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### “The Doubtful Beam”: Balancing Images in *The Rape of the Lock*

The word “balance” appears regularly in accounts of the poetry of Alexander Pope. Balance is the operative principle of the heroic couplet, with its lines of equal weight paired by rhyme but often set off conceptually by antithesis. Geoffrey Tillotson writes: “the most important characteristic of Pope’s versification [is] its skill in effects of balance.”<sup>1</sup> A tension of union in opposition is also essential to the structure of the individual line: the caesura creates two half-lines in a balance often rendered problematic by varying syllabic weight and antithetical or contrasting meaning. We find this kind of tense balance in a couplet from *The Essay on Man*:

Created half to rise, and half to fall:  
Great Lord of all things, yet a prey to all. (II, 14-15)<sup>2</sup>

The creature of the first line is the lord of all things in the second; the caesura in the first line distinguishes the part of man that will rise from that which will fall, giving less syllabic weight to fallen man. In the second line man as lord of all and prey to all is joined and distinguished, with each aspect given an equal amount of syllables. There is not a perfect balance but rather a felt sense of a difficult balancing.

This structural balancing suits Pope’s theme of human nature, seen in *The Essay on Man* as a balance of opposites. Man is a being who “hangs between”:

Plac’d on this isthmus of a middle state,  
A being darkly wise and rudely great. . . . (II, 3-4)

Further, when he chides man for his proud and foolish dissatisfaction with God’s creation, Pope introduces the *image* of a balance:

Go, wiser thou! and in thy scale of sense  
Weigh thy Opinion against Providence. (I, 113-114)

Such reiteration or mirroring by imagery of the structural and thematic sense of balance is the central concern of this study of *The Rape of the Lock*.

Pope's comic epic combines admiration of a small society with satire of it and presents ridiculous behavior in the heroic language of epic.

What dire Offence from am'rous Causes springs,  
What mighty Contests rise from trivial Things. . . . (I, 1-2)

With this set of antitheses Pope announces his double theme: love and war opposed to one another in verses joined by the logical link of "Offence" to "Contests." The half-lines are nearly equal in weight but antithetically yoke "dire" and "am'rous" and "mighty" and "trivial." The opening couplet sets a pattern for a poem whose themes and structure are founded on a delicate balance sustained by irony. My concern in this essay is to examine a pattern of images of balance through the poem, including the overall shape of the poem's narrative. This will make possible a new reading of the poem that emphasizes its reflexive nature, making a theme of the process of reading, and sees the poem, like Belinda at her glass, regarding itself as an ingenious construct of words.

To begin, I will review the critical work that has been done on the dynamics of balance in *The Rape of the Lock*. I will then show what I mean to add to this body of work.

## I. A Delicate Balance

Cleanth Brooks in "The Case of Miss Arabella Fermor" sees Belinda as vain, silly and flirtatious and also beautiful, charming and well-bred. The conventions of her society are a facade for a mating ritual; but Pope delights in the elaborate social game they make possible. Brooks makes clear that Pope was fully aware of the sexual undertones of his poem—the *double-entendres* and suggestive images, yet "we are not forced to take the poem as either sly bawdry or as delightful fancy." It is not a case of either/or but of both/and. He describes the poem's form as "the delicate balance and reconciliation of a host of partial interpretations and attitudes."<sup>3</sup>

Austin Warren carries on this line of analysis when he points out that zeugma, "the joining of two unlike objects governed by a single verb"—as in "stain her Honour or her new Brocade" (II, 107)—"gives

the tone to the whole." The mock epic also depends on balance in that "it plays form against matter," and the poem as a whole "is in nothing more dextrous than in its controlled juxtaposition of worlds."<sup>4</sup> G. Wilson Knight also points to zeugma and to caesura as ways "contrasts are neatly balanced in one line" and so help attain the poem's thematic "balancing of flirtation and religion" in a poetic medium which "attains a perfect poise of relaxation and control."<sup>5</sup>

Murray Krieger reiterates Brooks's point on Belinda's world being treated with a "two-way irony that admires even as it patronizes" and echoes Warren on "the double-edged nature of the mock-heroic."<sup>6</sup> In the introduction to his edition of the poem, J.S. Cunningham follows Brooks on the combination of mockery and celebration of Belinda's world and follows Warren on the subtle intertwining of the heroic and the trivial. He adds a significant point, however, in remarking on "the morality of grace and balance" expressed in Clarissa's speech in Canto V, drawing attention to an ethical dimension to the poem's dynamics of balance.<sup>7</sup>

More recently, John A. Jones declares: "Although balance is Pope's favorite structure in his earlier poems, it works in none of them with the ravier effects flashed in *The Rape of the Lock*." He goes on to explore the "ironic equations" of the poem's couplets.<sup>8</sup> Patricia Meyer Spacks focuses on Pope's images which she finds "display an intricate balance of oppositions, an awareness of contradictory values and of the possibility of their harmonious existence." She treats *The Rape of the Lock* only briefly, but shows how it expresses Belinda's "psychic landscape" and the "arbitrary repression" which is the "emotional foundation of this society." She sees a balancing effect in the poem's overall structure; commenting on R. K. Root's idea that the first half of the poem deals with lack of good sense and the second half with lack of humor, she writes: "both lacks involve the presence of their opposites." In the poem's ending, she sees Belinda achieving a kind of "transcendence through the distancing and heightening of art."<sup>9</sup>

In the dialectical sense of balance that Spacks describes, one's sense of the ending is important. Is the poem finally balanced? Is the "central problem" which she sees as moral and aesthetic control resolved by a final image of order? These questions will be taken up by the present study, as they have been by other recent readers of the poem.

David Fairer sees Pope's main concern in *The Rape of the Lock* as the paradoxical nature of imagination which is "the source of Belinda's coquetry and her prudery" and the role of judgment in controlling the dangerous imagination. The sylphs, for him, are images of the uncon-

trolled imagination based in the ephemerality of visual impressions. Image production is uncontrolled in Belinda, yet, rather than impose moral values, Pope seeks to express the mind of Belinda in all its self-delusion and paradox. The tension and antitheses of the poem reflect the nature of the imagination as Pope sees it. The Cave of Spleen and the gnomes express the nightmare pole of the imagination. Belinda can go from one extreme to the other—from bewitching pleasant images to horrific ones, but she “cannot break out of her imagination.” This is what Clarissa demands of her: maturity, judgment, discrimination in the control of images. Yet Fairer notes that “Pope ends the poem with a fancy of his own by which the lock is awarded its final metamorphosis.”<sup>10</sup>

Since he sees judgment and order as predominant in Pope’s vision, Fairer sees this paradoxical ending as “detachable” and substitutes one he chooses from a letter of Pope’s to Arabella Fermor on the occasion of her marriage. As her title indicates Rebecca Ferguson, in *The Unbalanced Mind*, finds no such final balance of control. She is interested in the theme of passion and sees fear, anger and pride among “a complex of other passions” at work in *The Rape of the Lock*. She agrees with Fairer on fancy’s antagonism to morality: “. . . with the free play of fancy comes the dissolution of the tenuous moral codes at play in the *Rape*”; but she differs with him on the sense of the poem’s ending. “Clarissa’s invocation of ‘Sense’ is inadequate to resolve” what Ferguson calls “the dissonance at the center of the poem.” She sees the apotheosis of the lock as “an elaborate heroic fiction” which suspends Clarissa’s call for truth and leaves as a final impression the attractiveness of the lack of self-consciousness in Belinda and her society.<sup>11</sup> Essentially, Fairer sees the poem ending on the note of reasoned control and Ferguson sees it end with passion predominant.

Ferguson points out that the poem ends with an invitation for Belinda to indulge her wayward imagination. As Fairer himself writes, the poem ends in “the realm of the imagination rather than truth.” For all its effects of balancing, the poem ends spotlighting imbalance as the lock, emblem of the power of the imagination to distort reality, becomes extravagantly important.

However, the poem can be said to end with a classic image of closure, a sunset, which recalls, while decidedly altering, the troubling image of Belinda as the sun of her world, foresees the death of the protagonist, and reiterates the sobering words of Clarissa:

When those fair Suns shall sett, as sett they must,  
And all those Tresses shall be laid in Dust . . . (V, 147-148)

The sense of an ending that can cause such balancing acts in critics remains an open question.

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What has gone unmentioned in all these accounts of the “delicate balance” of *The Rape of the Lock* are the physical images of balance within the poem, such as Jove’s scales:

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. (V, 71-74)

This balancing of the wits and the hairs, with its simultaneous rising and falling, recalls a passage early in the poem which expresses the relationship of prudery to coquetry, the intrinsically connected extremes of Belinda’s experience:

The graver Prude sinks downward to a *Gnome*,  
In search of Mischief still on Earth to roam.  
The light Coquettes in *Sylphs* aloft repair,  
And sport and flutter in the Fields of Air. (I, 63-66)

Similar images define a motif which adds another dimension to the poem’s thematic and formal dynamics of balancing. They highlight and comment upon the “delicate balance” of the poem’s form as seen by Brooks and subsequent critics. Visual as they are, they constitute an interpretive lens within the work through which to view its balancing effects to best advantage.

Seen through this intrinsic lens, the balance of the poem involves its dialectical opposite, imbalance. The addition of an imagery of form to a poem seen to hold an equipoise of form and content tilts the scale in favor of form. *The Rape of the Lock* expresses an infinite regress of images of its own surface, like two mirrors facing one another. There is no end to the beam’s doubtful nodding; the poem’s overdetermined form creates a lack of form, for it is impossible to fix its bounds.

## II. Image as Poem

Studying the imagery of form in *The Rape of the Lock* makes it clear that Pope was aware of a specific theme of balance in the poem, and that this theme reflects/is reflected in the poem’s structures. The poem has a thematics of form. At first glance, this motif creates a more

inclusive unity. However, as we look closely at these images of form, they bring about an imbalance in the poem which subverts its formal unity.

Such an image appears at the centre of the dramatic action in the instrument of the rape (and, as Fairer shows, of truth over imagination). The scissors do, in physical terms, what the couplet, the half-lines and figures like zeugma do in terms of poetic structure. They connect and separate, unite and diversify at once:

The Peer now spreads the glitt'ring *Forfex* wide,  
T'inclose the Lock; now joins it, to divide. (III, 147-148)

This couplet is just such an interacting dual unit as the scissors. The opening up of the first verse is set against the enclosing of the first half-line of the second verse, while they are joined by the sequence of causation. The syntax of the second half of the second verse echoes that of the line and a half that precede it and has the same paradoxical cause and effect in its verbs. The verses are joined by rhyme but narrate the Baron's aggression against the lock.

The reversing-mirror effects of language here and the reversals of perspective they bring about are rendered more complex by the fact that they reflect the operation of the poetics; "joins . . . to divide" is what the couplet and the caesuras do here. This is an example of what I call Pope's imagery of form. I will return to this passage later in the essay.

The mirror of my analytical metaphor has a counterpart in the poem. The first of a series of images of form in *The Rape of the Lock* is Belinda's face-to-face encounter with her reflection in the mirror of her dressing table. Again it is a matter of a matching pair opposite one another in an unstable interaction. Reflexivity itself is represented in this scene of image-making, as Belinda puts on her make-up and jewelry and does her hair. Balancing here takes the form of an effort to align Belinda's features with a disembodied image of beauty which exists properly in the eyes of her admirers. The lady and her maid work to match Belinda's appearance with that ideal imaginary other:

A heav'nly Image in the Glass appears,  
To that she bends, to that her Eyes she rears  
Th'inferior Priestess, at her Altar's side,  
Trembling, begins the sacred Rites of Pride. (I, 125-128)

Belinda's goddess is a merely physical phenomenon of light; her altar of ideal beauty sanctifies objects. A concentration of images of things

draws the reader's attention to the poem's glittering surface made up of jewels, combs and pins in "shining Rows, / Puffs, Powders, Patches, Bibles, Billet-doux" (I, 137-138).

The scene is made up of the reflective surface of the mirror, the surfaces of objects and the representational surfaces of verbal constructs and of Belinda's face which seeks to imitate its own reflection. It is emblematic of the world of the poem where Bibles go with love letters and both with facial decorations and where "Nymphs . . . too conscious of their Face" treat honor as a purely visual phenomenon. In his prefatory letter to Arabella Fermor, Pope tells her "the Character of *Belinda* . . . resembles You in nothing but in Beauty." But this flattering disclaimer rather includes than excludes Arabella from the satire, since beauty is all to Belinda. As the poem is an artificial reflection of the world of Arabella, so Belinda's approach to the Platonic form of fashionable beauty is by way of artifice:

Now awful Beauty puts on all its Arms;  
The Fair each moment rises in her Charms,  
Repairs her Smiles, awakens every Grace,  
And calls forth all the Wonders of her Face;  
Sees by Degrees a purer Blush arise,  
And keener Lightnings quicken in her Eyes. (I, 139-144)

The balance in this scene is between the "real" woman and her image which, in common sense terms, is just a reflection of light in a mirror but in Belinda's world (the poem's imaginary world) is the ultimate reality. The image is "awful Beauty" putting on "all its Arms"; the "Fair" attempts to rise to its level of grace, wonder and purity. The reflection, paradoxically, determines the appearance of its original. Described in epic terms the image presents the heroic world to which Belinda and her friends correspond in an uneasy balance of comic disproportion. On the other hand, considering the dedicatory preface, the double/image may be taken as Arabella, Belinda's beautiful original, whom she seeks through image-matching to resemble. The reflection in this case is the self as an image of the other. This is, in Lacan's phrase, the mirror stage of Belinda's experience; she is seen as self-alienated, as a rival to herself. Like an artist working in reverse, she works at copying an image; and so is herself like a mirror facing a mirror, creating a succession of imaged frames of reference (Narcissus, Achilles, Arabella, painting, psychology, fashion, optics, poetry, and so on). The scene as a whole is an image of form, of how the poem works.

There are many reflections of this reflexive image balancing in the poem. The scene at the altar of beauty has a counterpart in Canto II when the Baron worships at an altar "to Love." The Baron's shrine is made of sleazy facsimiles of that emotion,

Of twelve vast *French* Romances, neatly gilt.  
There lay three Garters, half a Pair of Gloves;  
And all the Trophies of his former Loves.  
With tender *Billet-doux* he lights the Pyre,  
And breathes three am'rous Sighs to raise the Fire. (II, 38-42)

This is an altar not so much to love as to signs or representations of love. The equivalent today might be an altar built of Harlequin romances. Images of objects are prominent. The greater number of these objects, building on the example of the Bible and love letters of Belinda's altar, are printed collections of words. Like Belinda gazing into the mirror, the Baron has looked to the pages of novels to discover his ideal image of love. *The Rape of the Lock* is also made up of words which create images to represent a love affair, but this similarity is counterbalanced by the poem's attitude of irony towards these other sign systems.

In his prayers the baron asks to capture not Belinda's heart but her lock—another trophy, an external decoration of that fascinating face. Belinda's locks seen together form another image of balance, but their symmetrical beauty conceals a devious web-like trap:

This Nymph, to the Destruction of Mankind,  
Nourish'd two Locks, which graceful hung behind  
In equal Curls, and well conspir'd to deck  
With shining Ringlets the smooth Iv'ry Neck.  
Love in these Labyrinths his Slaves detains,  
And mighty Hearts are held in slender Chains. (II, 19-24)

The locks conspire to create a predatory beauty. Like "those Eyes that must eclipse the Day" (I, 14), they are a pair united in rivalry with a third term, in this case, mankind. The pairing and opposing of images reflects the structure of balance and antithesis in the verse, as we saw above in the scissors couplet. The process of metaphor and epic allusion in this passage effects another sort of balancing. The word "Labyrinths" matches Belinda's hair to the site of sacrifice of Athenian youths to the Minotaur. If we follow this thread far enough (the line "And Beauty draws us with a single Hair" [II, 28] guides us on our way), we recall that Theseus conquers the Cretan maze and its monster with the help of Ariadne's thread and that he later betrays the woman



for her trouble. The reader sees as an image behind the paired association the ultimate doom of Belinda's vanity, much as Ariel sees "some dread Event impend" "In the clear Mirror" of Belinda's "ruling *Star*" (I, 108-109).

This verse paragraph draws the reader's attention to the delicate balance of tenor and vehicle in metaphor. The locks become successively labyrinths, chains, snares, nets or fishing lines. This over-extension of metaphor emphasizes the artificiality of the poetry, while also revealing naturalistically the essential factor of sexuality within the mirror of the poem's surface.

The locks which by their balanced matching form labyrinths recall the image applied earlier to Belinda's social life. She is guided "thro' mystick Mazes" (I, 92) by the sylphs, who use a system of behavior modification based on counterbalancing one attraction against another:

What tender Maid but must a Victim fall  
To one Man's Treat, but for another's Ball?  
When *Florio* speaks, what Virgin could withstand,  
If gentle *Damon* did not squeeze her Hand? (I, 95-98)

As with all the balancings of the poem, this system depends on equal but opposed forces exerted on a point of equilibrium (in this case, Belinda's affections). Also as usual, this balancing of elements in the poem's plot turns quickly into an imaging of its form. The sylph's technique of control is summed up in a couplet which overextends the balancing of Pope's versification as the labyrinth to fishing-line passage overextends metaphor: "Where Wigs with Wigs, with Sword-knots Sword-knots strive, / Beaus banish Beaus, and Coaches Coaches drive" (I, 101-102). The natural balance of the couplet which may be doubled, as here, by strong caesuras is quadrupled as each half-line is split again by identical nouns pivoting on a single verb, an eight-part complex of syntactical balance.

In its overdetermination of balanced pairs this couplet becomes itself an image of the poem's form. Images of balance abound in the poem, and they not only repeat but intersect—at times, even bisect—each other. Thus the balance of the pair of locks is destroyed when the balanced action of the scissors "joins . . . to divide," and this action separates Belinda's face from the ideal image of beauty she matched with her make-up in the mirror scene. Her appearance then becomes uncouth, and the sexuality which is the real source of danger in the locks surfaces in the laments of Thalestris and Belinda over the rape of the lock.

With the loss of one lock, Belinda's appearance of balance is gone, and it is a balance of appearances that a coquette must maintain. Thalestris says women will sacrifice their virtue to keep their honor, and Belinda echoes this sentiment in her famous *double-entendre*:

The Sister-Lock now sits uncouth, alone,  
And in its Fellow's Fate foresees its own;

\* \* \*

Oh hadst thou, Cruel! been content to seize  
Hairs less in sight, or any Hairs but these! (IV, 171-176)

The remaining lock sees its fate mirrored in that of the cut lock. The hairs of "honour," of one's social image, are now set off against those "hairs less in sight," the hidden but powerful force of sexuality in the poem.

Following this pattern of surface and hidden hairs, the mock battle of the game of cards in Canto III has its counterpart in Canto IV's open battle of the sexes. Whereas sexual attraction and aggression are sublimated in the formal rules of Ombre (a shadow of their actual self) in the former, sexual and combative aggression coalesce in the latter:

When bold Sir *Plume* had drawn *Clarissa* down,  
*Chloe* stept in, and kill'd him with a Frown. . . . (V, 67-68)

Nor fear'd the Chief th' unequal Fight to try,  
Who sought no more than on his Foe to die. (V, 77-78)

As these passages reveal, it is going too far to say that sex surfaces in the poem; it still lies buried in metaphors, often hackneyed metaphors derived from fictional accounts of love. The reader is never allowed to forget the literary nature of what transpires in the poem: "A *Beau* and *Willing* perish'd in the Throng, / One dy'd in *Metaphor*, and one in *Song*" (V, 59-60). The artifice of dying as a figure for sex is doubled by having it occur in metaphor and song which occurs, like a *mise-en-abyme*, within the metaphorical frame of this poem. Even in its counterpoise of sexual desire and social image the poem brings the reader back to signs of signs and thus to images of itself as a construct of language.

Like the Baron's altar, the poem's account of love focuses on linguistic artifacts about love; it is always overtly mediated by words, as when Belinda's "Eyes first open'd on a *Billet-doux*" (I, 118). Love is always seen as letter, as book, as metaphor, as poetic devices; the focus is always on the sign rather than on that which it represents. Murray

Krieger has argued that the whole poem is based on the trope of metonymy; mistaking the lock for the lady's body.<sup>12</sup>

The lock is presented manifestly as a signifier, and one which constantly alters its relationship to its signified. We see this in the passage in Canto II when it signifies successively labyrinths, chains, traps, nets or fishing-lines and also a line of vision like a rope: "And Beauty draws us with a single Hair" (II, 28). To the Baron, the lock is another trophy of love: "The long-contended Honours of her Head" (IV, 140). It is also Belinda's honour in Thalestris's sense of appearance / reputation, ". . . at whose unrival'd Shrine, / Ease, Pleasure, Virtue, All, our Sex resign" (IV, 105-106). It is in short an image of image. It embodies Belinda's "Image," the goddess of the mirror; and, as I will argue below, it comes to represent the poem itself, in keeping with the self-reflexive nature of the imagery of form.

### III. Poem As Image

Canto III is the point of balance of the poem as a whole, the pivot on which the narrative action turns. As usual in *The Rape of the Lock*, this fact of narrative form is expressed as an image. The poem is divided and joined here as the lock itself is divided by the joining blades of the "glitt'ring *Forfex*":

The meeting Points the sacred Hair dis sever  
From the fair Head, for ever and for ever! (III, 153-154)

The lock which had represented the power of the coquette over men separates from the lady and becomes a signifier without a definite signified. Belinda too is divided from her self, like the sylph momentarily cut in half trying to protect the lock. She loses the coquette and takes on the prude. The final two cantos tell the story of Belinda's behavior in her new character but are as much (or more) concerned with the lock's adventures in search of a new signified.

Canto IV introduces the machinery of prudery in counterpoint to the machinery of coquetry which dominates the poem before Canto III. The "lucid Squadrons" of sylphs with "Bodies half dissolv'd in Light" (II, 62) and dressed in "Thin glitt'ring Textures of the filmy Dew; / Dipt in the richest Tincture of the Skies" (II, 64-65) give way to the gnomes led by "*Umbriel*, a dusky, melancholy Spright, / As ever sully'd the fair face of Light" (IV, 13-14). What was a world of light—of a "radiant lock," mirrors, crystal, silver and other things described as shining, lucid, glowing, golden, gilt, sparkling, refulgent

and bright—becomes the dark underworld of “the gloomy Cave of Spleen.” The atmosphere of Canto IV, Belinda’s world after her fall, is that of this dismal, sullen grotto, “screen’d in Shades from Day’s detested Glare” (IV, 22).

Canto III, the point of transition, is in itself a balance of light and dark. Along with the “shining train” of the band of soldiers/hand of cards, the “shining Altars of Japan” and the “glitt’ring *Forfex*” with its “shining Case,” there are intermingled the “Sable *Matadores*,” the “swarthy *Moors*,” the “*Club’s* black Tyrant” and “*Africk’s* Sable Sons” — all following ominously Belinda’s perverse version of the *Lux Fiat*: “*Let Spades be Trumps!* she said, and Trumps they were” (III, 46). The name of the card game Ombre foreshadows the name of the gnome who will take an interest in Belinda’s fate in Cantos IV and V. Shadows are appropriate, since the day which makes up the poem’s time scheme is in decline. Up until this point, the only time reference has been to noon—“And sleepless Lovers, just at Twelve, awake . . .” (I, 16); now the rising sun, repeatedly compared to Belinda’s eyes, begins to set:

Mean while declining from the Noon of Day,  
The Sun obliquely shoots his burning Ray;  
The hungry Judges soon the Sentence sign,  
And Wretches hang that Jury-men may Dine. . . . (III, 19-22)

At the same time, the reader is given a glimpse of the darker side of early eighteenth-century London life, behind the glittering facade of Belinda’s social sphere.

Canto III is pivotal in another sense. The poem has an overall balance between visual and audial dramatic effects. When Ariel says the sylphs protect coquettes from “the Glance by Day, the Whisper in the Dark” (I, 74), his neat antithesis indicates another way balance is imaged in the narrative structure. The first two cantos are predominantly visual—emphasizing looks, eyes and gleaming surfaces. The only words spoken are Ariel’s. The human characters act as if in a silent pageant, moving ceremoniously in seemingly preordained patterns.

The first hint of human speech in the poem is Belinda’s shout of triumph after the game of Ombre (III, 99-100), reported in indirect discourse. The first quoted words are those of the Baron’s victory speech when he cuts the lock (III, 161-178). From this point on vocal rather than visual effects predominate; in fact, there is a confusion of tongues. Thalestris, Sir Plume and Belinda have speeches in Canto IV,

the latter concluding, in the epic manner, with the opening words of Canto V: "She said." Her beauty was sufficient before; now Belinda is reduced to the vulgarity of speech. In Canto V we hear Clarissa's speech, its heavy morality contrasting with the airy mood of coquetry, and also the quoted words of Thalestris, Dapperwit, Sir Fopling, the Baron and the resounding cry of Belinda, "Restore the Lock."

The poem as a whole creates an image of balance—of matched pairs set in opposition. In the bright visual first half of the poem there are two altar scenes: Belinda at her mirror and the Baron at his Shrine of French romances. The second half of the poem also has two altars: the throne of Spleen where Umbriel makes his "Pray'r" for the means to disrupt Belinda's domain and the "unrival'd Shrine" of honor where Thalestris says ladies give up "Ease, Pleasure, Virtue, All" (IV, 105-106), as the Baron sacrificed his souvenirs on the altar of love. Umbriel's prayer is answered with Spleen's gift of a bag containing "the Force of Female Lungs, / . . . and the War of Tongues" (IV, 83-84), of which Thalestris's long, echoing speech containing the reference to honor's shrine is an example.

There is a fifth altar scene which occurs between the contrasted pairs discussed above. In fact, it occurs at the precise midpoint of the poem (ll. 396-403 of a total of 794 lines) and opens the scene in which the lock is cut:

For lo! the Board with Cups and Spoons is crown'd,  
The Berries crackle, and the Mill turns round.  
On shining Altars of *Japan* they raise  
The silver Lamp: the fiery Spirits blaze.  
From silver Spouts the grateful Liquors glide,  
While *China's* Earth receives the smoking Tyde.  
At once they gratify their Scent and Taste,  
And frequent Cups prolong the rich Repast. (III, 105-112)

Unlike the other scenes in the motif, which involve prayer or petition, this is a mock communion. The characters gather around this altar to share the pleasures of coffee-drinking. This gathering together affords the Baron his opportunity to act, and the effect of the stimulant inspires his action. This altar scene occurs at the turning point of the poem's action and the balance point of its structure.

Like the first altar in the poem, Belinda's vanity table, the "Altars of *Japan*" display shining objects and present the communicant with a reflective surface. The verbal focus in the passage is the word for this surface, Japan. The balance between image and woman in the sacred rites of pride becomes the balance between the literal and figurative

meanings of a word in the sacred rites of coffee. Japan means lacquer but also names a country, so the altar becomes at once a coffee service and a vast land area inundated by the sea. The reader's awareness is drawn away from the dramatic action to the balancing act of meanings within a single word.

The insistent presence of zeugma in Canto III further highlights its status as a point of balance. This device, based on an unstable balance of two contrasting subjects or objects, appears more frequently in Canto III than in all the rest of the poem. The first verse paragraph has statesmen predicting the fall "Of Foreign Tyrants, and of Nymphs at home" and Queen Anne taking counsel and tea. At the crisis of the card game Belinda feels herself "Just in the Jaws of Ruin, and *Codille*" (III, 92); and, losing her lock, she screams as loud as ladies do "When Husbands or when Lap-dogs breathe their last" (III, 158). The Baron says the glory of his victory will last,

While Fish in Streams, or Birds delight in Air,  
Or in a Coach and Six the *British Fair*. . . (III, 163-164)

This last marks the point of overdetermination of the trope. Three subjects rather than two are balanced on the fulcrum of the verb. Only the combined values of water and air as elements of life can equal the importance of a coach and six to a young coquette.

Another aspect of this insistent counterpoise of images centred on Canto III is the pattern of rising and falling. In the first two cantos Belinda's course, like the sun's, is set on rising. After getting up from her bed, she goes to the mirror where she "rises in her Charms" and makes "a purer Blush arise" (I, 140 and 143). She is attended by sylphs who "sport and flutter in the Fields of Air" (I, 66), and appears in a boat on the Thames like the sun when it "rises o'er the purpled Main" (II, 1-4). She arrives at Hampton's "rising Tow'rs" (III, 2), and, having won at Ombre, she "exulting fills with Shouts the Sky" (III, 99).

However, when she "bends her Head" over the coffee and lets the Baron cut her lock, this movement reverses. Her "Screams of Horror" are like those heard "when rich *China Vessels* fal'n from high, / In glitt'ring Dust, and painted Fragments lie!" (III, 159-160). Umbriel goes "Down to the Central Earth" (IV, 15) and returns to find Belinda "Sunk in *Thalestris' Arms* . . . / Her Eyes dejected and her Hair unbound" (IV, 89-90). Thalestris imagines Belinda becoming a "degraded Toast" as the Baron shows off the lock and wishes, "Sooner let Earth, Air, Sea, to *Chaos* fall" (IV, 119). This shift from rising to falling is explicitly connected to the idea of balance in the image of

Jove's scales which decide the battle of men and women and in which, at length, "the Hairs subside" (V, 74).

\* \* \*

The battle between the sexes in Canto V is fought to decide the fate of Belinda's image, worshipped in the mirror scene and now totally invested in the lost lock. In the epic convention, the outcome is decided by the tilting of Jove's scales, the poem's final image of balance:

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. (V, 71-74)

This moment of suspension recalls the point in the game of Ombre when Belinda's fate hung "Just in the Jaws of Ruin, and *Codille*" (III, 92). Then the jaws did not snap shut, but now the weight of death is in the lock and Belinda loses.

Jove's scales with their "doubtful Beam" image again the dynamics of balance found at every level of the poem's form—from a single word to paired words and devices like zeugma and from the double structure of the single line and the couplet to the contrasting image patterns that divide the five cantos. Yet this image differs in one regard from the other images of balance and the structures they reflect; here the balance is tipped. This ungrammaticality in the poem's discourse offers a means of reading its conclusion.

The men's wits, as evidenced by the words of Sir Plume and the others, are lightweight in the extreme. This is one reason why they should "mount up" in the scale; but, in epic convention, this means winning the battle, staying alive. In this light it is appropriate that wits should win over mortal beauty according to the moral put forth by Clarissa:

How vain are all these Glories, all our Pains,  
Unless good Sense preserve what Beauty gains. . . . (V, 15-16)

However, there is another sense in which wits rising is a clue to the poem's outcome. During the second half of the poem the lock gradually slips away from signifying Belinda's image and reappears as an image of the poem itself. It is in this form that it rises in the apotheosis that ends *The Rape of the Lock*.

Canto V recounts the progress of the lock as an image in quest of a new significance. To survive it must incorporate beauty and wit in a

balanced signified. It does this by following the pattern set by the scene at the dressing table, the scissors and Jove's scales: by becoming an image of the poem's form. In the end the poem turns back on itself, like Belinda at the dressing table, to regard itself as a balanced expression of wit and beauty.

The poem ends not by affirming passion or control but in what may be called, in de Man's phrase, an allegory of reading. The lock as Belinda's self-image, as honor in its various guises, falls victim to men's wits; then, by grace of the poet's imagination, it miraculously rises. How to read this metamorphosis? A series of constructs of language and other semiotic systems are offered in comparison. If, as some think, "it mounted to the Lunar Sphere," where the wits of heroes and beaus are given containing form by "pondrous Vases" and "*Snuff-boxes* and *Tweezer-cases*," respectively, then it is like "broken Vows, and Death-bed Alms," and "Lovers' Hearts" seen as *billet-doux*, "with Ends of Riband bound" (V, 113-118). Comparisons are offered with other misleading sign systems, political, religious, sexual, social and scientific:

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 Yoak a Flea;  
Dry'd Butterflies, and Tomes of Casuistry. (V, 119-122)

But the lock is of a different symbolic order, the order of art. As such, it will be read variously by the "*Beau-monde*." "This, the blest Lover shall for *Venus* take," (V, 135), while Partridge will read in it "The Fate of *Louis*, and the Fall of *Rome*" (V, 140). The lock, as poem, becomes "the clear Mirror" of a "ruling Star" for each of its readers, a notion Pope satirizes in his *Key to the Lock*, with its specious allegorical interpretation of the poem.

Read carefully, the poem does not work as a mirror for the reader's self-expression nor for his desire for a finally closed form. The gaze of "quick Poetic Eyes" will focus on a balancing form which reflects on itself in seemingly endless correspondences. The tipping of the scales in favor of wits is balanced by the rising of the lock as an image of form. There is ultimately no end to the beam's doubtful nodding, since the "content" of each dish of the balance is an image of form, as is the scale itself.

The sun sets, but the imagery of light and of rising motion returns to the poem, not in the service of Belinda's image but of the lock in its apotheosis:



But trust the Muse—she saw it upward rise,  
 Tho' mark'd by none but quick Poetic Eyes:  
 (So *Rome's* great Founder to the Heav'ns withdrew,  
 To *Proculus* alone confess'd in view.)  
 A sudden Star, it shot thro' liquid Air,  
 And drew behind a radiant *Trail of Hair*. (V, 123-128)

The poet speaks ostensibly to calm Belinda's anger and to allay her grief, but he also adverts to the words of Clarissa. Physical beauty and youth are transient, so the attractive face cannot long remain the centre of life. However, the lock will endure:

For, after all the Murders of your Eye,  
 When, after Millions slain, your self shall die;  
 When those fair Suns shall sett, as sett they must,  
 And all those Tresses shall be laid in Dust;  
*This Lock*, the Muse shall consecrate to Fame,  
 And mid'st the Stars inscribe *Belinda's* Name! (V, 145-150)

These lines recall a number of passages in Shakespeare's sonnets, among them the ending of Sonnet 18: "So long as men can breathe, or eyes can see / So long lives this, and this gives life to thee." The lock, irrevocably separated from its former owner, becomes an image of the poem's enduring account of that moment in time when "*Belinda* smiled and all the World was gay."

The lock becomes an image of the poem itself. This is why the muse is invoked as witness to the lock's apotheosis and only "quick Poetic Eyes" are able to apprehend its new form. Praise for Belinda, in these final passages, is overbalanced by praise for the lock, and praise for the lock merges unobtrusively with praise by Pope for his own work. This effect is aided by the allusion to the *Metamorphoses* in lines 125-128 of the passage quoted above. After telling how Caesar's soul rose into the sky and "its fiery tail leaving a wide track behind, flashed forth as a star," Ovid compares himself and his poem to this comet:

My work is complete: a work which neither Jove's  
 anger, nor fire nor sword shall destroy, nor yet the  
 gnawing tooth of time. . . . I shall soar, undying, far  
 above the stars, and my name will be imperishable.  
 Wherever Roman power extends . . . people will read  
 my verse. If there be any truth in poets' prophecies,  
 I shall live to all eternity, immortalized by fame.<sup>13</sup>

Pope echoes Ovid's sentiments in his poem, also at the very end of his work. Not Belinda's face but her "name" the muse will "inscribe" in the heavens. Belinda/Arabella should be reconciled to a loss that has meant such a gain for the world.

The replacement of the glory of the lock for Belinda's beauty and the coalescence of praise for the lock and praise for the poem completes a motif of reflexivity present in the imagery of balance throughout the poem. The scissors, the dressing table, the pair of locks and Jove's scales, all serve as visual emblems of the dynamics of Pope's verse which, in its half-lines, couplets and zeugmas works on the principle of opposition paradoxically unified. *The Rape of the Lock* as a whole also swings on a balance, with the central canto as pivot or fulcrum for the turning of the plot—again reflected by transformations in the patterns of imagery.

The reader's experience of the poem is like "the doubtful Beam" of Jove's scales, swaying between the beautiful surface of the imagery and the ingenious facility of the poetics, between a trivial event in early eighteenth-century English Catholic society and its classical analogues, between husbands and lap-dogs, virtue and a flawless appearance. Pope ends with a reiteration of Clarissa's weighty moral words balanced against the momentary beauty of Belinda and her satellites—the doomed subsidence of this system of counterpoised attractions lifted out of the grave by the transforming language of the poet. The lock's weight of mortality is metamorphosed into lasting glory by the consecration of the muse—that is, as language, as name, as inscription.

*The Rape of the Lock* ends regarding its own image (its own process of communication), like Belinda at her mirror. The poem flatters Belinda finally by being like her in that early scene; but, even there, Belinda was acting like the poem acts in its discourse. Arabella Fermor and other readers become part of this discourse by having the "quick Poetic Eyes" that can follow the subtle and manifold balancing effects of Pope's work. To see the dynamics of the imagery of balance as an imagery of form, from the mirror scene to the apotheosis of the lock, is one aspect of the exercise of wit made possible and celebrated by *The Rape of the Lock*.

#### NOTES

1. "On Versification," in *On the Poetry of Pope*, 2nd. ed. (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1950), 105-140; rpt. in *Pope: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. J. V. Guerinot (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1972), 64.
2. The edition of Pope's poems used in all quotations is *The Poems of Alexander Pope*, ed. John Butt (New Haven: Yale UP, 1963).
3. *The Sewanee Review* (Autumn, 1943), 504-524; rpt. in *Essential Articles for the Study of Alexander Pope*, ed. Maynard Mack (Hamden, Conn.: Archon Books, 1968), 247-265.

4. "The Rape of the Lock as Burlesque," ch. 3 of *Rage for Order* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1948), 37-51.
5. *The Poetry of Alexander Pope: Laureate of Peace* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1955; rpt. 1965), 30.
6. "The 'Frail China Jar' and 'The Rude Hand of Chaos,'" *Centennial Review of Arts and Sciences* 5 (1961); 176-194; rpt. in *Essential Articles*, 303.
7. *The Rape of the Lock*, ed. J.S. Cunningham (Oxford UP, 1966; rpt. 1984), 14.
8. *Pope's Couplet Art* (Athens, Ohio: Ohio UP, 1969), 88.
9. *An Argument of Images: The Poetry of Alexander Pope* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard UP, 1971), 229-240.
10. *Pope's Imagination* (Manchester: Manchester UP, 1984), 43-80.
11. *The Unbalanced Mind: Pope and the Rule of Passion* (Brighton: The Harvester Press, 1986), 32-63.
12. *Essential Articles*, 303.
13. *The Metamorphoses of Ovid*, tr. Mary M. Innes (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1955; rpt. 1986), 357.