

The Rape of the Lock, 1712 version

The Rape of the Lock

*Nolueram, Belinda, tuos violare capillos
Sed juvat, hoc precibus me tribuisse tuis.*

Mart.

Canto I

What dire offence from am'rous causes springs,
What mighty quarrels rise from trivial things,
I sing – This verse to C – l, Muse! is due:
This, ev'n Belinda may vouchsafe to view:
Slight is the subject, but not so the praise,
If she inspire, and he approve my lays.

Say what strange motive, goddess! could compel
A well-bred lord t' assault a gentle belle?
O say what stranger cause, yet unexplored,
Could make a gentle belle reject a lord?
And dwells such rage in softest bosoms then,
And lodge such daring souls in little men?

Sol through white curtains did his beams display,
And ope'd those eyes which brighter shine than they,
Shock just had giv'n himself the rousing shake,
And nymphs prepared their chocolate to take;
Thrice the wrought slipper knocked against the ground,
And striking watches the tenth hour resound.
Belinda rose, and midst attending dames,
Launched on the bosom of the silver Thames:
A train of well-dressed youths around her shone,

And ev'ry eye was fixed on her alone:
On her white breast a sparkling cross she wore
Which Jews might kiss and infidels adore.
Her lively looks a sprightly mind disclose,
Quick as her eyes, and as unfixed as those:
Favours to none, to all she smiles extends;
Oft she rejects, but never once offends.
Bright as the sun, her eyes the gazers strike,
And, like the sun, they shine on all alike.
Yet graceful ease, and sweetness void of pride,
Might hide her faults, if belles had faults to hide:
If to her share some female errors fall,
Look on her face, and you'll forgive 'em all.

This nymph, to the destruction of mankind,
Nourished two locks, which graceful hung behind
In equal curls, and well conspired to deck
With shining ringlets her smooth iv'ry neck.
Love in these labyrinths his slaves detains,
And mighty hearts are held in slender chains.
With hairy springes we the birds betray,
Slight lines of hair surprise the finny prey,
Fair tresses man's imperial race insnare,
And beauty draws us with a single hair.

Th' adventurous baron the bright locks admired;
He saw, he wished, and to the prize aspired.
Resolved to win, he meditates the way,
By force to ravish, or by fraud betray;
For when success a lover's toil attends,
Few ask if fraud or force attained his ends.

For this, ere Phoebus rose, he had implored
Propitious heav'n, and every pow'r adored,
But chiefly Love – to Love an altar built,
Of twelve vast French romances, neatly gilt.
There lay the sword-knot Sylvia's hands had sewn
With Flavia's busk that oft had wrapped his own:

A fan, a garter, half a pair of gloves,
And all the trophies of his former loves.
With tender billets-doux he lights the fire,
And breathes three am'rous sighs to raise the fire.
Then prostrate falls, and begs with ardent eyes
Soon to obtain, and long possess the prize:
The pow'rs gave ear, and granted half his pray'r,
The rest the winds dispersed in empty air.

Close by those meads, for ever crowned with flow'rs,
Where Thames with pride surveys his rising tow'rs,
There stands a structure of majestic frame,
Which from the neighb'ring Hampton takes its name.
Here Britain's statesmen oft the fall foredoom
Of foreign tyrants, and of nymphs at home;
Here thou, great Anna! whom three realms obey,
Dost sometimes counsel take – and sometimes tea.

Hither our nymphs and heroes did resort,
To taste awhile the pleasures of a court;
In various talk the cheerful hours they passed,
Of who was bit, or who capotted last;
This speaks the glory of the British queen,
And that describes a charming Indian screen;
A third interprets motions, looks, and eyes;
At ev'ry word a reputation dies.
Snuff, or the fan, supply each pause of chat,
With singing, laughing, ogling, and all that.

Now when, declining from the noon of day,
The sun obliquely shoots his burning ray;
When hungry judges soon the sentence sign,
And wretches hang that jurymen may dine;
When merchants from th' Exchange return in peace,
And the long labours of the toilet cease,
The board's with cups and spoons, alternate, crowned,
The berries crackle, and the mill turns round;
On shining altars of Japan they raise

The silver lamp, and fiery spirits blaze:
From silver spouts the grateful liquors glide,
While China's earth receives the smoking tide.
At once they gratify their smell and taste,
While frequent cups prolong the rich repast.
Coffee (which makes the politician wise,
And see through all things with his half-shut eyes)
Sent up in vapours to the baron's brain
New stratagems, the radiant lock to gain.
Ah cease, rash youth! desist ere't is too late,
Fear the just gods, and think of Scylla's fate!
Changed to a bird, and sent to flit in air,
She dearly pays for Nisus' injured hair!

But when to mischief mortals bend their mind,
How soon fit instruments of ill they find!
Just then, Clarissa drew with tempting grace
A two-edged weapon from her shining case:
So ladies, in romance, assist their knight,
Present the spear, and arm him for the fight;
He takes the gift with rev'ence, and extends
The little engine on his fingers' ends;
This just behind Belinda's neck he spread,
As o'er the fragrant steams she bends her head.
He first expands the glitt'ring forfex wide
T' enclose the lock; then joins it, to divide;
One fatal stroke the sacred hair does sever
From the fair head, for ever, and for ever!

The living fires come flashing from her eyes,
And screams of horror rend th' affrighted skies.
Not louder shrieks by dames to heav'n are cast,
When husbands die, or lapdogs breathe their last;
Or when rich china vessels, fall'n from high,
In glitt'ring dust and painted fragments lie!

"Let wreaths of triumph now my temples twine,"
The victor cried, "the glorious prize is mine!"

While fish in streams, or birds delight in air,
Or in a coach and six the British fair,
As long as Atalantis shall be read,
Or the small pillow grace a lady's bed,
While visits shall be paid on solemn days,
When num'rous wax-lights in bright order blaze,
While nymphs take treats, or assignations give,
So long my honour, name, and praise shall live!"

What time would spare, from steel receives its date,
And monuments, like men, submit to fate!
Steel did the labour of the gods destroy,
And strike to dust th' aspiring tow'rs of Troy;
Steel could the works of mortal pride confound,
And hew triumphal arches to the ground.
What wonder then, fair nymph! thy hairs should feel
The conqu'ring force of unresisted steel?

Canto II

But anxious cares the pensive nymph oppressed,
And secret passions laboured in her breast.
Not youthful kings in battle seized alive,
Not scornful virgins who their charms survive,
Not ardent lover robbed of all his bliss,
Not ancient lady when refused a kiss,
Not tyrants fierce that unrepenting die,
Not Cynthia when her manteau's pinned awry,
E'er felt such rage, resentment, and despair,
As thou, sad virgin! for thy ravished hair. While her racked
soul repose and peace requires,
The fierce Thalestris fans the rising fires.
"O wretched maid!" she spread her hands, and cried,
(And Hampton's echoes, "Wretched maid!" replied)
"Was it for this you took such constant care

Combs, bodkins, leads, pomatums to prepare?
For this your locks in paper durance bound?
For this with tort'ring irons wreathed around?
Oh had the youth been but content to seize
Hairs less in sight, or any hairs but these!
Gods! shall the ravisher display this hair,
While the fops envy, and the ladies stare!
Honour forbid! at whose unrivalled shrine
Ease, pleasure, virtue, all, our sex resign.
Methinks already I your tears survey,
Already hear the horrid things they say,
Already see you a degraded toast,
And all your honour in a whisper lost!
How shall I, then, your helpless fame defend?
'T will then be infamy to seem your friend!
And shall this prize, th' inestimable prize,
Exposed through crystal to the gazing eyes,
And heightened by the diamond's circling rays,
On that rapacious hand for ever blaze?
Sooner shall grass in Hyde Park Circus grow,
And wits take lodgings in the sound of Bow;
Sooner let earth, air, sea, to chaos fall,
Men, monkeys, lapdogs, parrots, perish all!"

She said; then raging to Sir Plume repairs,
And bids her beau demand the precious hairs:
Sir Plume, of amber snuff-box justly vain,
And the nice conduct of a clouded cane,
With earnest eyes, and round unthinking face,
He first the snuff-box opened, then the case,
And thus broke out – "My lord, why, what the devil!
Zounds! damn the lock! 'fore Gad, you must be civil!
Plague on't! 't is past a jest – nay, prithee, pox!
Give her the hair." – He spoke, and rapped his box.

"It grieves me much," replied the peer again,
"Who speaks so well should ever speak in vain:

But by this lock, this sacred lock, I swear,
(Which never more shall join its parted hair;
Which never more its honours shall renew,
Clipped from the lovely head where once it grew)
That, while my nostrils draw the vital air,
This hand, which won it, shall for ever wear."
He spoke, and speaking, in proud triumph spread
The long-contended honours of her head.

But see! the nymph in sorrow's pomp appears,
Her eyes half-languishing, half drowned in tears;
Now livid pale her cheeks, now glowing red
On her heaved bosom hung her drooping head,
Which with a sigh she raised, and thus she said:
"For ever cursed be this detested day,
Which snatched my best, my fav'rite curl away;
Happy! ah ten times happy had I been,
If Hampton Court these eyes had never seen!
Yet am not I the first mistaken maid,
By love of courts to num'rous ills betrayed.
O had I rather unadmired remained
In some lone isle, or distant northern land,
Where the gilt chariot never marked the way,
Where none learn ombre, none e'er taste bohea!
There kept my charms concealed from mortal eye,
Like roses, that in deserts bloom and die.
What moved my mind with youthful lords to roam?
O had I stayed, and said my pray'rs at home!
'Twas this the morning omens did foretell,
Thrice from my trembling hand the patchbox fell;
The tott'ring china shook without a wind,
Nay, Poll sat mute, and Shock was most unkind!
See the poor remnants of this slighted hair!
My hands shall rend what ev'n thy own did spare:
This in two sable ringlets taught to break,
Once gave new beauties to the snowy neck;
The sister-lock now sits uncouth, alone,

And in its fellow's fate foresees its own;
Uncurled it hangs, the fatal shears demands,
And tempts once more thy sacrilegious hands."

She said: the pitying audience melt in tears;
But fate and Jove had stopped the baron's ears.
In vain Thalestris with reproach assails,
For who can move when fair Belinda fails?
Not half so fixed the Trojan could remain,
While Anna begged and Dido raged in vain.
"To arms, to arms!" the bold Thalestris cries,
And swift as lightning to the combat flies.
All side in parties, and begin th' attack;
Fans clap, silks rustle, and tough whalebones crack;
Heroes' and heroines' shouts confus'dly rise,
And bass and treble voices strike the skies;
No common weapons in their hands are found,
Like gods they fight, nor dread a mortal wound.

So when bold Homer makes the gods engage,
And heav'nly breasts with human passions rage,
'Gainst Pallas, Mars; Latona, Hermes arms,
And all Olympus rings with loud alarms;
Jove's thunder roars, heav'n trembles all around,
Blue Neptune storms, the bellowing deeps resound:
Earth shakes her nodding tow'rs, the ground gives way,
And the pale ghosts start at the flash of day!

While through the press enraged Thalestris flies,
And scatters death around from both her eyes,
A beau and witling perished in the throng,
One died in metaphor, and one in song.
"O cruel nymph; a living death I bear,"
Cried Dapperwit, and sunk beside his chair.
A mournful glance Sir Fopling upwards cast,
"Those eyes are made so killing" – was his last.
Thus on Mæander's flow'ry margin lies
Th' expiring swan, and as he sings he dies.

As bold Sir Plume had drawn Clarissa down,
Chloe stepped in, and killed him with a frown;
She smiled to see the doughty hero slain,
But at her smile the beau revived again.

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.

See fierce Belinda on the baron flies,
With more than usual lightning in her eyes:
Nor feared the chief th' unequal fight to try,
Who sought no more than on his foe to die.
But this bold lord, with manly strength endued,
She with one finger and a thumb subdued:
Just where the breath of life his nostrils drew,
A charge of snuff the wily virgin threw;
Sudden, with starting tears each eye o'erflows,
And the high dome re-echoes to his nose.

"Now meet thy fate," th' incensed virago cried,
And drew a deadly bodkin from her side.

"Boast not my fall," he said, "insulting foe!
Thou by some other shalt be laid as low;
Nor think to die dejects my lofty mind;
All that I dread is leaving you behind!
Rather than so, ah let me still survive,
And still burn on, in Cupid's flames, alive."

"Restore the lock!" she cries; and all around
"Restore the lock!" the vaulted roofs rebound.
Not fierce Othello in so loud a strain
Roared for the handkerchief that caused his pain.
But see how oft ambitious aims are crossed,
And chiefs contend till all the prize is lost!
The lock, obtained with guilt, and kept with pain,

In ev'ry place is sought, but sought in vain:
With such a prize no mortal must be blessed,
So heav'n decrees! with heav'n who can contest?
Some thought it mounted to the lunar sphere,
Since all that man e'er lost is treasured there.
There heroes' wits are kept in pond'rous vases,
And beaux' in snuff-boxes and tweezer-cases.
There broken vows, and death-bed alms are found,
And lovers' hearts with ends of ribbon bound,
The courtier's promises, and sick man's pray'rs,
The smiles of harlots, and the tears of heirs,
Cages for gnats, and chains to yoke a flea,
Dried butterflies, and tomes of casuistry.

But trust the muse – she saw it upward rise,
Though marked by none but quick poetic eyes:
(Thus Rome's great founder to the heav'ns withdrew,
To Proculus alone confessed in view)
A sudden star, it shot through liquid air,
And drew behind a radiant trail of hair.
Not Berenice's locks first rose so bright,
The skies bespangling with dishevelled light.
(This the beau monde shall from the Mall survey,
(As through the moonlight shade they nightly stray,
(And hail with music its propitious ray;
This Partridge soon shall view in cloudless skies,
When next he looks through Galileo's eyes;
And hence th' egregious wizard shall foredoom
The fate of Louis, and the fall of Rome.

Then cease, bright nymph! to mourn thy ravished hair,
Which adds new glory to the shining sphere!
Not all the tresses that fair head can boast,
Shall draw such envy as the lock you lost.
For after all the murders of your eye,
When, after millions slain, yourself shall die;
When those fair suns shall set, as set they must,

And all those tresses shall be laid in dust,
This lock the muse shall consecrate to fame,
And 'midst the stars inscribe Belinda's name.