a time of understanding and questioning gender and gender roles. Some scientific studies of the time considered male bodies to be constant and stable and female bodies to be less predictable (Harvey 194). Consequently, scholars believe that men were generally expected to act logically, while women tended to succumb to strong emotions and mood swings (King 432). It appears that a traditional sign of a competent husband was a comfortable home for his family due to his financial success (Tosh 220). Likewise, a traditional sign of a competent wife was domestic harmony within the family (Rogers 10). However, after the major political and economic changes of the seventeenth and early eighteenth century—such as the Civil War, Interregnum, Restoration, and rise of the bourgeois class—the nation's identity was also changing (Doody 61). Margaret Doody explains, "If the major political events that constitute the Civil War and the Interregnum involved complex senses of gender, gender roles, and displacements, it can be no wonder that the culture of the next two or three generations . . . was imbued with ideas of gender—and of gender as problematic" (61). According to her, differing interpretations of gender identity took part in the images of political leaders (i.e. Charles I preferred to embrace the more feminine style and politeness of the French, while Oliver Cromwell preferred to embrace the more masculine style and bluntness of the English) (59).

Unfortunately, before the eighteenth century, the subject of gender and gender roles was discussed in the literary conversations of a relatively small number of educated men (Thomas 120). But with the dramatic political changes mentioned earlier, pamphlets, journals, newspapers, and the like were created as a quick and economical way of spreading news and ideas (Backsheider 3). As these forms of media gained respectability, women had easier access to the circulating notions of gender and were able to publish their own ideas, thus joining in the literary discussion (Grant 111). With more voices and opinions circulating in literature—particularly poetry—the question of what appropriately defines gender and gender roles became open-ended, especially in regards to the nature of women (Backsheider 18). One assumption discussed in poetry was that women were prone to vanity and obsessions of their appearance (King 432). Lady Mary Wortley Montagu and Alexander Pope were two prominent poets who voiced their views of this notion toward eighteenth-century Englishwomen. While some critics consider Pope to be a mocking misogynist, I suggest that both he and Montagu seek to reveal the flaws of their society's view of the nature of women. In their exaggerated displays of women seeking to become more beautiful, the poets criticize society's opinion concerning female appearance but suggest different solutions. Through the hyperbolic representations of vain women, Pope's *Rape of the Lock* suggests that women have control over their situations regardless of appearance, while Montagu's "Saturday. The Small-Pox. Flavia." blames society for forcing women to focus on physical beauty.

In "Saturday. The Small-Pox. Flavia." of Montagu's *Six Town Eclogues,* Flavia's obsession with her reflection (both of the past and of the present) reveals that she places her self-worth in her physical appearance. The poem begins with Flavia upset and disgusted with her reflection: "A glass revers'd in her right hand she bore, / For now she shun'd the face she sought

before" (lines 3–4). She proceeds to lament about her now-scarred skin as she remembers her past beauty. Flavia says, "Where's my Complexion? where my radiant Bloom, / That promis'd happiness for Years to come?" Here, she claims that beauty is her main, and perhaps only, tool for a happy future, which may be referring to a happy marriage. Later Flavia adds, "Ah! faithless glass, my wonted bloom restore; / Alas! I rave, that bloom is now no more! / The greatest good the GODS on men bestow, / Ev'n youth itself, to me is useless now" (lines 13–16). Here, Flavia ironically claims that beauty, not health, is the greatest aspect of youth. As she curses the image in the mirror, she realizes she will never regain her beauty, an endeavor she has pursued with various doctors. She concludes that her youth is purposeless because her appearance is an overwhelming barrier to the happy future she had once anticipated. Her intense complaints of her changed appearance show that Flavia places her self-worth in the degree of beauty she possesses.

Through her past physical beauty, Flavia has gained popularity and power over others. Before contracting smallpox, Flavia is a society belle who gains the admiration of others because of her beauty. Backsheider points out, "The speaker of this poem has reaped every advantage of the beautiful, accomplished woman" (103). One of these advantages is that suitors from various social standings and occupations pursue Flavia's attention through gifts, love poems, favors, and witty conversations. As they seek Flavia's favor, the men present themselves in ways they assume will impress her, ways that are often unnatural for them. For instance, the Soldier attempts to write her a poem; the Beau tries to engage in witty conversation; and the squire awkwardly "[dares] to speak with spirit not his own" (38). Obviously, the men are infatuated with Flavia and are willing to let her preferences influence their behavior. She gains so much influence over others, that Montagu hyperbolizes Flavia's power to be like the monarchy's: "Monarchs and beauties rule with equal sway; / All strive to serve, and glory to obey (lines 85–

86). Before Flavia contracts smallpox, she had an “empire” of admirers; however, unlike monarchs, who gain power through birth in a royal family and maintain it through good leadership, Flavia has gained her influence only through her looks.

Because Flavia loses the privileges she has previously enjoyed, the poem reveals that any popularity or power gained through physical beauty will only last as long as the beauty can maintain itself. “Saturday. The Small-Pox. Flavia.” is the last eclogue in a series. Isobel Grundy explains, “The last eclogue in a series (like Pope’s ‘Winter’) traditionally laments a death: the death here is that of Flavia’s looks” (188). Consequently, the main focus of Flavia’s lament is not only the loss of her beauty but also the privileges associated with that beauty. The last lines of five consecutive stanzas have this basic form: “Beauty is fled, and ____ is now no more!” The five losses put into these lines are “presents,” “lovers,” “dress,” “empire,” and “spirit” (lines 27, 40, 54, 64, 77, 83). From these samples, we see what Flavia thinks is important or valuable. “Presents” and “lovers” are linked to popularity, while “empire,” as noted earlier, refers to her influence over those that admired her. “Dress” is what once enhanced her natural beauty, giving her “spirit” or high self-esteem. Interestingly, Flavia never considers any alternative ways to regain those privileges. Instead, she seeks the help of three well-known doctors to restore her beauty, all of which fail her request. Since the privileges mentioned above have faded along with her beauty there is an important lesson that Flavia learns from her illness: her popularity and influence over others are no more because they have all been based on Flavia’s short-lived beauty.

The reactions of Flavia’s acquaintances reveal that society, not female nature, is the source of her mindset toward appearance. Because Flavia is an unmarried young woman, her priority is most likely to marry an eligible man and to prepare for motherhood (Rogers 7). But

when she loses her beauty, her former suitors stop paying attention to her: “Fir’d by one wish, all did alike adore; / Now beauty’s fled, and lovers are no more!” (lines 39–40). Since she can no longer attract eligible men, she is failing in her pursuit to marry and raise a family. Besides the men in her life, Flavia’s female friends are content with her illness, because they are gaining more of her former suitors’ attention than before. Like those who mock former monarchs, her supposed friends “mock the idol of their former vow” by visiting Flavia only to gloat that they are courting men who previously favored Flavia. Because Flavia’s “false friends” have abandoned her, she is already socially isolated before she makes the over-the-top decision never be seen again: “There let me live in some deserted place, / There hide in shades this lost inglorious face. / Ye, operas, circles, I no more must view! / My toilette, patches, all the world adieu!” (lines 93–95). Concerning these lines, Isobel Grundy suggests that Montagu “invites the reader, by ending on toilette and patches, to register the narrowness of this world” (188). I suggest that this narrowness is the poem’s unforgiving implication that beauty is the only valuable female trait. Perhaps this is why Flavia cannot perceive any other way to earn the admiration, popularity, and happy future she had before. Thus, through the narrow-mindedness of the friends and suitors, “Saturday. The Small-Pox. Flavia” reveals that society is what has pushed eighteenth-century women to value beauty above all else, becoming apparently self-centered and superficial.

In Pope’s mock-epic *The Rape of the Lock*, Belinda also considers her beauty to be her most important and valuable trait. Pope describes her process of getting ready as if it were a sacred ritual:

> And now, unveil/d, the Toilet stands display’d,
> Each silver Vase in mystic order laid.
> First, rob’d in white, the nymph intent adores
> With head uncover’d, the cosmetic pow’rs.

> A heav'nly Image in the glass appears,
> To that she bends, to that her eyes she rears;
> Th'inferior Priestess, at her altar's side,
> Trembling, begins the sacred rites of Pride. (1.121–28)

Through the words "priestess," "sacred rites," "altar," "bends," and "rears," Pope has raised Belinda's toilette to resemble a religion in which she worships her own image. In fact, as she applies these "cosmetic pow'rs," Belinda's beauty is so enhanced that she becomes like a goddess. These "sacred rites" take a very long time to accomplish; it is only at the beginning of canto III that "the long labours of the Toilet cease" and Belinda is ready to be seen by potential suitors (3.24). This hyperbolic description of Belinda's preparation for Hampton Court parodies the traditional epic scene of a warrior arming himself for battle with his best armor (Brown 144). Like the ancient heroes, Belinda prepares herself for the figurative battle of courtship by arming herself with combs, pins, puffs, powders, and patches. The result: "Now awful Beauty puts on all its arms; / The fair each moment rises in her charms, / Repairs her smiles, awakens ev'ry grace, / And calls forth all the wonders of her face" (1.39–142). Clearly, Belinda spends much time, effort, and resources to enhance her appearance because she considers beauty to be a valuable tool in her pursuit of a husband.

With this valuable tool of beauty, Belinda gains so much influence that she can manipulate any man in her favor. As Valerie Rumbold points out, the power of sexual attraction is a central theme throughout the *Rape of the Lock* (162). This theme is most apparent at the beginning of canto II, where Pope describes Belinda's beauty as a powerful force over men. He writes, "Fair nymphs, and well-drest youths around her shone, / But ev'ry eye was fix'd on her alone. / On her white breast a sparkling Cross she wore, / Which Jews might kiss, and Infidels adore" (2.5–8). In this passage, Belinda's physical appearance gains everyone's attention and transcends religion itself. Those "Jews" and "Infidels" who do not agree with her gladly

surrender their beliefs for a time, so they may remain in her presence for as long as possible. Later, she proves to be so beautiful and graceful that she compensates for any "female errors" she may have, such as her extreme mood swings or supposedly unstable body (2.17–18). Of all her physical attributes, Belinda's two locks of hair give her the most beauty and, therefore, influence. These "shining ringlets" (2.22) are described as chains that have the potential to bring about "the destruction of mankind" (2.19): "Love in these labyrinths his slaves detains, / And mighty hearts are held in slender chains" (2.23–24). In essence, because of her beautiful yet deadly locks, Belinda's suitors willingly subject themselves to her wishes. Isobel Grundy explains that Belinda is "shallow, self-centered, frivolous, yet so beautiful that men are [her] willing slaves" (185). Consequently, Belinda's physical beauty—especially that of her locks—allows her to influence any suitor to act as she pleases.

While Belinda gains influence over her suitors, it appears that her guardian sylphs control her actions. In Ariel's address to his fellow sylphs, the reader discovers that invisible supernatural creatures take part in many aspects of Belinda's world. Some guide the stars and planets; some counsel the government's leaders; others, like Ariel, "tend to the fair" (2.91). He also claims that the sylphs, not Belinda's maidservant, help Belinda the most in her daily toilette. Likewise, Ariel claims that the sylphs control the minds and hearts of women. He says, "They shift the moving Toyshop of their heart; . . . This erring mortals Levity may call, / Oh blind to truth! the Sylphs contrive it all" (1.100–104). The most obvious instance of this is when Umbriel travels to the "cave of Spleen" (4.16). There, a "wayward Queen" (4.57) gives him a vial of Belinda's fears, sorrows, grief, and tears. While Umbriel is on his quest, Belinda is obviously upset but remains somewhat rational. When he returns, Umbriel breaks the vial, causing Belinda

to throw a dramatic tantrum in Hampton Court. Because of their supernatural influence, it seems that the sylphs, like Umbriel, control Belinda's actions.

But this is not always the case: In fact, the sylphs' failure to control Belinda's heart satirizes the notion that women cannot control their emotions. In Belinda's dream, Ariel warns her of what the future may bring.

> I saw, alas! some dread event impend,
> E're to the main this morning Sun descend.
> But heav'n reveals not what, or how, or where:
> Warn'd by thy Sylph, oh pious Maid beware!
> This to disclose is all thy guardian can.
> Beware of all, but most beware of man! (1.109–114)

Here, Ariel is not sure what will happen, but he knows a man will cause the misfortune. Since Belinda is a popular, beautiful young woman, it is safe to assume that the man will be sexually interested in her. However vivid her dream may have been, Belinda immediately forgets the warning to "beware of man" when she sees a love letter, possibly from the baron himself, addressed to her: "Thy eyes first open'd on a Billet-doux; / Wounds, Charms, and Ardors, were no sooner read, / But all the Vision vanished from thy head" (1.118–120). Even though she later regrets not heeding the warning, Belinda—not the sylphs—decides to read the letter and be infatuated by whoever wrote it. Since *Rape of the Lock* is a mock-epic, or a "comic [satire] using the motifs of ancient epic to reflect ironically on modern life" (Rumbold 157), it is likely that the influence of the sylphs parodies the intervention of gods and goddesses in the ancient epics. Because of this connection, the poem ridicules the idea that (as Kathryn King explains) women "threaten always to slide back into more rudimentary states of being— . . . madness, self-absorption, triviality, and emotionalism" (431). Since the sylphs are elevated to be like the ancient gods and goddesses but do not always succeed in controlling Belinda's emotions, their supposed power over humanity is ridiculous.

After the baron cuts Belinda's lock, the poem suggests that women seek admiration of others through "good sense" rather than physical beauty. When Belinda loses one of her locks, it is as if the baron has sexually violated her. She claims that despite her sacrifice of "ease, pleasure, virtue, all" her honor is tainted. Sir Plume states that, like virginity after rape, the lock will never be restored now that it is lost. He says, "But by this Lock, this sacred Lock I swear, / (Which never more shall join its parted hair; / Which never more its honours shall renew, / Clip'd from the lovely head where late it grew)" (4.33–136). Belinda then proceeds, after Umbriel breaks his vial, to lament "[her] best, [her] fav'rite Curl" (4.148). She claims she wishes to have been born in "some lone isle or distant Northern land," where her locks would ironically have no purpose without any suitors to see them (4.154). Strangely enough, Belinda (and Sir Plume) mourns her hair, something that will soon grow back since she is still young. Perhaps this temporary loss of her most beautiful trait is a miniature representation of what would happen if she lost her beauty overall, as Flavia did. After the lament, Clarissa, who supplied the baron with the scissors, gives a speech. Rumbold suggests that while she may be resentful of the fact that Belinda monopolizes the male attention, Clarissa "[sets] forth a realistic alternative for Belinda's next move and for female life in general" (166). The following advice mirrors the subject I mention in the paragraph above, that women are in control of their own emotions.

> But since, alas! frail beauty must decay,
> Curl'd or uncurl'd, since Locks will turn to grey,
> Since painted, or not painted, all shall fade,
> And she who scorns a man, must die a maid;
> What then remains, but well our pow'r to use,
> And keep good humour still whate'er we lose?
> And trust me, dear! good humour can prevail,
> When airs, and flights, and screams, and scolding fail.
> Beauties in vain their pretty eyes may roll;
> Charms strike the sight, but merit wins the soul. (5.24–34)

Here, Clarissa recognizes that female beauty "strike[s] the sight" of men, gaining their attention and admiration. But she also recognizes that because beauty will not last forever, Belinda—like all women—will need to turn to other ways in order to maintain the admiration of men. Clarissa's only suggestion to Belinda is to have "good humour," or control of one's emotions, instead succumbing to airs, flights, screams, and scolding, no matter what the circumstance. Apparently, she thinks that if a woman loses her beauty but continues to act irrationally, no man will want to marry that woman. By putting "good humour" to the test, she suggests that men's affections will be more genuine because his "soul" is gained through "merit." Thus, Clarissa's address urges Belinda, and eighteenth-century women in general, to earn admiration by controlling their emotions rather than flaunting physical beauty.

Because Belinda wins the battle against the baron, the poem suggests that women determine the prevailing notions of female nature, not men. After Clarissa has given her suggestions, no one in Hampton Court seems to agree with her, especially Belinda. Instead of calming her emotions and maintaining her composure, Belinda literally declares war on the baron. While some critics interpret the fight to be a battle of the sexes (Rumbold 164), I suggest the fight to be a battle of differing notions of female identity: The baron's side advocates the notion that "wits," a supposedly masculine quality, is the most valuable trait a woman can have. And Belinda's side advocates the notion that beauty, a supposedly feminine trait, is the most valuable trait a woman can have. At one point in the battle, the two notions are put on the scale of the gods: "Now Jove suspends his golden scales in air, / Weighs the Men's wits against the Lady's hair; / The doubtful beam long nods from side to side; / At length the wits mount up, the hairs subside" (5.71–74). Apparently Belinda wins. This victory, however, reflects on how her society—or England's eighteenth-century society—comes to support one notion about gender

over another. In the speech, Clarissa shows Belinda how to prove through actions that women are more than vain assemblages of looks that are emotionally out of control. Unfortunately, Belinda chooses to act violently, inappropriately releasing her anger. By doing so, Belinda shows that she, as a woman, considers the battle for the lock to be justifiable, since she considers her beauty to be her most valuable trait. When she gains Jove's approval and wins the battle, she perpetuates the inaccurate assumptions of the day toward female nature, therefore giving the rest of society viable evidence to support the prevailing notions.

The Rape of the Lock and "Saturday. Small-Pox. Flavia." debate the question, why is vanity and self-absorption a stereotype for eighteenth-century women? The poems take this stereotype to the extreme, especially when revealing the extent that Flavia and Belinda value physical beauty. Both poems also agree that the general notion of women as superficial assemblages of looks is flawed and needs to be changed. However, the two suggest different ways by which this change should come about. In Montagu's poem, it seems that Flavia's opinion of herself has been completely constructed by the way her peers treat her before the illness and the way they reject her after she has recovered. In a sense, Flavia is forced to obsess over her physical appearance because that is all that her relationships with others, her suitors in particular, are based upon. Consequently, the poem critiques the way that the members of society view the role of physical appearance in relationships and suggests that they seek to value more lasting qualities in others. This top-down approach contrasts the suggestions in Pope's *Rape of the Lock.* Unlike Flavia, Belinda has been empowered with the ability to choose between valuing beauty or "good sense." When she reverts back to the same belief as Flavia's—that the only value worth fighting for is beauty—she allows society to assume that women are vain and self-

absorbed. With this point of view, Pope is not a mocking misogynist, but an advocate seeking to help women realize their ability to make or break society's assumptions about female nature.

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