

THE SYLPH IN POPE'S RAPE OF THE LOCK

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By  
Diana J. Prola  
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By

Diana J. Prola

Approved:

Date:

Jacob Fuchs

Thomas R. Brooke

Walter Rosenbaum

August 20, 1974

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Aug. 22, 1974

TO MY DAD:

. . . if this day is not a fulfillment  
of your needs and my love, then let it  
be a promise till another day.

-- from THE PROPHET

"Copies of it The Rape of the Lock got about, and 'twas like to be printed, on which I published the first draught of it (without the machinery), in a Miscellany of Tonson's. The machinery was added afterwards to make it look a little more considerable; and the scheme of adding it was much liked and approved of by several of my friends . . ."

Pope to Joseph Spence,  
Observations, Anecdotes,  
and Characters of Books  
and Men (Oxford, 1966),  
Anecdote #105

## FOREWORD

In quoting from the Villars' source material I have not modernized the spelling; but, where it was appropriate I have changed the archaic "ff" to the modern "s" for the sake of simplifying the text.

DJP

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## I. INTRODUCTION

An understanding of the "machinery" of Alexander Pope's Rape of the Lock contributes a great deal to the reader's enjoyment of the poem. Pope's elemental people --sylphs and gnomes--function on multiple levels, enlarging the scope of the poem through allusion as well as by direct operation in the poem.

The Rape first appeared in 1712 without the machinery. In this primary version it was little more than a drawing room comedy aimed at restoring good humor between Lord Petrie and the family of Arabella Fermor, the persons involved in the original "rape." When Pope revised the poem for his later edition, he obviously intended to enlarge its scope into something approximating that of epic. In addition to the supernatural machinery, Pope added such events to the poem as Clarissa's speech, which parallels the Sarpedon episode in Homer, and the card game, which alludes to the epic battle sequences. Like his predecessor, John Dryden, Pope's mode is that of allusive irony. The critic Reuben Brower, writing about Dryden, could also be speaking of Pope and The Rape when he says:

. . . His mode is allusive in a wide variety of ways: in close imitation or parody of other writers, in less exact references to language, styles and conventions of other literatures--Classical, Biblical,

French--in drawing on the large materials of philosophy and theology, in playing on popular parallels between contemporary religion and political situations and those of ancient history, sacred and secular. . .<sup>1</sup>

While on the surface level the sylphs add glitter and charm to the poem, on a deeper level they function similarly to the gods and goddesses of Homer and Virgil and the angels of Milton's Paradise Lost. Thus, like Dryden and Milton, Pope derives his literary ancestry from both the classical and the Christian traditions. Perhaps the most important function of the elemental people, though, is thematic and symbolic. They represent an artificial beauty which can only be achieved by Belinda's denial of her own humanity. In contrasting alternatives, Pope presents Belinda with a clear choice between the transitory loveliness of her elemental companions and the immortal beauty of the human spirit. As Thomas Edwards points out, the poem

. . . finds its meaning in the contemplation of alternatives, in a multiplicity of vision that seems a more faithful rendering of experience than any single vision can provide.<sup>2</sup>

In dealing with this machinery and Pope's handling of it, I shall first examine his source material, the Rosicrusian work, Le Comte de Gabalis by Abbe Nicholas

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<sup>1</sup>R. A. Brower, Alexander Pope: The Poetry of Allusion (Oxford, 1959), p. 8.

<sup>2</sup>Thomas Edwards, Jr., This Dark Estate (Berkeley, 1963), p. 27.

Villars de Montfaucon. Pope has used this work as the kernel of his own creation of Sylphs. However, by selection and adaptation, the Augustan author has given his sylphs a completely different and independent existence from their Rosicrucian counterparts.

The second section of this study will investigate the influence of both classical epic writers and neo-classical theorists on Pope's poem. The focus will center especially on the Homeric and Virgilian parallels and on the epic theory of Boileau and LeBossu.

As a third concern, I shall explore the allusive parallels between sylphs and gnomes and the angelology of Milton. The Christian scope of Pope's work, while perhaps less obvious than the classical allusions, adds an element of complexity to the moral nature of the sylphs.

Finally, I shall attempt a summary of conclusions as to what the sylphs represented to Pope, to Belinda, and to the reader.

## II. THE SOURCE

How Pope first encountered the Rosicrucian satire that inspired his creation of the sylphs is unknown. The book, Le Comte de Gabalis, written by the Abbe Villars de Montfaucon, deals mockingly with the Rosicrucian belief in elemental spirits. Pope's brief explanation of his choice of the sylphs is in his dedication of the second edition of his poem to Arabella Fermor, the model for Belinda. Pope writes:

The Machinery, Madam, is a Term invented by the Criticks, to signify that Part which the Deities, Angels, or Daemons, are made to act in a Poem: For the ancient Poets are in one respect like many modern Ladies; Let an Action be never so trivial in it self, they always make it appear of the utmost Importance. These Machines I determin'd to raise on a very new and odd Foundation, the Rosicrucian Doctrine of Spirits.<sup>3</sup>

Pope goes on to tell Arabella in his dedication that the sylphs keep company with only the most chaste of young girls, an implied flattery of his subject. He did not tell her that, according to the Villars' text, those young girls are chaste from human contact, but that they held sexual commerce with the elemental sprites. As critic Peter Quennell has

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<sup>3</sup>Alexander Pope, The Rape of the Lock in The Poems of Alexander Pope (Twickenham Text), ed. John Butt (New Haven, 1963), pp. 217-8.

remarked wily,

Perhaps he felt fairly confident that Arabella would not pursue her own researches.<sup>4</sup>

Arabella obviously did not pursue her own researches. And although subsequent critics have examined the role of the sylphs, with or without the source material, they vary sharply in their opinions as to the effectiveness of this machinery.

Dr. Johnson tells us, for example, that Pope quarreled with Addison who felt that the addition of the sylphs would destroy the Rape's seriousness. Pope himself and Johnson agreed that the machinery was essential in developing the work into one of literary significance. Johnson tells us that Pope

. . . always considered the intermixture of the machinery with the action as his most successful exertion of poetical art. He indeed could never afterward produce anything of such unexampled excellence. Those performances, which strike with wonder, are combinations of skillful genius with happy casualty; and it is not likely that any felicity, like the discovery of a new race of preternatural agents, should happen twice to the same man.<sup>5</sup>

As Pope pointed out, his foundation was both new and odd. According to Villars, the elemental people are

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<sup>4</sup>Peter Quennell, Alexander Pope: The Education of Genius (New York, 1968), p. 71.

<sup>5</sup>Samual Johnson, Rasselas, Poems, and Selected Prose, ed. Bertrand H. Bronson (New York, 1952), p. 310.

neither deities nor angelic spirits. Instead, we are told, they were separately created by God and called "elemental" or "elementary" people because each is composed of one physical element. The four types are the sylphs, or creatures of the air, the gnomes, which inhabit the earth, the nymphs or creatures composed of water and which abide in the seas and rivers, and the fiery salamanders. As Villars presents them, these creatures are different from man because each is composed of only one element, whereas human beings are composed of all four. Man was originally a higher form of life, but when Adam sinned, the elementary people rose above him in the hierarchy of created beings.

The French author explains it thus:

There was a Sort of Sameness between the Ingredients that form'd Adam, and these so perfect Creatures; because, being made up of the very purest Particles of these four Elements, he contain'd in himself the Perfections of these four Species of People, and was their natural Lord and King. But so soon as ever his Sinning had thrown him headlong into the Excrements of the Elements, (as you'll find some other Time) the Harmony was broke, and he had no longer any Proportion, being impure and gross, with those Substances so pure and so subtile.<sup>6</sup>

Man also differed from the elementary people in that he had retained after the Fall his knowledge of the Cabala (in Rosicrucian doctrine this was a secret work of theosophy

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<sup>6</sup>Abbe Villars de Montfaucon, The Diverting History of the Count de Gabalis (London: 1714), p. 21. No translator named.

only understood by certain favored sages). The final difference was that men were still immortal, while the spirits were not. These latter two facts explained why the sylphs and other creatures sought sexual commerce with human beings: to learn the secrets of the universe, and to gain immortality. In Pope's use of the source material, only the idea of immortality was to play a role, and his adaptation of this idea was extremely subtle.

The Count of Gabalis explains that the only way a spirit of the elements can gain immortality is by mating physically with a human. He says:

. . . you'll melt with Pity, when you hear them tell you, that their soul is mortal, and that they have no Hope of everlastingly enjoying the Supreme Essence, whom they know and religiously adore. They'll tell you that, being compos'd of the purest Parts of the Element they inhabit, and having in them no contrary Qualities, since they are made but of one Quality, they do not dye 'till after many Ages: But what is Time in Comparison to Eternity? They must re-enter for ever and for ever into Nothing . . . And God, whose Mercy is boundless, reveal'd to them . . . that in like Manner as Man, by Means of the Alliance, which he has contracted with God, is made Partaker of his Divinity: so the Sylph, the Gnomes, the Nymphs, and the Salamanders, by an Alliance which they may contract with Man, may be made Partakers of Immortality.<sup>7</sup>

From this basic material Pope composed the witty mythology of The Rape of the Lock. His genius lies, not so much in the finding and use of the machinery, but in the adaptation of it. Upon completion, Pope's sylphs are almost

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<sup>7</sup>Ibid., p. 16.

unrecognizable as the Villars elementals, yet a close comparison of the two works reveals many hidden parallels.

As one modern critic, David Lougee, has commented:

The freshness of Pope's imaginative conception becomes apparent when the poem is compared to its "sources" . . . The machinery, for example, he developed from . . . Le Comte de Gabalis. Pope's originality lies in his ability to form something excellently new and polished from old material, and he achieves this through a careful selection, adaptation and complication of the materials in which he makes the sylphs and gnomes an organic part of his narrative.<sup>8</sup>

Pope's first major change in the sylphs is in his account of their origins. To him the elementary people became, not separately created beings, but souls of people--specifically, young ladies--living on after death. In Pope's mythology each spirit takes the form or element which most characterized her personality during life. Ariel explains in the poem:

For when the Fair in all their Pride expire,  
To their first Elements their soules retire  
(The Rape of the Lock, I, ll.57-8)

But at this point Pope stays fairly close to his source material. He explains that the termagants, or ladies of fiery temperaments, become Salamanders; "Soft yielding Minds" become water Nymphs; Prudes sink into the earth to become Gnomes; and the Coquettes become the Sylphs of the

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<sup>8</sup>A. Pope, The Rape of the Lock, ed. David Lougee and Robert McHenry, Jr., (Columbus, 1969), p. 10.

air. After this description in Canto I, Pope deals chiefly with the sylphs (and briefly with the gnomes) but omits the other creatures from his narrative. A slight confusion occurs in the poem when Pope refers to Belinda as a Nymph (e.g., II, 5, 19). However, the poet clearly explains that the Fair who have expired return to their first elements. So the reference to Belinda as a Nymph does not mean the elemental nymph.

Pope's sylphs have one particularly interesting quality, they seem to have no sexual distinction. In Villars sylphs are specifically masculine. Their feminine counterparts are called sylphids. In Pope, however, the sylphs are the spirits of young ladies; yet Ariel, the chief guardian sylph, takes a masculine form. To Pope, a sylphid seems to be a small or young sylph, presumably one who is new on the job.

The Rosicrucian sylphs, as far as I can see, have no specific function in the universe other than existence. They may learn from available sources (i.e., the Sages of the Rosicrucian belief), and they may mate to gain immortality. They may also bear children, but this is a sort of bonus, not the purpose of the mating. And like man in a Miltonic Eden, the sylphs have free will to decide whether or not they want this immortality. Villars points out that

. . . there are several among them who chuse rather to die, than (by becoming immortal) to run a Risk of being unhappy, as they see the Devils are.<sup>9</sup>

It is, however, possible for the Villars' creatures to be lured into this decision by the Devils who are jealous of the possibility of eternal bliss.

Pope's sylphs, on the contrary, have specific goals and duties in life. Their goals, in keeping with one of the major themes of the poem, are to continue the artificial values such as beauty and coquetry in the society. To do this they

early taint the Female Soul,  
Instruct the Eyes of young Coquettes to roll,  
Teach Infant-Cheeks a bidden Blush to know,  
And little Hearts to flutter at a Beau.

(Rape, I, ll. 87-90)

The sylphs also guard their women charges in order that the coquette's behavior does not lead her into unchastity, which both Pope's and Villars' sylphs deplore:

Oft when the World imagine Women stray,  
The Sylphs thro' Mystick Mazes guide their Way . . .  
This erring Mortals Levity may call,  
Oh blind to Truth! the Sylphs contrive it all.

(Rape, I, ll. 91-104)

Both Pope's elementary creatures and those in his source material have reasons for communicating with human beings: the former because it is their duty to guide and protect their humans and the values which they themselves appreciated

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<sup>9</sup>Villars, p. 24.

during life; the latter, because they wish to gain both knowledge of the secrets of the universe and immortality. The reasons are remarkably similar in the sense that Pope's sylphs achieve a kind of immortality in striving to continue the way of life that they cherish on earth.

Why do human beings value commerce with the sylphs? The Count de Gabalis gives two reasons; the first is spiritual, the second is physical desirability. Just as sylphs may choose not to mate with humans for fear that immortality may lead to eternal damnation, so men who mate with sylphs have the option of rejecting their immortality in case they should be damned. In Pope's Rape the concern with immortality focuses the glorification of the Lock as it rises into the sky. I shall deal with this point further at the end of this chapter.

However, the other reason in the Villars' book for humans to desire commerce with the sylphs is of great interest to Alexander Pope:

In Exchange for Women, whose feeble Charms pass away in a few Days, and are succeeded by frightful Wrinkles, the Sages possess Beauties which never grow old, and whom they have the Glory to render immortal . . . renounce the vain and transitory Pleasures which Women afford; the fairest of them all is a Mother Shipton to the meanest Sylphid.<sup>10</sup>

Pope imparts this aspect of sexual desirability--not to his

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<sup>10</sup>Ibid., p. 18.

sylphs who are lovely but not in a way that might make a man desire to possess them--to their charge, Belinda. A human being, in other words, would desire commerce with the sylphs, because she might thus achieve this "Beauty which never grows old" as long as she preserves her chastity from mortal desecration.

Villars goes to great lengths to explain that, while sylphs have existed as long as man, there are historical reasons (mostly due to human errors) why most men are unaware of the existence of the elementary people. Villars' explanation may have given Pope his idea for integrating his satire with epic tradition to produce the mock-epic. Villars describes the sylphs as

. . . mortal creatures between Gods and Men; to whom  
 may be referr'd every Thing that exceeds human  
 Weakness, and yet is short of the divine Greatness.<sup>11</sup>

He continues that in ancient times activities of the sylphs which were beyond human powers and could not be otherwise explained were attributed to false, or nonexistent, gods. That is, men of every culture made up godlike fantasies in order to explain events caused by the sylphs. Villars gives, as an example, the "true" story behind the birth of Romulus:

We find, for Instance, in Titus Livius, that Romulus was the Son of Mars; the Free-Thinkers say, 'tis a

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<sup>11</sup>Ibid., p. 44.

Fable; the Divines, that he was Son to an Incubus-Devil; the Waggs, that Mademoiselle Sylvia had lost her Gloves, and, to cover the Shame of it, said, a God had stol'n 'em from her. Now We, who are acquainted with Nature and who are call'd by God out of Darkness to Light, We know, that pretender Mars was a Salamander, who, being smitten with young Sylvia, made her the Mother of the great Romulus, that Heroe, who, after having founded his superb City, was carry'd away by his Father in a fiery Chariot . . .<sup>12</sup>

These so-called cases of mistaken sylph/god identity in Villars may have inspired Pope to give his creatures god-like activities--prophecy, guidance and influence of human destiny, protecting favored humans, and so on.

Finally, with regard to man's limited knowledge of the sylphs, Villars explains that famous Oracles of the past have been, in reality, sylphs:

. . . there have certainly been Oracles, or Places where divine Answers were given, and that 'twas the Sylphs who gave those Answers, and who still give them every Day in Drinking-Glasses or Looking-Glasses.<sup>13</sup>

The italics in the above quotation are mine, because I think it is particularly obvious how Pope used this bit of inspiration. While Belinda does not actually get any predictions from her mirror, the tone of the Villars quote is echoed when Ariel whispers to Belinda as she dreams:

In the clear Mirror of thy ruling Star  
I saw, alas! some dread Event impend,  
Ere to the Main this Morning Sun descend.  
(Rape, I, ll. 108-110)

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<sup>12</sup>Ibid., p. 61.

<sup>13</sup>Ibid., p. 46.

It is interesting that the sylphs are given the power to foretell impending doom, but they are not allowed to know the specific misfortune which may arise. Ariel tells Belinda:

But Heav'n reveals not what, or how, or where:  
Warn'd by thy Sylph, oh Pious Maid beware!  
(Rape, I, ll. 111-2)

This limitation of the sylphs' knowledge brings up the greater question of whether the sylphs function as benevolent or malevolent beings in the poem. Actually they have a dual nature. On the one level, they guard Belinda from harm and may thus be considered benevolent. On the other hand, in order to stay in the sylphs' graces, Belinda must reject mortal love and therefore, violate her humanity by denying her natural human emotions. Belinda's denial of her true self is unnatural, the sylphs are actually tempting Belinda and may be considered malevolent. David Lougee makes the following observation:

Ariel wonders if Belinda will break the law  
of chastity

'Or stain her Honour, or her new  
Brocade'

The zeugma is a foolish as well as surprising  
comparison . . . comments on the confusion of  
values which Ariel and the sylphs represent.<sup>14</sup>

Villars continues that in biblical times the sylphs were mistaken for angels:

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<sup>14</sup>Lougee and McHenry, p. 8.

The Hebrews call'd these Substances,  
 which are half Angel half Man, Sadaim;  
 and the Greeks transposing the the Syllables,  
 and adding but one Letter, call'd them  
Daimonas.<sup>15</sup>

This double mistaking of the sylphs, first for angels, and then (in New Testament Greek) for demons is interesting especially when one considers the parallels between Pope's sylphs and the angelic beings in Paradise Lost. The sylphs of The Rape are not distinguished by their natural and fallen natures, as are Milton's angels, but the sylphs-- if they are indeed benevolent spirits--perform some morally questionable functions in the poem. I shall deal with this question in the third section of this study, but shall touch on it now.

One cannot decide on the nature of the sylphs without considering the underlying theme of sexuality in the poem. On one hand the sylphs demand chastity of their humans, according to Villars. Yet this chastity is only in relation to other humans and may be a result of jealousy on the sylphs' part. The Count de Gabalis persuades us in the following anecdote that the elementary people are exceedingly jealous creatures:

From hence you may see, how much more human the  
 Morals of the Salamanders are than ours, and even  
 more than that of the Sylphs or Nymphs; for the

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<sup>15</sup>Ibid., pp. 44-5.

Jealousy of these last is cruel . . . A certain Philosopher, with whom a Nymph was engag'd in an Intrigue of Immortality, was so disloyal as to love a Woman: As he sat at Dinner, with his new Paramour and some Friends, there appear'd in the Air the fairest, most lilly-white Thigh in the World; (the invisible Sweet-heart did that, to let her Traitor's Friends see how much he was to Blame in preferring a Woman to her.) After this, the Nymph, incens'd, kill'd him upon the Spot.<sup>16</sup>

Pope's acknowledgement of sexual activity between humans and the elemental people is not emphasized in the poem, but it is clearly present:

Know farther yet; Whoever fair and chaste  
Rejects Mankind, is by some Sylph embrac'd:  
For Spirits, freed from mortal Laws, with ease  
Assume what Sexes and what Shapes they please.  
(Rape, I, ll. 67-70)

One must, of course, recognize the existence of sylphs before making a moral judgment on such sexual activity. The Count de Gabalis is quick to point out, however, that even though they may have been mistaken for devils, the sylphs are not devils. They do exhibit behavior of a questionable moral nature in the Villars book in spite of this defense. For example, a sylph can mate with a human being without that human's consent:

. . . many a young Wench would swear, when she awakes, that she's a Virgin, and yet, during her Sleep, had an Honour done her she little dream'd of [i.e., intercourse with a sylph.]<sup>17</sup>

Pope's use of this material is not overt. However, he does

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<sup>16</sup>Villars, p. 59.

<sup>17</sup>Ibid., p. 77.

have Ariel inspire in Belinda a dream of a handsome young man and the dream brings a blush to her cheeks. During the dream Ariel whispers in Belinda's ear, very much like the devil whispering to Eve in Paradise Lost.

Along this same line, Villars gives another detail of "sylph-like" behavior, which is reminiscent of Medieval tales of demonology:

. . . the Sylphs, seeing themselves taken for Devils when they appear in humane Shape, as a Means to lessen this Aversion Men have for them, put on the Figure of those Animals; and so adjust themselves to the whimsical Weakness of Women, who wou'd be afraid of a handsome Sylph, but are not so of a Dog or Monkey. I could tell you several Stories of those Bologna Lap-Dogs, and certain seeming Virgins . . .<sup>18</sup>

Pope's subtleness in using this material is for obvious reasons. He was, after all, trying to settle an ongoing feud, not turn all of the parties involved into a hostile audience for his poem. That he used the material, though, is unquestionable. The very fact that Belinda's lap-dog Shock is in the poem (for no obvious purpose) may be related to Villars' mythology. The critic Earl Wasserman is convinced that Shock plays a definite part:

Belinda is provided with a chaste surrogate for a husband in Shock, the lap-dog, equated by the poem with a lover and husband (I, 15-16; III, 158). Notably a mass of hair the breed derives its generic name from the Icelandic word whose sense we retain in a "shock of hair" and thus is related

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<sup>18</sup>Ibid., p. 76.

to the sexual symbolism of the lock. This . . . husband-substitute, appropriately located in the lap, is Belinda's fetish, for, as the system of incubus-like sylphs makes clear, she is wedded to and sexually gratified by her own virginity.<sup>19</sup>

Wasserman perhaps goes a bit far in supposing that Pope would know Icelandic; however, it seems to me that his point that Belinda revels in her own chastity is well-taken. And the attention that she lavishes on Shock (the disguised sylph), while perhaps typical in her society, nevertheless sets Shock up as a substitute for the natural affection she should be lavishing upon a husband or lover.

Another critic, Patricia Bruckmann, agrees with Wasserman. She says essentially that since sylphs can take animal shapes and since the sylphs inspired Belinda's rejection of her human lovers, Ariel assumed that the retaliation by the human lover might be aimed at one of his own company--namely Shock who was a real if unrecognized rival. When he gives the jobs of guarding Belinda to his subject spirits, Ariel reserves the job of guarding Shock for himself (Shock, according to Bruckmann, is a sylph in disguise, so Ariel feels responsible as much for him as for Belinda).

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<sup>19</sup>Earl R. Wasserman, "The Limits of Allusion in The Rape of the Lock," JEGP, LXV (1966), p. 430.

<sup>20</sup>Patricia L. Bruckmann, "Pope's Shock and the Count of Gabalis," ELN, I (1964), p. 262.

Pope, himself, gives a firm indication that he knew what he was doing, in the clever zeugma in Canto III:

Not louder Shrieks to pitying Heav'n are cast,  
When Husbands or when Lap-dogs breathe their last.  
(Rape, III, ll. 157-8)

One can almost picture the poet chuckling to himself over his cleverly hidden insinuation as he thought of Arabella Fermor and her friends shuddering at the thought of their favorite pets meeting with death.

None of these facts is conclusive evidence as to Pope's own theory about the moral nature of the sylphs. The discussion will be extended in the section of this paper that deals with parallels between Pope and Milton. As to the source material, the Count de Gabalis is emphatic in proclaiming that his sylphs are "good". With his own inimitable reasoning, the Count "proves" that the sylphs cannot be devils because

. . . Did ever any Body take it in their  
Head to Exercize sic Sylphs?<sup>21</sup>

This comment, more than any other in the book, points up the fact that the source material, like The Rape, is satirical. While the Count defends his sylphs, one cannot be assured that Villars is trying to convince the reader of their benevolence.

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<sup>21</sup>Villars, p. 51.

This ambiguity of the sylphs' moral nature may be seen on another level as a psychological function of Belinda's mind. This is summed up quite well by F. B. Thornton:

He richly colors all the preternatural characteristics in the sylphs; yet he gives them, at most, only the ineffectual reality and power which they actually could have in human life and human consciousness. There is no confusion of the preternatural and supernatural, such as bedeviled Coleridge. . . . Over against this ineffectual quality of the sylphs, Pope sets a philosophy of value and the mystery of human worth.<sup>22</sup>

It is this value of human worth that explains, in the final analysis, Pope's choice of the sylphs as his machinery. As symbols of the artificial values in Belinda's society, they play counterpoint to the values that Pope feels are really worthwhile. Chosen because they enlarged the scope of his work through parallels with other great writings, appropriately the sylphs alone, at the end of the poem, watch the Lock rise into the sky. The immortal Lock comes to represent the true inner beauty that Belinda and Arabella Fermor and all of their contemporaries may achieve. And the Sylphs, as they behold this dazzlingly beautiful spectacle, are pleased, the poet tells us, a pleasure which holds a promise of new values for the future.

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<sup>22</sup>Francis B. Thornton, Alexander Pope: Catholic Poet (New York, 1952), pp. 68-9.

### III. CLASSICAL UNDERCURRENTS

Examining the Villars' material, we begin to see the advantages afforded Pope's satire by the addition of the sylphs. One cannot fully appreciate the poet's revisions, however, without becoming aware of the multi-level allusions in The Rape of the Lock. As biographer Peter Quennell points out:

. . . Pope, whenever we re-read him, is apt to reveal some unexpected subtlety . . . in Pope's verse, several layers of significance are compressed into a single image; and his imagery has a protean charm that constantly changes and grows beneath the reader's eye.<sup>23</sup>

One primary level of allusion in The Rape brings in the whole realm of classical epic and mythology as well as neoclassical epic theory. It is important to recall that Pope was both a student and a translator of the classics. His work on Homer and his study of the various Latin classics certainly influenced--if not the decision to enlarge the poem's scope--the method in which he makes the reader aware of the entire epic tradition of the Golden Age through literary allusion.

Dryden, Pope's model, describes the work of the translator as taking one of three forms: metaphrase, in

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<sup>23</sup>Peter Quennell, p. 242.

which the translator gives a literal, word-for-word rendition of the original work; paraphrase, in which the translator tries to render the sense of the work, but accounts for the difference between languages; and finally, imitation, in which the translator takes the basic story from his source, but tells it in his own words.<sup>24</sup> Pope must have been aware of these possibilities open to him as a Greek translator, and it was but one small step from imitation to innovation. In this case the innovation took the form of mock-epic, which paralleled the classics in both style and ingredients but with the purpose of contemporary satire rather than glorification of the past. Pope is indebted to Dryden for developing the technique of mock-epic which he adopted. The younger poet's genius refined and perfected the form, especially in its structural element, the machinery.

In expanding his machinery Pope was faced with a dilemma. It was not actually appropriate for him to use the classical gods in his mock-epic. Although no one took them seriously anymore and so they might seem appropriate for the mock-epic, their use in a contemporary satire would

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<sup>24</sup>A. F. B. Clark, Boileau and the French Classical Critics in England (New York, 1965), p. 110. Also, Dryden's Essays, ed. W. P. Ker (Oxford, 1900), Vol. 1, p. 237.

seem hackneyed and stilted. However, if he used the Christian God and spirits of Miltonic epic in a satirical poem, Pope would be inviting charges of sacrilege. As a Catholic in Protestant England, Pope was probably not anxious to put himself in an unpleasant situation--at least not then, in the beginning of his career. The use of the Christian mythology would have caused him another problem, too. By definition, the Christian God, as an all-powerful Being, would always win over his adversary, Satan. (This, as a matter of fact, is a problem that arises in Paradise Lost.) Whose side was God to take in The Rape? Would God concern Himself with actions which Pope strove to show were trivial? Would He find a worthy opponent? Obviously He could not favor the Baron whose pride and lust caused the ravaging of Belinda's hair. On the other hand, God could not aid Belinda until her pride had been humbled. Belinda, throwing snuff at the Baron, shows she may be humiliated but she has not accepted her destiny. Unlike Adam and Eve, she does not admit her fault. Pride was the chief among the Seven Deadly Sins, so if Pope were to use the Christian machinery, he must also take into account the Christian theology behind it. By alluding to the Christian mythology only indirectly, Pope avoids criticism and follows the precepts of Boileau who insists on the decorum of the classical machinery as opposed to the Christian God in epic.

A third alternative in selecting the machinery would have been to invent his own fictitious mythological system. The extreme difficulty of this idea is that of making the machinery believable even though the reader is aware of its fictitious quality.

Pope must, therefore, have been delighted to come across Le Comte de Gabalis, a Rosicrucian "doctrine of spirits." He may have sensed the advantages to the Villars material which seem so apparent to readers analyzing his work today. First, Pope hadn't invented it; the Rosicrucian material was an accepted belief of at least a small group of people. There was thus an element of believability inherent in the material. Second, the group of believers was not a big enough sect to cause the kind of criticism that Pope might face if he used the Christian machinery. And, as a bonus, Villars himself relates the sylphs to the gods of antiquity, claiming (as I pointed out in Section II) that the beings the ancients mistook for gods were really sylphs.

Still, the sylphs by themselves might have been unacceptable even within the fictional structure of the poem. But the obvious echoes of classical machinery cause the reader to relate them to the gods of classical epic, and thus accept that the sylphs will function similarly.

In adapting the sylphs to his narrative, Pope took

into account the critical principles of the eighteenth century French neoclassical critics, Boileau and Le Bossu. According to Boileau's theory, the gods in classical epic serve three purposes. First, they are decorative, adorning the work with a beauty which will delight the reader. Pope's sylphs, as we have seen, definitely meet this purpose. As a matter of fact, the critics of the nineteenth century were so impressed with this aspect of The Rape that they tended to overlook the deeper meaning of the work. But the sylphs are not merely decorative. They meet Boileau's other qualifications as well. The machinery provided the poem with a sense of wonder--what the Renaissance referred to as admiratio. The gods could perform all sorts of marvelous deeds, stir up storms, perform prophecy through an oracle, assist a favored warrior in battle, and generally inspire the reader with a sense of the marvels of the supernatural. Again Pope's sylphs are capable of many of these same acts on their own level. We see them preparing Belinda (the warrior) for conquest in Canto I:

The busy Sylphs surround their darling Care;  
 These set the Head, and those divide the Hair,  
 Some fold the Sleeve, whilst others plait the Gown;  
 And Betty's prais'd for Labours not her own.  
 (Rape, I, ll. 145-8)

In addition the poet presents Ariel, the chief of the sylphs, in the role of prophet or oracle. In her morning dream

Belinda is warned by Ariel of impending disaster in true classical style:

Of these am I, who thy Protection claim,  
 A watchful Sprite, and Ariel is my Name.  
 Late, as I rang'd the Crystal Wilds of Air,  
 In the clear Mirror of thy ruling Star  
 I saw, alas! some dread Event impend,  
 Ere 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!  
 (Rape, I, ll. 105-114)

Pope's sylphs add a quality of wonder to the poem. That the wonder inspired is not of the same dimensions as that in Homeric epic is a point that emphasizes the mock-epic nature of The Rape.

It is interesting also, that in the Villars' account mortals must refrain from human embrace to enjoy the "chastity" of the embrace of a sylph. Pope's sylphs, too, require the preservation of chastity, although their reasons are not so overtly sexual:

What guards the Purity of melting Maids,  
 In Courtly Balls, and Midnight Masquerades,  
 . . . 'Tis but their Sylph, the wise Celestials know,  
 Tho' Honour is the Word with Men below.  
 (Rape, I, ll. 71-78)

But one of the main duties of the sylphs in Pope's world is to help their charges preserve this purity. The poet tells us that ". . . the Sylphs, thro' mystick Mazes guide their Way", and the reader accepts this as exactly what one might expect of a sylph. How the poet must have chuckled at the

sexual allusions in this line, due to the Villars' source material with which his contemporaries were not familiar! From our vantage point in the twentieth century we can see that Pope hinted frequently at these human-sylph physical contacts. Examples of this included the references to "husbands and lapdogs" as quoted earlier.

On the other hand, the sylphs also represent some of the vices of Pope's society, chiefly pride and coquetry, and, because the latter is a form of deception, the sylphs also represent dishonesty.

Boileau insisted on the allegorical nature of epic machinery, and there seems to me little doubt that Pope, at least, accepted and used the French critic's theory. Peter Quennell points out in his biography:

What he took from Boileau was the whole conception of a modern mock-heroic poem, frivolous in subject, flippant in approach, yet deeply imaginative in its range of thought and feeling.<sup>25</sup>

While Quennell is probably referring to Boileau's Le Lutrin as having influenced Pope, we know from references in his letters that the Augustan poet was also familiar with Boileau's Art Poetique, and with the work of his countryman Le Bossu, who defined three types of gods in classical epic. The first type, in Le Bossu's words, was theological. Le Bossu felt that certain gods were invented by the ancients

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<sup>25</sup>Quennell, p. 75.

to explain the Nature of God. Thus Zeus has the quality of being all-powerful, Apollo inspires certain mortals to tell the future, and so on. As foreknowledge of the future may be seen as an attribute of God, we may consider it a theological trait that Pope's sylphs are able to sense omens of the future, though not to foretell specific incidents. The sylphs, of course, are not meant to be interpreted theologically, although these "theological" features add to the sylphs' allusive qualities by reminding us of the nature of classical gods and goddesses.

Le Bossu sees a second type of god in classical poetry as representing aspects of Nature: for example, Diana is the goddess of the moon, Pan, of the woods. Pope's machinery came directly from Villars with the built-in advantage that they resided in the elements. Pope did not change the elements, but added to them the aspects of personality of various human female types which he found representative of elemental humors. Of the salamanders, he says:

The Sprights of fiery Termagants in Flame  
Mount up, and take a Salamander's Name.  
(Rape, I, ll. 59-60)

The nymphs, on the other hand, present quite different features and are found in a different element:

Soft yielding Minds to Water glide away,  
And sip with Nymphs, their Elemental Tea.  
(Rape, I, ll. 61-62)

Pope deals a little more harshly with the gnomes:

The graver Prude sinks downward to a Gnome,  
 In search of Mischief still on Earth to roam.  
 (Rape, I, ll. 63-64)

And finally, most important to the poem:

The light Coquettes in Sylphs aloft repair,  
 And sport and flutter in the Fields of Air.  
 (Rape, I, ll. 65-66)

Third, Le Bossu agrees with Boileau that there are gods representing moral qualities, but he goes one step further. To Le Bossu the ancients wrote of such gods specifically for instructional purposes. While one could say that Pope's whole poem, as a satire, has instructional purposes, he amends Le Bossu's idea to let the sylphs do their own instructing of Belinda within the framework of his story. Le Bossu might have been upset with the sylphs' material except for the overall instructive purpose of the poem. In Canto I Pope describes the sylphs' goals in teaching their young ladies:

Some Nymphs there are, too conscious of their Face,  
 For Life predestin'd to the Gnomes' Embrace.  
 These swell their Prospects and exalt their Pride,  
 When Offers are disdain'd, and Love deny'd.  
 Then gay Ideas crowd the vacant Brain'  
 While Peers and Dukes, and all their sweeping Train,  
 And Garters, Stars and Coronets appear,  
 And in soft Sounds, Your Grace salutes their Ear.  
 'Tis these that early taint the Female Soul. . .  
 (Rape, I, ll. 79-87)

Blaming the sylphs for what he considers the duplicity of feminine behavior is a clever move on Pope's part. Without directly criticizing the ladies of his society, he points

out their flaws and blames them on creatures who do not exist. The discerning reader is expected to make the observation that although the poet gives the ladies an excuse, the excuse is fictional. The ladies must, therefore, take the blame, although the poet is innocent of having accused them. Thus the sylphs have in a roundabout way served the instructive purpose that Le Bossu considers so important.

Finally, Le Bossu describes the dual nature of the gods in classical epic. He points out that there is little in human experience which has the simplicity of being all good or all bad. So, too, each of the gods represent opposing but related qualities. Venus, for example, is the goddess of love and this is "good". Conversely, she also symbolizes physical love, which is passion or lust and can in many circumstances be considered "bad". Similarly, Pope's sylphs, as I mentioned earlier, represent two-sided qualities. They are beautiful symbols but they represent an artificial, surface beauty which leads to pride. They represent chastity, but they teach young girls to flirt and tempt young men. Thus, Belinda's "rape" is, in a sense, self-induced, as her manner of dealing with men is something of a challenge to them to subdue her. So the sylphs, like the gods, have a dual nature which adds to the complexity of their role in the poem.

Some interesting allusions to the classical gods of Greek mythology and to those in the writings of Homer and Virgil may be found in the text. The most important parallel between the sylphs and the gods is that both attempt to influence human behavior but that neither can wholly control it. The gods influence strongly in various ways. The sylphs, at first glance, seem to have no control at all, but as symbols of widely accepted social values, they do have a great deal of power. The sylphs make great efforts in the poem to foresee and warn Belinda of approaching disaster. But, although Ariel is aware of dark omens, he does not know specifically what the disaster will be, and he cannot force Belinda to listen to his warnings:

This Day, black Omens threat the brightest Fair  
That e'er deserv'd a watchful Spirit's Care;  
Some dire Disaster, or by Force, or Slight,  
But what, or where, the Fates have wrapt in Night.  
(Rape, II, ll. 101-104)

Later in the poem, as the Baron approaches, scissors in hand to snip the lock, the sylphs try to make Belinda aware of her danger:

Swift to the Lock a thousand Sprights repair,  
A thousand Wings, by turns, blow back the Hair,  
And thrice they twitch'd the Diamond in her Ear,  
Thrice she look'd back, and thrice the Foe drew near.  
(Rape, III, ll. 135-138)

But they cannot force her to heed the warning. And the limitations of Ariel's power are revealed when he finally looks into her heart to see why she is not listening to his warning:

Sudden he view'd, in spite of all her Art,  
 An Earthly Lover lurking at her Heart.  
 Amaz'd, confus'd, he found his Pow'r expir'd,  
 Resign'd to Fate, and with a Sigh retir'd.  
 (Rape, III, ll. 143-146)

It is apparent that Pope knew his classics. In spite of frequent allusions, his sylphs never overstep the role of the gods. They are concerned in human affairs; they inspire and help their chosen humans. They influence destiny--but they do not control it. This is an example of careful interweaving of allusion, the poem attains the greater scope of the epic, rather than the abbreviated impression of drawing room comedy that characterized the original "sylph-less" version.

Similarly in Virgil's Aeneid some gods inspire Laocoon and Cassandra to warn the Trojans about the Great Horse:

An, at that point, Laocoon came running,  
 With a great throng at his heels, down from the hilltop  
 . . . Do not trust it, Trojans,  
 Do not believe this horse. Whatever it may be,  
 I fear the Greeks, even when bringing presents<sup>26</sup>

And other gods try to discredit the warnings (Neptune, by sending the serpents, and Apollo who had punished Cassandra by allowing no one to believe her prophecies.) But the gods cannot force men to heed or ignore the warnings.

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<sup>26</sup>Virgil, The Aeneid, translated by Rolfe Humphries, (New York, 1951), p. 32.

Two other parallels come to mind when one reflects on Virgil's Aeneid. One is that Venus in attempting to influence Dido to cordiality toward Aeneas' people, inspires the queen with a love for Aeneas. One might see the result of the sylphs' efforts at making Belinda a flirt as inspiring the Baron to "love" Belinda. Like Venus the sylphs did not realize the harm that would result as a result of their meddling with human emotions.

The other allusion involves the influences of Juno on Aeneas and of Umbriel on Belinda. Frequently in Virgil's epic Juno stirs up trouble. She is, of course, angered that Paris chose Venus in the contest of goddesses that resulted in the Trojan war. She is also the one who requests Neptune's storm to drive the wanderers off course. And finally she arouses Queen Amata to frenzy by sending to her the Fury Alecto in order to further thwart the Trojans. A similar set of activities are given to Umbriel in The Rape. More about the gnomes as elemental people will be discussed in Part IV of this paper, but Umbriel presides with glee over Belinda's display of tears, her attack on the Baron, and the Baron's mocking surrender which infuriates the girl. The gnome fulfills a role similar to Juno's in that he inspires the chaos which can only be settled by a restoration of harmonious balance between the antagonists in the poems.

Like the gods in Homeric verse the sylphs also assist in battle. The battle in this case is a card game and the idea of superhuman intervention in such a trivial pasttime adds to the mock-epic texture of the poem:

Soon as she spreads her Hand, th' Aerial Guard  
 Descend, and sit on each important Card:  
 First Ariel perch'd upon a Matadore,  
 Then each, according to the Rank they bore;  
 For Sylphs, yet mindful of their ancient Race,  
 Are, as when Women, wondrous fond of Place.  
 (Rape, III, ll. 31-36)

Throughout the poem we see other allusions to the gods in classical epic. We have mentioned for other reasons the suggestion of a physical relationship between Belinda and the sylphs. In the source material Villars says the sylphs often take the form of pet animals such as lap-dogs in order not to frighten human women away from physical contact. Viewed in this light, the relationship between Belinda and Shock (a disguised sylph according to Bruckmann) reminds one of the contacts in classical mythology such as the one when Zeus approached Leda in the form of a swan.

In a more minor allusion the sylphs call to mind the nymphs of Diana. Belinda in the dazzling early morning light is as virginal a symbol as the Greek goddess. Murray Krieger<sup>27</sup> claims Belinda is divinized in this scene and the

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<sup>27</sup>Murray Krieger, "The Frail China Jar and the Rude Hand of Chaos" in Essential Articles for the Study of Alexander Pope (Hamden, 1968), p. 306.

sylphs contribute by paralleling the nymphs who attend the moon-goddess, Belinda's parallel divinity.

Finally, Pope uses the sylphs in somewhat the same manner as the Muses function in ancient epic. Pope's description of the Muses in a letter to Henry Cromwell is striking in its similarity to his description of the sylphs:

. . . In the meantime I take up with the Muses for want of your better Company; the Muses . . . Those Aeriall Ladies just discover to me enough of their Beauties to urge my Pursuit, and draw me on in a wandring Maze of Thought, still in hopes (and only in hopes) of attaining those favors from 'em, which they confer on their more happy admirers elsewhere.<sup>28</sup>

Throughout Pope's poem the behavior of his "Aeriall Ladies" is in accordance with Edith Hamilton's description of the Muses:

They are all of one mind, their hearts are set upon song and their spirit is free from care. He is happy whom the Muses love. For though a man has sorrow and grief in his soul, yet when the servant of the Muses sings, at once he forgets his dark thoughts and remembers not his troubles. Such is the holy gift of the Muses to men.<sup>29</sup>

One may question whether the sylphs are free from care or whether their wards are truly happy, but the gift of the Muses to their servants (i.e., the ability to inspire joy) is remarkably like the gift of loveliness which Belinda can bestow as a result of the sylphs ministrations:

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<sup>28</sup>"To Henry Cromwell" (Nov. 12, 1711) in Letters of Alexander Pope, ed. John Butt (London, 1960), p. 21.

<sup>29</sup>Edith Hamilton, Mythology (Boston, 1942), p. 40.

Belinda smiled and all the world was gay.  
(Rape, II, l. 52)

So the sylphs increase the readers' enjoyment of the poem because they bring in, through allusion, the whole realm of classical epic and mythology and that of the neoclassical critics. But in addition, they emphasize the mock-epic quality of the poem by increasing the implied comparison between the great and marvelous events of literary antiquity and the frivolous, artificial society in which Alexander Pope lived.

#### IV. CHRISTIAN OVERTONES

Any consideration of the role played by the elementary people in The Rape of the Lock would be incomplete without a discussion of their parallels with Milton's angels in Paradise Lost. As Douglas Bush points out in his book, Mythology and the Renaissance Tradition in Literature: Milton makes "abundant, splendid and functional use of pagan mythology"<sup>30</sup> which was really not related to his theme. Similarly, Pope adapts and includes the wealth of Christian allusion through frequent, unmistakable parallels between his sylphs and the angels of Paradise Lost.

These parallels can be more clearly appreciated if we consider that the epic background in any classical poem is generally made up of antagonistic human forces supported by various supernatural beings. In the Iliad, for example, the Greek and Trojan warriors supported by various gods clash in a life and death struggle over a principle. In Christian epic these forces are morally more clear cut and are represented by the good and bad angels. Pope, in satirizing the social forces at work in his society, creates

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<sup>30</sup>Douglas Bush, Mythology and the Renaissance Tradition in Literature (Minneapolis, 1932), p. 285.

mock-epic by reducing the titanic struggle to silly battles over transient values. Unlike Milton's angels whose existence, though literary, may also be accepted on religious faith, Pope's sylphs are believable only within the scope of his work. There they are lovely, if silly and transient, and their existence echoes the spiritual host of Christian epic, thus enlarging the scope of Pope's work by opening a new world of allusion.

Pope's reasoning in adding the sylphs to the final draft of the poem was sound. The Rape of the Lock keeps going beyond the scope of a simple social satire. Epic in general and Christian epic in particular tend to glorify man as an unique being in a complex universe or as a creature of God. Mock-epic, conversely, reflects the non-heroic nature of man. But the Rape, although satirizing the foibles of Pope's society, is gentled by the charm of the sylphs who worship the values that Pope considered so foolish in 18th century society. One critic has remarked that

. . . the epic takes for its theme no less than a problem of importance to a nation or the human race.<sup>31</sup>

If that is so, perhaps one could say that the mock epic creates the problem of conflicting values--those the author sees as worthwhile and those he sees prized by his

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<sup>31</sup>M. Woodhull, The Epic of Paradise Lost: Twelve Essays (New York, 1907), p. 19.

contemporaries. The values accepted by the society of Belinda and her peers include a fleeting illusion of beauty created by powder puffs and (if we are to believe the author) by sylph-ish ministrations. By the very fact that he shows this beauty as artificial and, more directly, in the speech of Clarissa, Pope makes us aware that the only beauty that is truly worthwhile is that beauty of spirit and inner being which can never fade with age. However, as he criticizes, Pope also creates his sylphs in beauty to show that he understands the charm of the things he opposes. A good deal of this dual effect is achieved through the numerous allusions to Milton's good and bad angels.

Just as the grandeur of Milton's spirits contributes to the monumental effect of Paradise Lost, the smallness of Pope's sylphs increases the satiric quality of The Rape. Where the angels or devils inspire awe, the sylphs whose make-up and abilities parallel those of their Miltonic counterparts, inspire delight coupled with a recognition of the frivolity of the values they worship.

Milton and Pope had a common literary problem: i.e., how to treat graphically beings who were essentially unpicturable because they were non-material creatures. Milton was, of course, limited by the Christian theology in which he was grounded. Pope was only bound by this in as much as he made use of allusion to Milton's epic.

Milton's angelology was complicated by arguments which seem to have been recorded as early as the sixth century and (perhaps falsely) credited to Dionysius the Areopagite. These arguments as to the nature of angelic substances were continued into the Middle Ages. Briefly, three possibilities for angelic substance were mentioned: (1) Angels could be composed of elementary matter like humans and other earthly creatures; (2) They could be made of celestial matter as are the stars; or (3) They could be metaphysical in nature, possessing quality but not quantity. In other words

. . . the Angelic form rested on a matter not subject to quantity, and the form found in such matter was merely its principle of individuation.<sup>32</sup>

Robert West feels that Milton as a Puritan and as a Renaissance man agreed with the Calvinist doctrine that angels are material, not much closer to God than man was before the Fall. West continues that Milton adopted the Platonist theory that the angelic spirit was housed in its own elemental because it was convenient to his literary creation and because the scholastic argument for pure spirits was too Papist for Milton's taste.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>32</sup>Harris F. Fletcher, Milton's Rabbinical Readings (Urbana, 1967), p. 214.

<sup>33</sup>R. H. West, "The Substance of Milton's Angels" in SAMLA Studies in Milton (Gainesville, 1953), p. 25.

The theory Milton used then, was Platonist. These thinkers felt the gap in the great Chain of Being from bodily to bodiless creatures was unbelievable, and they peopled it with spirits in intangible rather than material bodies, with

. . . angelic souls vitalizing natural bodies ordinarily imperceptible to human sense, though occasionally thickening to visibility or even tangibility . . . The insistence that the angel was not compound of form and matter preserved, . . . the continuity of created beings up to God, for if angels had body . . . it would be necessary to have incorporeal beings to complete the hierarchy of creation.<sup>34</sup>

Pope, though writing about sylphs and not angels, had the same problem in presenting non-visible beings through literary description. He may have read Henry More's 1660 summary of seventeenth century schools of thought regarding angels:

Concerning angels, some affirm them to be fiery or airy Bodies; some pure spirits; some Spirits in airy or fiery Bodies . . .<sup>35</sup>

Certainly this "fiery and airy" description sounds like the elementary people. Pope never says specifically whether his sylphs are material or spiritual. He describes their appearance, but in fact, during the poem, no mortal perceives their presence except Belinda, and she, only in a dream.

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<sup>34</sup>Ibid., p. 25.

<sup>35</sup>Henry More, The Grand Mystery of Godliness (London, 1660), I, iii, 6.

Ariel's name in itself is worth a few moments of study when one considers angelology. The name Ariel occurs variously in the Old Testament as the name of a warrior and as a symbolic name meaning "strong Lion." In the Book of Ezra Ariel is a messenger. In Ezekiel (43:16) an altar-hearth in the shape of a lion was called Ariel. The name is Hebrew in origin:

ל א אלהים

The first syllable means lion and the second means God.

Kimchi, a rabbi commenting upon the Scripture in the thirteenth century but rather well-known in Milton's time, pointed out that in Hebrew the word for messenger and the word Ariel were not only similar, but both meant "Angel, or one to whom is delegated God's essence and spirit."<sup>36</sup> The name also meant Jerusalem (the seat of power and of the Temple.)<sup>37</sup> Finally, in the thirty-third chapter of Isaiah and in 2 Samuel 23:20 Ariel is obliquely referred to as an angel. Interestingly, Milton borrowed from the rabbinical writings on Scripture the name of Ariel to symbolize both messenger and warrior. Milton's Ariel is a rebel angel. He synthesized the Biblical ideas and made of them a demon whose name and activities greatly contribute to the fierceness of tone and desperate nature of the

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<sup>36</sup>Fletcher, p. 271.

<sup>37</sup>Ibid., p. 267.

fighting between the spiritual titans.

When Pope adapted the name of Ariel for his chief sylph, he adopted with it a whole realm of literary allusion.<sup>38</sup> There was the Biblical background. If Pope's sylphs worshipped Beauty as their god, then Ariel as their chief and the most beautiful sylph carried the essence of his "god's" spirit. Stretching the point a little, one might add that the chief sylph certainly was the Temple or seat of this Beauty.

The role of Ariel in The Rape overlaps the "good and bad" angels' activities in Paradise Lost, thus drawing in the increased area of allusion to Christian epic. Like Satan Ariel tempts Belinda with pride, but in this society of mixed values, pride is a virtue. Ariel protects Belinda's chastity by sheltering her from the real world, just as the angels protect Adam and Eve. But in so doing, angel and sylph may be violating the humanity of their charges by destroying their free will, so in the end, the humans make their own choices independently.

There are important parallels and differences between Ariel and Milton's Satan. These recurrent events are frequent in the poems. The Rape of the Lock opens as the

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<sup>38</sup>In addition to the Biblical allusions mentioned here, the poet was also able to add texture to his poem by modeling Ariel's physical appearance on the Ariel of Shakespeare's The Tempest. This point is an extensive one and merits a complete discussion in itself, but it is not part of this particular paper.

sylph speaks to Belinda in a dream just as Satan whispers in Eve's dreams (P.L., IV, 800-809). Satan and Ariel are the unearthly rivals trying to take Eve's and Belinda's allegiance away from their earthly lovers, Adam and the Baron. Satan evidences jealousy when he first observes Eve's natural splendor. Ariel's jealousy is less overt, and yet he too has strict rules which Belinda must follow or forfeit the sylphs' attention. Like Satan, Ariel is the leader of his sprites. The scene where Ariel assigns jobs to the sylphs in anticipation of Belinda's fall parallels the council in Pandemonium where Satan predicts the fall of man. Each leader takes upon himself the most important job among his followers: Ariel will guard Shock; Satan will attempt the long, hazardous journey through Chaos to the new world. And finally, Ariel's spirits receive his threat that they will be "stopt in vials" if they are lax in their duties. Satan's threat that his followers will continue in doom if they do not follow his battle plan is completely ineffective. After all, they are already eternally damned.

One major difference between the two is that Ariel misleads Belinda into the fault of Pride which is not given the status of sin in the society of The Rape. He does not sin himself. Satan's sin, of course, is also one of pride. In another sense, Satan leads Eve to worship a false god (i.e., knowledge.) That she does so becomes clear when,

having eaten the forbidden fruit, she bows low before the tree. Similarly, Ariel leads Belinda to worship a false value. When Belinda shows her spleen after the "rape", she is not so much worried about her chastity--in fact, as we have seen, her honour is not actually stained--but about her reputation, what people will think happened. She would rather have lost her chastity and have no one know than have things the way they are. Canto IV demonstrates this:

Oh hadst thou, Cruel! been content to seize  
Hairs less in sight, or any Hairs but these.  
(Rape, IV, ll. 175-6)

Some critics have pointed out that these lines could be interpreted to mean she would not have minded had the Baron violated the pubic hairs guarding the center of her chastity. Thus Belinda, taught by Ariel, values her reputation or "honour" more than her moral state.

Finally, one importance difference between Ariel and Satan is that Satan seems to have won when Adam and Eve fall. In reality he has lost because the Messiah offers to redeem mankind. Ariel, on the other hand, seems to have lost. The sylphs arm for battle, but when Belinda makes her choice, they are forced to retire. Belinda's choice of spleen over the graceful acceptance of fate suggested by Clarissa is more a victory for the gnomes than the sylphs. Yet, at the end, Belinda, fighting for the restoration of the Lock, returns to Ariel's camp. When the Lock rises

gloriously into the sky, the sylphs behold and admire it, knowing they have won Belinda back from the spleen that the gnomes inspired in her. However, the reader may assume that both Belinda and the sylphs have changed at this point. The sylphs are pleased at the "eternal beauty" of the glorified Lock, and Belinda has accepted the true beauty of her inner chaste self rather than the transient beauty of external looks and artificial reputation. She is once again beautiful, chaste and happy. Belinda will smile and all the world will be gay again, so Ariel has emerged victorious after all.

Ariel's role, however, also overlaps the functions of the good angels. Since Milton does not have a single good angel with the stature of Satan, the parallels here are not quite so obvious. However, Ariel's activities are in some ways like those of Raphael, Gabriel and Michael. Like the first, Ariel warns Belinda of imminent disaster and is, like him, ignored until it is too late. Like Gabriel, he guards his charge, assigning his sylphs to vigilant patrol against the enemy that threatens. And like Michael, Ariel expels his charge from the company of spirits when she has transgressed.

Another echo of Paradise Lost which occurs is in the idea of angelic (or sylphic) rank. Theories of angelology in Milton's lifetime went into detailed discussions of

order and hierarchy among the angels. Milton is in the pseudo-Dionysian tradition which suggests nine hierarchies of angels in three orders.<sup>39</sup> However, Milton adapts the theory to his own needs rather than slavishly following it. He alludes to five of the orders but does not specifically describe their ranking. Pope's sylphs seem to have similar rank. One is reminded of Milton's ancient race of angels when Pope writes

For Sylphs, yet mindful of their ancient Race,  
Are . . . wondrous fond of Place.  
(Rape, III, II. 35-6)

But the allusion increases the satire in this instance. Milton's angels were, after all, created and arranged in ranks according to God's universal plan. The sylphs, in contrast, rank because of their foolish fondness for ranking. Copley comments:

Pope's preoccupation in this poem, of course, is with the continual scaling-down of the heroic. Even the duties of the sylphs are arranged in diminishing order of importance . . .<sup>40</sup>

We do, indeed, see the jobs of the sylphs listed in order of diminishing importance in Canto II. The contrast with the jobs of the angels--even the devils--points up the micro-cosmic foolishness of Belinda's society whose values

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<sup>39</sup>P. E. Dustoor, "Legends of Lucifer in Early English and in Milton," Anglia, LIV, 1930, p. 219.

<sup>40</sup>J. Copley, "The Rape of the Lock, II, 73-100", MLN, LXXVI (1961), pp. 494-5.

the sylphs guard.

Milton certainly (and Pope probably) was aware of the angelology of Cornelius Agrippa. There is a small point of interest in this: Agrippa felt that each man has three guardian spirits--a sacred one, subject to God; a spirit of his nativity; and a spirit of profession which changed as the man changed his occupation. Pope's elemental people parallel this latter type of spirit. Belinda has Ariel as her guardian as long as her "occupation" is beauty and good humor. But when she changes to histrionics and revenge, Umbriel, the gnome, takes over as her guardian spirit. He conducts her to the Cafe of Spleen, just as Gabriel takes the fallen Adam out of the care of Raphael and Paradise to the world of sorrow.

The gnome Umbriel deserves his share of attention when Miltonic parallels are discussed. Of the four types of elemental beings mentioned in Le Comte de Gabalis Pope mentions the nymphs and salamanders only briefly. The majority of his poem concentrates upon the sylphs until the Lock is cut. At that time the fourth type of elemental being appears in the shape of Umbriel. He too is an ambiguous figure. Like Milton's Uriel, the brightest-eyed of all the angels, he seems to see all and to appear at crucial moments. Where Uriel is one of the seven angels who stands in the presence of God, Umbriel seems to be the one who is admitted to the presence of the goddess of Spleen.

On the other hand, his role parallels Satan in his descent into the Cave of Spleen which is similar to Hell in its gloomy aspect and chaotic outer area. Compare Satan's flight through Hell:

. . . i' th' midst a horrid Vale.  
 Then with expanded wings he steers his flight  
 Aloft, incumbent on the dusky Air . . .  
 (P.L., I, ll.224-6)

with the following description of Umbriel's descent into Spleen:

Swift on his sooty Pinions flitts the Gnome,  
 And in a Vapour reach'd the dismal Dome.  
 No cheerful Breeze this sullen Region knows,  
 The dreaded East is all the Wind that blows.  
 (Rape, IV, ll. 17-20)

Umbriel again resembles Satan as he watches the real physical battle and vocal exchange between Belinda's supporters and the Baron:

Triumphant Umbriel on a Sconce's Height  
 Clapt his glad Wings, and sate to view the Fight:  
 Propt on their Bodkin Spears, the Sprights survey  
 The growing combat . . .  
 (Rape, V, ll. 53-6)

The allusion is to Satan, the general, surveying his warriors in the battle of the angels.

Finally, Satan looses Sin and Death upon the world; Umbriel's children are Bad Humor and Chagrin. Again the contrast with the Christian epic emphasizes the littleness of the society to which Belinda belongs.

Milton and Pope were faced with a similar problem in creating their two battle scenes. How does one stage a

battle involving superhuman beings who are incapable of receiving mortal injury in any sort of believable manner? Milton overcomes this problem by allusion: he catalogues Satan's followers by naming them after classical and Biblical figures. Because of the allusion the reader is able to overlook the literal and enter into the imaginative battle with interest. Similarly, Pope's allusion to Milton allows us to overlook the literal event of the card game with epic importance to its players. The idea of wee creatures dancing on each card does not seem so ridiculous to the reader who is making the comparison to Paradise Lost and observing the satiric influence of the allusion to the angelic battle.

Throughout The Rape of the Lock we are faced with Miltonic parallels which leave us unclear as to the moral nature of the sylphs. Both angels and demons share certain physical abilities with Pope's sylphs. They can change size, shape and sex at will. Milton tells us, for example:

. . . For Spirits when they please  
 Can either Sex assume, or both; so soft  
 And uncompound'd is their Essence pure . . .  
 (P.L., I, ll. 423-5)

Pope's description of his sylphs' abilities couldn't have been more similar unless he had plagiarized:

For Spirits, freed from mortal Laws, with ease  
 Assume what Sexes and what Shapes they please.  
 (Rape, I, ll. 69-70)

In certain other abilities the sylphs also parallel the angels--with certain noticeable differences. While Satan in Book VI of Paradise Lost is wounded and in pain, he is not killed because God has decreed that he shall not die. His substance heals itself although he carries his pain with him forever.

Sylphs, presumably, have the option of similar immortality (through commerce with Belinda, if one is to accept Villars' ideas.) However, the sylphs, though indestructible like Satan, seem not to feel pain. In the Rape a small sylph accidentally gets caught in the Baron's scissors as he cuts the Lock and is cut in half. But Pope assures us that "Airy Substance soon unites again". Like the angels, the sylphs seem to be composed of a self-healing substance. And like the good angels, sylphs do not feel pain.

One other ability the two creatures share is the power of expansion and contraction. Milton, in fact, has been criticized for not explaining how his myriad of demons were able to fit into Pandemonium all at once. Whatever the explanation, Milton gave his devils this ability to change size. Seemingly, Pope's elemental people also have the ability for Ariel appears to Belinda in her dream as a human (and therefore normal-sized) youth. Yet he later perches upon a card during the game of Ombre. One would

assume that the sylphs were of comparable size to their leader when he assigns their tasks, yet he threatens any sylph who is lax in his duty that he will be stopped in a vial. Another example is that Ariel assigns fifty sylphs to guard the petticoat. One would be hard put to imagine fifty of them retaining their human size and performing this task. Furthermore, since Pope hints that he accepts the Villars' notion that sylphs mate physically with humans, we may assume that sylphs are of normal human size during this activity.

Both angels and sylphs are able also to change their forms. Satan, as we know, fools Uriel by appearing as a Cherub. He later sneaks into Paradise as a mist, and whispers in Eve's ear disguised as a toad. All this is in addition to his famous snake act! Similarly we have noticed that Ariel appears in a dream as a human. Besides this, some readers of the poems feel that Shock, the lap-dog, is really a sylph in disguise. And I have previously mentioned the Villars' account of the sylph who appeared in the shape of a huge thigh.

At any rate Pope's sylphs seem to function similarly to the angels. West comments that

. . . Milton borrows in detail from Michael Psellus, a demonologist very widely known in the seventeenth century, when he represents angels as 'pan-organic'

with power to change size, shape, and color, and to heal instantly injuries in their substance.<sup>41</sup>

That the sylphs behave similarly enlarges the scope of Pope's poem through the implied comparison.

In conclusion, the following observations may be made regarding the parallels between the two poems. In Paradise Lost the Son of God and the good angels are manifestations of the spirit of God. In the Rape the sylphs are manifestations of the spirit of Beauty worshipped by Belinda's society. Just as the devils are the antitheses of goodness, so Umbriel and the gnomes are the antagonists of Beauty.

Pope's "sylphology" is not nearly as thoroughly worked out as Milton's study of his angels. Thus, in many places the role of the sylphs takes on a dual nature, overlapping functions of angels and demons.

In a Christian epic such as Milton's all the characters except Adam and Eve are both part of the divine machinery and essential to the epic. Pope added the machinery to his mock-epic to symbolize the values being satirized. While not essential to the poem, the sylphs and gnomes definitely widen its scope. Milton's angels represent the warring spiritual forces of good and evil.

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<sup>41</sup>West, Milton and the Angels (Athens, 1955), p. 110.

Pope's sylphs represent the superficiality of Belinda's "world of fashion and scandal, of petty vanities and trivial, mean absurdities."<sup>42</sup> But while he mocks, Alexander Pope, the social critic, still recognizes the fleeting beauty of that world, the beauty of which the sylphs are the symbol.

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<sup>42</sup>Ian Jack, Pope (London, 1954), pp. 13-14.

## V. CONCLUSION

Having examined the source material and some of the parallels between the Rape of the Lock and certain works and theories in both Christian and classical literature, one should try to pull the threads together in some sort of solid conclusions about the sylphs. As a way of approaching these conclusions, I would like to return to the questions I mentioned in the introduction. What do the sylphs mean specifically to Belinda? What did they mean to Alexander Pope? And finally, perhaps most important, what specifically do they mean to the modern reader?

Communication with the sylphs is central to the meaning of the poem, and it is important that Belinda is the only character who is aware of the existence of the elemental people. She is not aware of the sylphs in the same way that the Count de Gabalis is aware of them, that is, she does not hold lengthy and scholarly chats on philosophical topics with the elemental people. Belinda's knowledge of the sylphs is vague--a sense of benevolent guardians hovering about her. She is unaware that they also tempt her until Clarissa points out the nature of true Beauty and Belinda begins to realize--not that the sylphs have tempted her--but that the values she has followed are worthless. The sylphs may thus be seen as psychological

functions of Belinda's own mind: her pride, her beauty, her honor, her chastity.

Pope, as an Augustan writer, is always concerned with balance, harmony and the Golden Mean. The mean is always superior to the extremes, says Pope in his translation of the sixth epistle in Horace's First Book of Epistles. Clarissa in the poem is presented as the Mean (or human ideal.) The gnomes are extremes of "vice", at least inasmuch as they represent the antithesis of even the transient beauty which the society values. Umbriel is extremely ugly, obsessed with ugliness. The sylphs are the other extreme--they symbolize the fleeting beauty which the people in Belinda's world mistakenly value. The sylphs mislead Belinda, not because they are evil, but because they will always be beautiful, and they do not understand that in her human condition, she cannot always have the same physical beauty. Thus, in reaching for this extreme, Belinda is denying her own human nature. It is important that Clarissa, the Mean, is a human being, rather than one of the sprites, because as such she accepts her humanity and counsels Belinda to do the same. She represents common sense and the internal beauty which the sylphs do not need and the gnomes can never have.

To the modern reader the sylphs are important as a way of approaching the work. As with any great piece of

literature, one gets more from the Rape of the Lock with each re-reading. I feel it is unnecessary to decide finally whether the sylphs are good or bad, beautiful or artificial. They are all of these things and more. They are an essential part of what makes Pope's work eternal--that they exist is enough.

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