

Use of the Machinery/Nature & Function of the Sylphs in *The Rape of the Lock*

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“The addition of the sylphs meant grafting wings on to a creature that had been planned for walking only.” This defence of the addition of supernatural machinery to the Second Edition (1714) of *The Rape of the Lock* by Pope was not at all a meaningless claim. Rather, in spite of objections from such formidable well-wishers like Addison, Pope’s Second Edition flew on its wings to a real artistic height. The epic convention of the supernatural machinery involved the gods, goddesses and other supernatural entities taking active part in a human crisis, thus adding a moral grandeur and a sense of wonder to the heroic poem. But in Pope’s hand the machinery of the sylphs and gnomes becomes an important tool of the mock-heroic. Based on the Rosicrucian doctrine of Spirits from the poet’s reading of Abbe de Villars’ *Le Compte de Gabalis*, the machinery in the poem does what de Villars says: ‘teaching to live morally...giving [human beings] most wise and salutary counsels.’ The fantastic race of the sylphs and gnomes makes every trivial incident of the utmost importance and heightens the mockery of the epic.

Sylphs dominate the Canto I and Canto II of the poem and Pope makes marked deviation in their description from the source. de Villars describes the gnomes as friends to men; but in Pope they are mischievous. The exquisite description of the sylphs, too, is different. Only their metamorphosis from human beings to spirits is conventional. Just as the damned souls in hell, as Ariel says to Belinda in her dream, still retain their habits, trivial maids and coquettes carry forward their worthless habit in their life after death. The hot-tempered, the yielding, the 'graver-prude' and the 'light coquettes' transform respectively into Salamanders, Nymphs, Gnomes and Sylphs-the spirits of the elements.

If the gnomes lead the women into troubles by swelling their pride and giving them ambition of 'Garters, Stars and Coronets' and 'Your Grace', the sylphs guide them 'through mystic mazes' Whereas in de Villars the Sylphs are shown as desiring love affairs with human being, in Pope they are allies of women in their endless war with mankind. When a woman shifts 'a moving toyshop of [her] heart' from one lover to another and falls into trouble, the sylphs, Ariel says, help her to get out of it. Actually, the sylphs are the mirror of the foolish customs and manners of the women of that time. Further, the ladies' sense of being protected, in the poem, by their guardian angels gives them a sense of importance and heightens the mock-epic effect.

Pope's power of detailing, too, excels de Villars'. The sensuous beauty of the sylphs echoes the description of angelic powers and their luminescence especially as in Milton's description of Raphael in *Paradise Lost*. The sylphs are shown in canto II as basking and engaged in diversions in their elemental atmosphere, echoing that of the fallen angels in *Paradise Lost*-after their debate in Pandemonium. Some waft on the breeze, some are mixed in the golden cloud of the morning, whereas some are 'Dipt in the richest Tincture of the Skies,' changing the colour of wings. The purple winged Ariel acts their helmsman. They

also have the power to guide the course of mentors, create tempests, mists and rain, and some, the Chief, protect the British Throne with 'Arms Divine'. This far-fetched detailing heightens the mock-heroic effect and shows Pope's power of imagination.

G. Wilson Knight finds out a dramatic quality in the function of the sylphs in the poem. As seen in Ariel's speech to his fellows, he creates dramatic suspense by portending the central disaster. He gives a war-cry to them, to protect Belinda from the confusion. His fear 'Or stain her honour or her new Brocade,' is an exquisite example of bathos. Each sylph is given to look after a chosen item of Belinda's dress and cosmetics, especially the petticoat. Negligence of duty, too, will draw elemental punishment.

Allegorically speaking, the sylphs are the representation of the intricacies of the feminine mind. But the satire, as seen later, ends with a brilliant triumph of the mock-epic: unlike Shakespeare's Ariel, Pope's Ariel fails to protect Belinda's hair and withdraws when he finds an earthly lover lurking in her bosom.