

# Alexander Pope's Biography

- 1688-1744 (Painting of Pope, c. 1727)



# Chronology

- 1700 (age 12): living with retired father on small estate in Windsor Forest. Much reading and writing (perhaps especially because of health difficulties—bone disease left him short in physical stature).
- 1706-11 (18-23 yrs old): a man of literary society at London coffeehouses and taverns. Friends (sort of) with Whig literary figures: Congreve, Steele, Addison, etc.

# Chronology Continued

- 1711 (age 23): wrote *Essay on Criticism*
- 1712/14 (age 24/26): *Rape of the Lock*
- 1712 (age 24): befriends Jonathan Swift
- 1713 (age 25): begins translation of Homer's *Iliad*. (later translates *Odyssey*)

# Note on Religious Context

- Pope is famous for earning his living as a writer: “Because he could not, as a **Roman Catholic**, attend university, vote, or hold public office, he was excluded from the sort of patronage that was bestowed by statesmen on many writers during the reign of [Queen] Anne” (NA 2665).
- Pope’s bookishness as a youth and his gifts as a writer eventually paid off for him.

# Pope's Twickenham Estate

- 1718 (age 30): Five-acre villa with grotto



# Chronology Continued

- 1728: Begins epic satire *The Dunciad*.
- Pope was not shy about mocking others.
  - **“A little learning is a dangerous thing”**:
    - this famous quote from his *Essay on Criticism* exemplifies his attitude in *The Dunciad*.
  - **“fools rush in, where angels fear to tread”** is another quote of his with a similar point.
- He was more of a “cultured” elitist than an egalitarian...

# Literary, Social, & Economic Context

- Pope “disliked and feared . . . tendencies of his time—the **vulgarization of taste** and the arts consequent on the rapid growth of the reading public and the development of journalism, magazines, and other popular and cheap publications, which spread scandal, sensationalism, and political partisanship—in short the **new commercial spirit** of the nation that was corrupting not only the arts but, as Pope saw it, the national life itself” (NA 2666).

- “The reigns of George I and George II appeared to him, as to Swift and other Tories, a period of rapid moral, political, and cultural deterioration. The agents of decay fed on the rise of moneyed (as opposed to landed) wealth . . . and the court party and the corruption of all aspects of the national life by a vulgar class of *nouveaux riches*” (NA 2666-2667).

## **Pope's reactionary stance & traditional values:**

“Pope assumed the role of the champion of traditional values: of right reason, humanistic learning, sound art, good taste, and public virtue” (NA 2667).

# Pope's literary legacy

- Aside from being famous for his satire, Pope is most known for his intricate poetic verse:
- “Pope was a master of style. From first to last, his verse is notable for its rhythmic variety, despite the apparently rigid metrical unit—the heroic couplet—in which he wrote; for the precision of meaning and the harmony (or expressive disharmony) of his language; and for the union of maximum conciseness with maximum complexity” (NA 2667).

# *Rape of the Lock*

- **Mock epic**: The epic is considered to be the grandest literary form.
- Pope takes a trivial topic and treats it in a grand—epic—way, thus blowing things **out of proportion** (Swift does similar things).
- Pope pokes fun at how people can give too much importance to trivial things: “**What mighty contests rise from trivial things**” (line 2).

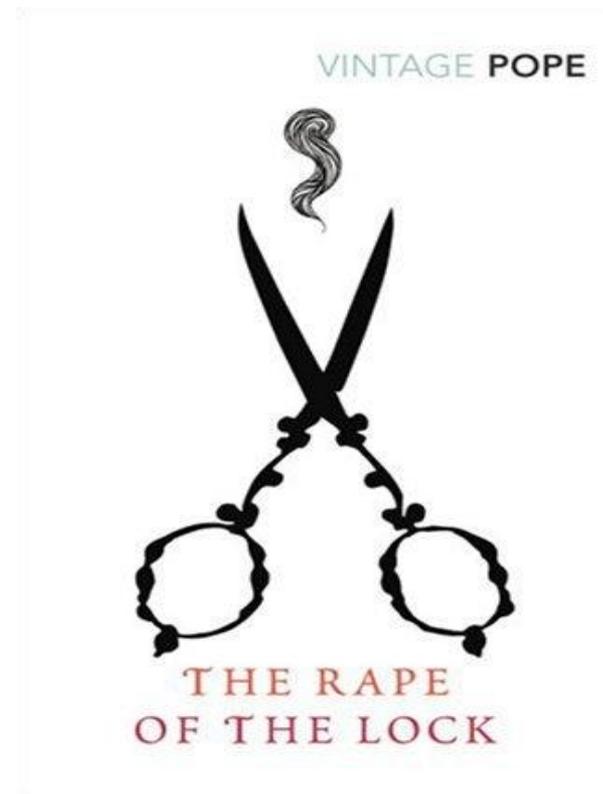
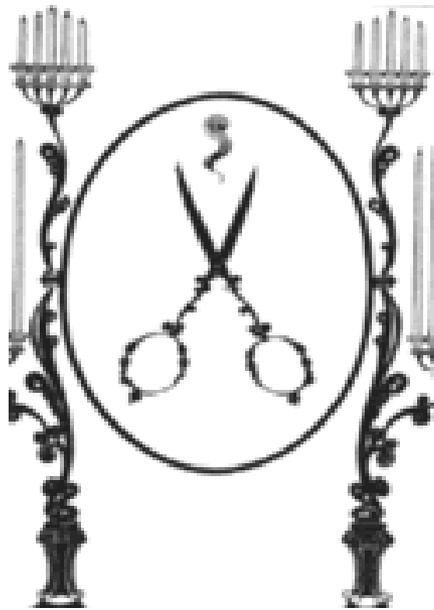
# The Epic Genre

- Famous epics include:
  - Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey*
  - Virgil's *Aeneid*
  - Spenser's *The Faerie Queene*
  - Milton's *Paradise Lost*
  - Wordsworth's *The Prelude*
  - The contemporary *Star Wars* saga

# Characteristics of the Epic

- Epics tend to have these traits: They ...
  - Are long narratives (in many books or parts).
  - Are elevated in language and tone.
  - Are vast in scope (in their setting or topic).
  - Usually center on turning points in history (wars, national origins, religious conflict etc.) & include battles.
  - Usually involve divine intervention.
  - Usually include an invocation to a muse.
  - Tend to begin in the middle (*in medias res*).
  - Usually include long lists

- **Frontispieces for Pope's work help convey the mixing of forms for comedic effect: the trivial quality of the topic is mixed with the high seriousness of an epic (the image is not unlike a coat of arms)**



# Plot / Images

- After the invocation to the muse (1.1-12), a guardian spirit comes to Belinda's bed in the early morning with a warning dream (1.13-114).



**Belinda  
wakes late,  
and looks  
forward to an  
exciting day:  
“Twas then,  
Belinda, if  
report say  
true, / Thy  
eyes first  
opened on a  
billet-doux  
[love letter]”  
(117-18).**



Belinda  
prepares for  
“battle”: She  
“begins the  
sacred rites of  
Pride” (128).  
“Beauty puts on  
all its arms”  
(139)



121 And now, unveil'd, the *Toilet* stands display'd,  
Each Silver Vase in mystic Order laid.  
First, rob'd in White, the Nymph intent adores  
With Head uncover'd, the *Cosmetic* Pow'rs.

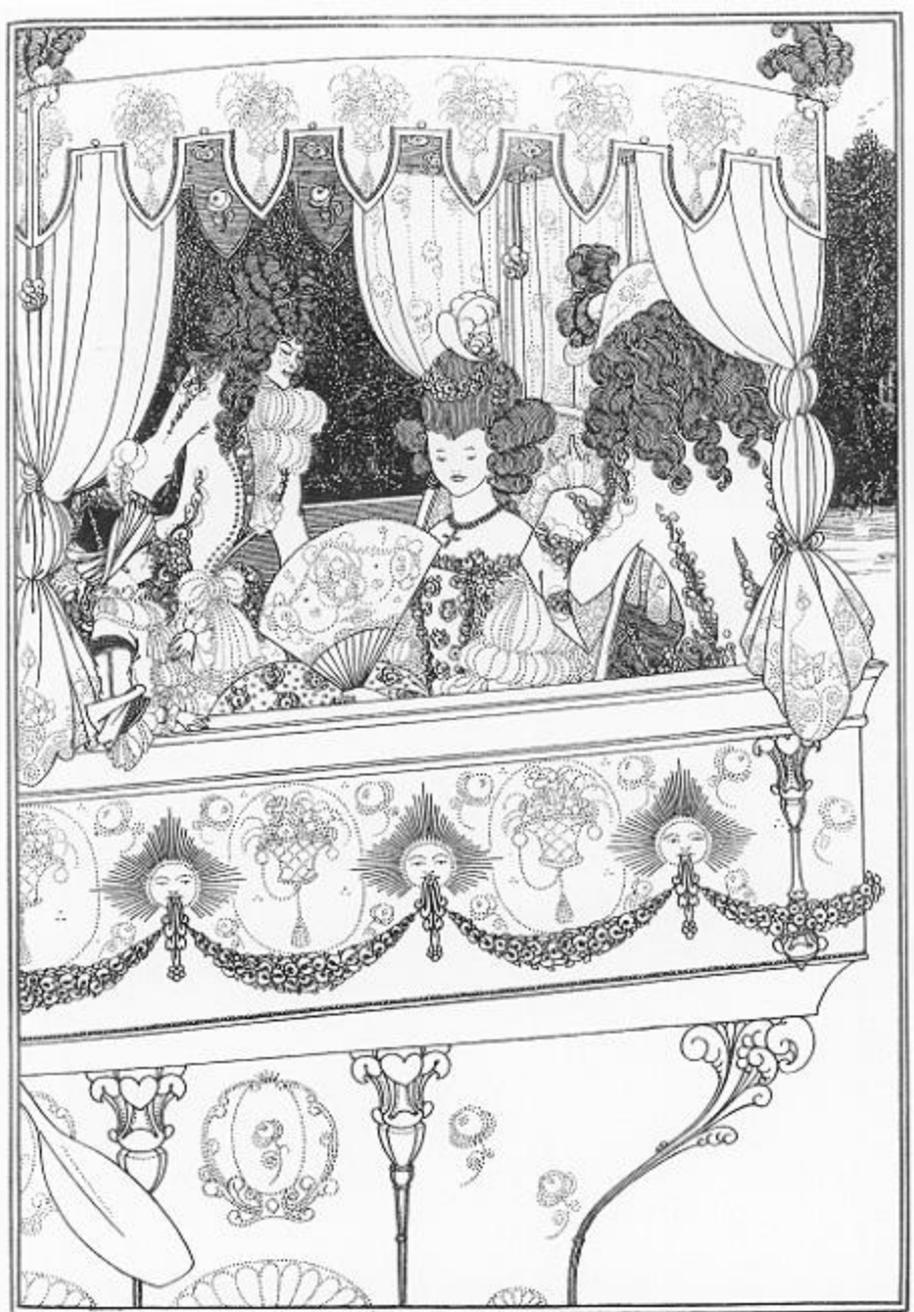
125 A heav'nly Image in the Glass appears,  
To that she bends, to that her Eyes she rears;  
Th' inferior Priestess, at her Altar's side,  
Trembling, begins the sacred Rites of Pride.  
Unnumber'd Treasures ope at once, and here

130 The various Off'rings of the World appear;  
From each she nicely culls with curious Toil,  
And decks the Goddess with the glitt'ring Spoil.  
This casket *India's* glowing Gems unlocks,  
And all *Arabia* breathes from yonder Box.

135 The Tortoise here and Elephant unite,  
Transform'd to *Combs*, the speckled and the white.  
Here Files of Pins extend their shining Rows,  
Puffs, Powders, Patches, Bibles, Billet-doux.  
Now awful Beauty puts on all its Arms;

Headed for Hampton Court (a royal palace about fifteen miles from London), Belinda rides off to her social engagement on a barge down the river Thames (2. 1-18):

“every eye was fixed on her alone” (2.6).



# Hampton Court



This nymph, to the **destruction of mankind**, /  
Nourished two locks (2.19-20)

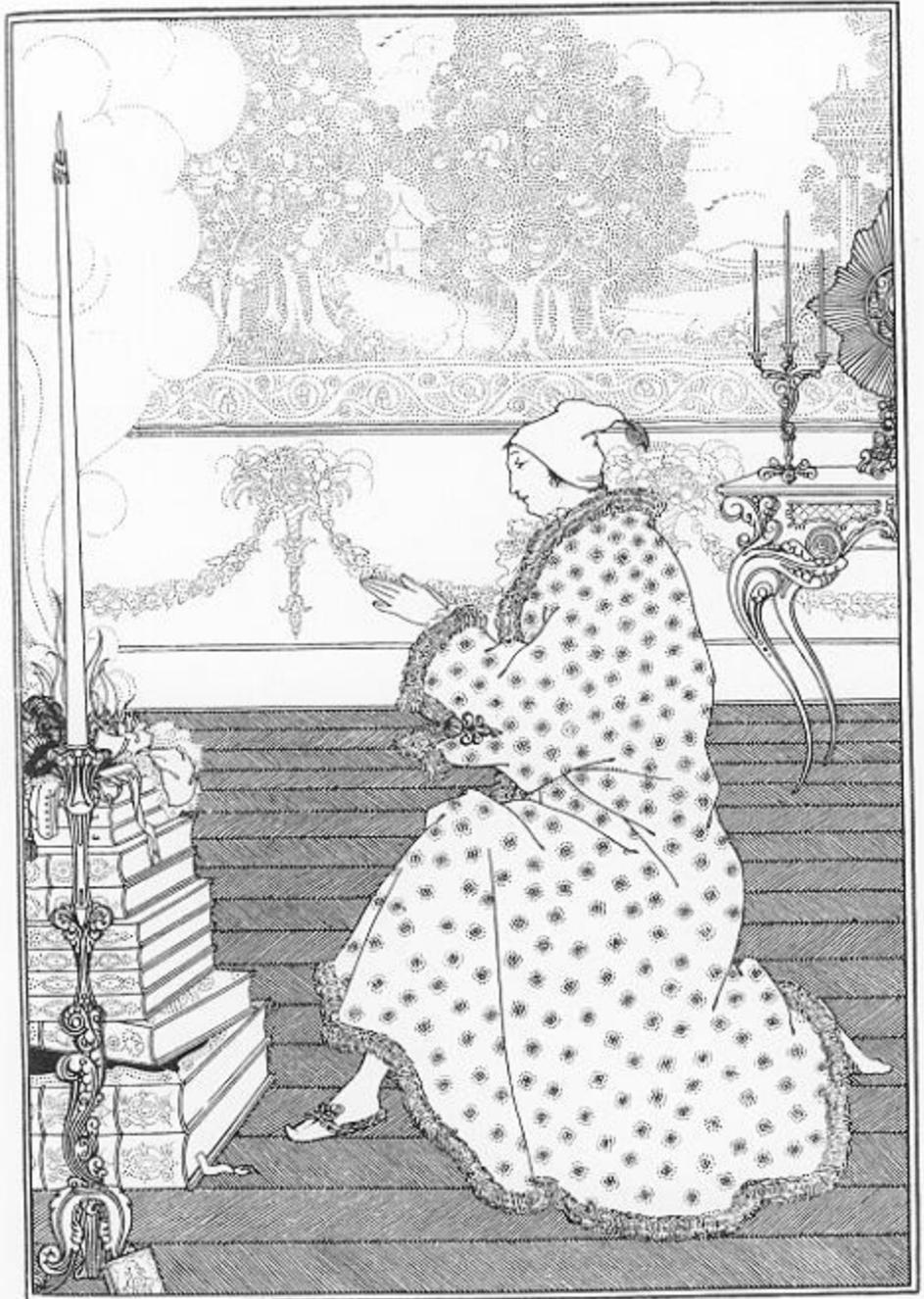
- **The overstated (elevated) quality of Belinda's hair and of Pope's diction is especially evident here:**

With hairy springes [snares] we the birds betray,  
Slight lines of hair surprise the finny prey,  
Fair tresses man's imperial race ensnare,  
And beauty draws us with a single hair (2. 25-28)

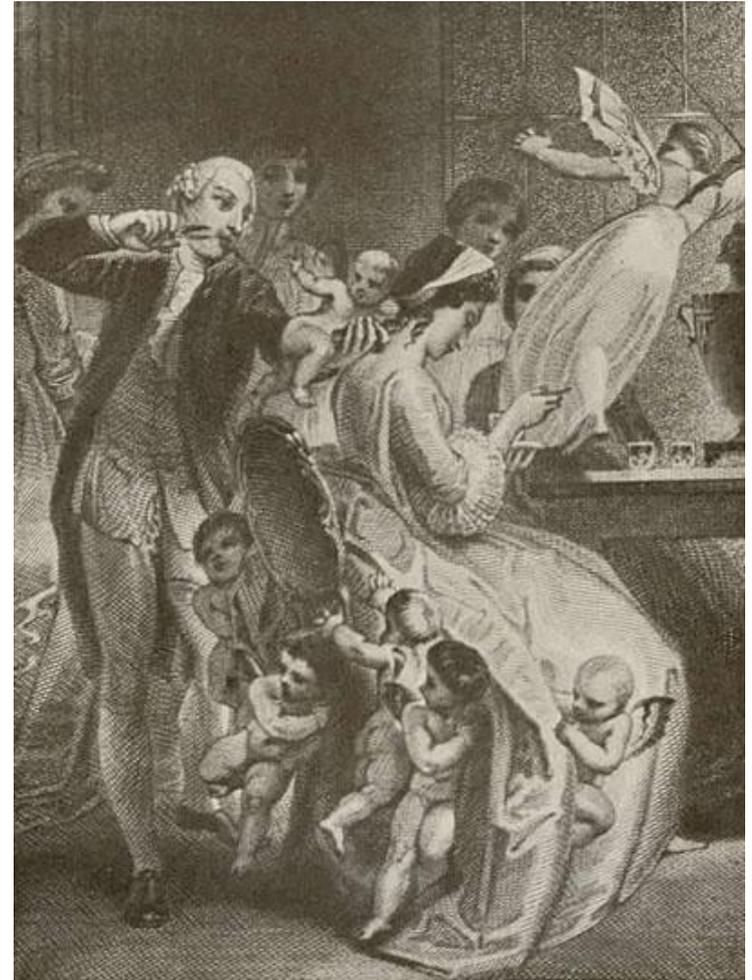
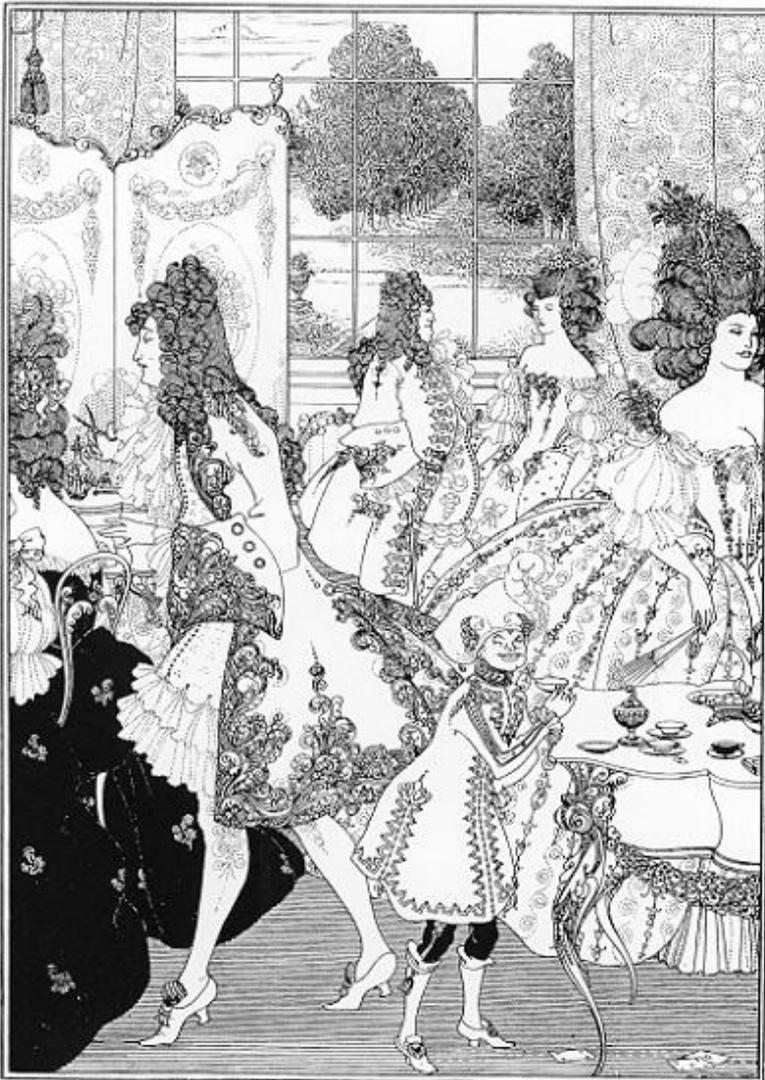
**It's worth noting that Pope's verse (finny prey = fish) is not unlike the Belinda's beauty:**

**elaborate, polished, and "fancy."**

The Baron is so smitten by Belinda and her locks that he prays and creates a sacrificial fire to the heavens (“to Love an altar built” [2.37]) hoping to gain the prize his eyes crave. (2.29-46)



**Belinda's guardian spirits prepare for war (end of canto two) and, after an elaborate description of a card game at Hampton Court (3. 25-100) and some coffee, the rape of the lock occurs.**



THE RAPE OF THE LOCK.

—POPE.

# The Rape of the Lock

- 147 The *Peer* now spreads the glittering *Forfex* wide,  
T' inclose the Lock; now joins it, to divide.  
Ev'n then, before the fatal Engine clos'd,
- 150 A wretched *Sylph* too fondly interpos'd;  
Fate urged the Sheers, and cut the *Sylph* in twain,  
(But Airy Substance soon unites again)  
The meeting Points the sacred Hair dissever  
From the fair Head, for ever and for ever!
- 155 Then flash'd the living Lightnings from her Eyes,  
And Screams of Horror rend th' affrighted Skies.  
Not louder Shrieks to pitying Heav'n are cast,  
When Husbands, or when Lapdogs breath their last,  
Or when rich *China* Vessels, fal'n from high,
- 160 In glitt'ring Dust and painted Fragments lie!

In order to respond to this dishonorable outrage in the fashion of a true 'drama queen,' Belinda is aided by a gnome spirit, Umbriel, who journeys to the underworld—to the cave of spleen—to find Belinda the 'weapons' she needs: a bag of sorrows and a vial of tears (4.81-88).



In Canto 5,  
Clarissa  
moralizes about  
vanity (5.1-34),  
but then a silly  
fight breaks out  
with hairpins as  
daggers, etc.,  
and in all the  
skirmish the lock  
is lost (5.108).  
But the Muse  
suggests it shot  
up like a star,  
now immortal.

