

PART ONE The Rape of the Lock



Virgins visited by angel powers: *The Rape of the Lock*, platonick love, sylphs and some mysticks

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Although nearly all exclaim over the sylph machinery Pope added to *The Rape of the Lock* in 1714, no one has yet given close attention to the suggestions they offer for a reading of the poem, despite the fact that Tillotson long ago provided an elaborate appendix on *The Count of Gabalis*, the seventeenth-century satire on Rosicrucianism on which his machinery was modelled.

Praise for the sylphs has not always been unqualified. At least two critics in Pope's own century had reservations. In his 'Remarks on Mr. Pope's Rape of the Lock', Dennis says, '[W]hat he calls his Machinery has no Manner of Influence upon what he calls his Poem, not in the least promoting, or preventing, or retarding the Action of it.' The Ancients and the Moderns, he says, took their machinery from contemporary religion, but 'the Author of the Rape has not taken his Machines from the Religion of his Country, nor from any Religion, nor from Morality' (p. 337). 'They are Beings so diminutive, that they bear the same Proportion to the rest of the intellectual, that Eels in Vinegar do to the rest of the material world. The latter are only to be seen thro' Microscopes, and the former only thro' the false Optics of a Rosycrucian Understanding' (p. 339). It might be easier to dismiss Dennis if Johnson were not, regretfully, on his side:

Pope is said by an objector not to have been the inventor of this petty nation; a charge which might with more justice been brought against the author of the *Iliad*, who doubtless adopted the religious system of his country . . . Has he not assigned them characters and operations never heard of before? Has he not, at least, given them their first poetical existence?²

Johnson cannot, however, find defence for Dennis' objection

that the machinery is superfluous; that by all the bustle of preternatural operation the main event is neither hastened nor retarded . . . The sylphs cannot be said to help or to oppose, and it must be allowed to imply some want of art that their power has not been sufficiently intermingled with the action. (p. 235)

¹ John Dennis, Works, E. N. Hooker (ed.), 2 vols. (Baltimore, 1939–43), 11, p. 328.

² Samuel Johnson, Lives of the English poets, George Birkbeck Hill (ed.) (New York, 1967), 111, p. 233.



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Dennis and Johnson argue from their considerable knowledge of those dictates of epic experience which insist that machinery, an essential feature, bear some relation by way of amplification to a larger context within an epically rendered society, and that it act.

Tillotson comments:

If [Dennis'] . . . pamphlet had been sound in argument and fact its pedantry would have had its importance . . . Pope had his eye on the rules for epic, and since Dennis was arguing from these rules, his attack was potentially serious. But there are two great flaws in his pamphlet. Dennis fails to see that the poem is not an epic but a mockepic . . . He fails also to see that any new poem must to some extent modify the rules, especially when it is a poem doing several things at the same time – following a given story, satisfying a social occasion, satirizing society as well as epic. Much of his criticism is automatically silenced by reference to these two principles.³

Although Tillotson is right about the pedantry, one wonders about the two principles which are said to silence it. A future translator of Homer and an admirer of Virgil would hardly satirize epic, although he might think, with Spenser and Milton, that one looked for proper epic words for a special epic space and time. There is no reason why a mock-epic (Pope's own description was, more accurately, 'heroi-comical') cannot be highly serious. Chaucer's Nun's Priest tells a tale of a fox, a cock and a hen that is a witty reflection on central questions in fourteenth-century theology and on the *Tales* as a whole. Johnson, who understands the moral implications of the poem better than any other critic, might not himself have been persuaded by Tillotson's reply.

For help with the sylphs we can turn first to Pope's Epistle Dedicatory to the 1714 edition:

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 itself, 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 . . . The Rosicrucians are a People I must bring you acquainted with. The best Account I know of them is in a French Book call'd Le Comte de Gabalis, which both in its Title and Size is so like a Novel, that many of the Fair Sex have read it for one by Mistake. According to these Gentlemen, the four Elements are inhabited by Spirits, which they call Sylphs, Gnomes, Nymphs and Salamanders. The Gnomes or Daemons of Earth, delight in Mischief; but the Sylphs, whose Habitation is in the Air, are the best-condition'd Creatures imaginable. For they say, any Mortals may enjoy the most intimate Familiarities with the gentle Spirits, upon a Condition very easie to all true Adepts, an inviolate Preservtion of Chastity. (pp. 142-3)

The passage is obviously playfully superior; it goes from a witty man to a witless lady, whose quarrel over her lock had created a serious breach in the

 3 TE 11, third edition, p. 393.



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small circle of Roman Catholics to whom unity was so important. But Pope's lecture provides information to which Warburton responds in his note to line 20 of the first canto:

When Mr. Pope had projected to give this Poem its present form, he was obliged to find it with its Machinery, For as the subject of the Epic Poem consists of two parts, the metaphysical and the civil; so this . . . was to have the same division of the subject. And, as the civil part is intentionally debased by the choice of an insignificant action; so should the metaphysical, by the use of some very extravagant system . . . There was but one System in all nature which was to his purpose, the Rosicrusian Philosophy . . . a kind of Theological-Philosophy, made up of almost equal mixtures of Pagan Platonism, Christian Quietism, and the Jewish Cabbala; a composition enough to fright Reason from human commerce. 5

Noting Gabalis as the source, Warburton adds:

But as . . . Mr. P. found several whimsies of a very high mysterious kind, told of the nature of these elementary beings, which were very unfit to come into the machinery of such a sort of poem, he has . . . in their stead, made use of the Legendary stories of Guardian Angels, and the Nursery Tales of the Fairies: which he has artfully accommodated to the rest of the Rosicrucian System. (p. 222n)

A brief (and pointed) account of this theological philosophy as de Villars gives it may place the sylphs more clearly in the total action (or inaction) of the poem.

The Count of Gabalis appears (like an epic muse, a courtesy book writer, or a spiritual director of souls) to introduce a new way of life to a prospective initiate. Since the real order of nature is spiritual and all else appearance, those who aspire to perfection must disengage themselves from the sensual distraction that disturbs celestial rhythms. To restore these, to himself and to mankind, the sage must 'his own Importance know', subdue his passions and become a mirror of heavenly order itself. The uninitiate bind their 'narrow Views to Things below'; they have no intuition about what Pope described in a note of 1751 as 'The Language of the Platonists, the writers of the intelligible world of Spirits' (p. 154n).

The complexities and high mysterious whimsies of the Count's system demand not only a horoscope with Saturn in prime, that is, melancholy, but a life free from carnality. His initiate must be prepared to forgo intercourse, but he is not expected to give up 'marriage'. As his too solid flesh melts, he weds elemental forces, with great wisdom for 'instead of *Women*, whose fading Beauty pass way in a short time, and are followed with horrible Wrinkles and Uglyness, the *Philosophers* enjoy Beauties which never wax old, and whom they

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⁴ Douglas Brooks-Davies, in his *The mercurian monarch: magical politics from Spenser to Pope* (Manchester, 1983), p. 182, sees the importance of the breach but is too extravagant, I think, to say that 'Catholic union [i.e., political union] is the clue to the poem's larger meaning'. That reading both expands and limits the meaning.

⁵ Alexander Pope, Works, William Warburton (ed.) (London, 1751), 1, p. 221n.



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have the glory to make Immortal'.⁶ As Gabalis attempts to lend historical dimension to his system, it looks as if all actions of moral and heroic stature can be attributed to such celestial marriages. Oracles announcing these speak from many places, including odd vessels like drinking glasses and looking glasses (p. 95). They can also appear transformed into domestic animals. I have argued elsewhere that Shock is just such a transformed sprite.⁷

The Count's provisions for a ready and easy way to establish new commonwealths of spirits trouble the candidate and as we read we wonder whether mankind could bear very much of this ideality. Ayres, one of the early English translators, comments cynically on the Cabalist, whom he describes as 'a miserable Blind Creature, fit for a Dog and a Bell; yet in his own Conceit, more seeing than all the World, and best qualifyed for the Office of a Guide: much devoted to idle Traditions; by which crooked Line, he measures *Religion* and *Reason*: A great Hater of *Women*; yet much addicted to Venery, in a Philosophick Way' (de Villars, p. 1).

A Rosicrucian programme for salvation through the power of positive thinking may seem far removed from what happens to Belinda at home and at Hampton Court, but the attitude of mind de Villars describes has an analogy within Mrs Arabella's own experience, and that of the fair sex who are said to have read his book for a novel by mistake. While Pope's epistle suggests that the ladies err through judging *The Count of Gabalis* by the size of its cover, the inner shape of the volume might strike them as consonant with the doctrine they accepted socially. In the seventy-third number of the *Spectator* (24 May 1711), Addison speaks satirically of the homage a lady might expect, by paralleling her place with the status of an idol:

They are to be accosted in the Language proper to the Deity. Life and Death are at their disposal . . . Raptures, Transports, and Extasies are the Rewards which they confer: Sighs and Tears, Prayers and broken Hearts are the Offerings which are paid to them . . . An *Idol* may be Undeified by many accidental Causes. Marriage in particular is a kind of Counter-*Apotheosis*, or a Deification inverted. When a Man becomes familiar with his Goddess, she quickly sinks into a Woman.⁸

As soon as the union of minds transubstantiates, as it were, into body, the idol loses her power to act as a modernized version of the medieval courtly lady.

The attitude Addison satirizes is related to that seventeenth- and eighteenth-century phenomenon which is reminiscent of the conversations in Andreas Capellanus' Art of Courtly Love, the discussion of platonic love. George Sensabaugh has written of the influence of seventeenth-century reflections of this kind on Comus; Kathleen Lynch describes the part they play in the social mode of Restoration comedy, what a later writer calls the comedy of habit.

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⁶ Nicolas Montfauçon de Villars, The Count of Gabalis, trans. Philip Ayres (Amsterdam, 1715), p. 36.

⁷ P. Brückmann, 'Pope's Shock and the Count of Gabalis,' ELN 1 (1964), 261-2.

⁸ Joseph Addison, The Spectator, D. F. Bond (ed.), 5 vols. (Oxford, 1965), 1, pp. 313-15.



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Writing of the 'romantic love' in seventeenth-century French romances, Arthur Johnston associates this attitude with platonic love. In *Un paradis désespéré*, Jacques Ehrmann addresses the pastoral quality of romances like the *Astrée*, but his discussion of their rhetoric illuminates the language of platonic love: En devenant presque uniquement une rhétorique, la passion amoureuse est dissociée du réel. Ce phénomène est évident, non seulement dans *l'Astrée*, mais dans la plupart des romans contemporains où la description de l'amour équivaut presque à la définition de l'amour. But before reflecting on these rhetorical implications, some contemporary description will be useful. John Dunton says:

Platonick Love (or a Tender Friendship between Persons of a different Sex) is not only innocent, but commendable, and as advantageous as delightful: A strict Union of Souls (as Plato asserts) is the Essence of Friendship: Souls have no Sexes, nor while those only are concern'd can any thing that's Criminal intrude. 'Tis a Conversation truly Angelical; and has so many Charms In't, that the Friendships between Man and Man, deserve not to be compared with it . . .''

Leaving marriage and other 'such coarse and homely Drudgeries' to 'Porters and Carmen', he continues:

if we wed no further than *Plato* allows, we may lawfully beget *Reflections* in each others Eyes, and those immaterial Creatures cannot sin or inherit any thing; this Life the Angels lead, and to court thus, is to court like them, for they no Sexes know, but ever live in Meditation, not in Act. (p. 10)

He alludes to 'Madam Astel' and expands in a note: 'The Lady the Reverend and Learned Mr. John Norris corresponded with in his Book entituled, Letters concerning the Love of God, between the Author of the Proposal to the Ladies; and Mr. John Norris, &c.' (p. 8). Certainly the Count of Gabalis or the Ariel who lectures Belinda in Canto I would subscribe to Norris' description of the worldly understanding of love and to his recommendation of a higher kind.

'tis so Common with men thus to descend, rather than love Platonically or Abstractedly, that the name of love is almost wholely appropriated to this Affection, and to be in Love signifies as much as to be inclined to Corporal Contact by the Occasion of Corporal Beauty... And that which increases the wonder is the vileness of that structure which is made the Object of this sensual Love. 12

In platonic letters to Pylades, Mrs Elizabeth Thomas, the unspeakable Curll's mistress, but here writing as Corinna, in the style of that 'professed Platonne' of which the *Tatler*¹³ speaks, defends Norris' doctrine of love, saying:

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⁹ George Sensabaugh, 'The milieu of Comus', Studies in Philology 41 (1944), 238-49; Kathleen Lynch, The social mode of Restoration comedy (New York, 1926); D. R. M. Wilkinson, The comedy of habit (Leiden, 1964); Arthur Johnston, Enchanted ground (London, 1964), pp. 201-2.

Jacques Ehrmann, Un paradis désespéré: l'amour et l'illusion dans l'Astrée (New Haven, 1963), p. 35.

¹¹ John Dunton, Athenianism (London, 1710), p. 6.

¹² John Norris, Theory and regulation of love (Oxford, 1688), pp. 46-7.

¹³ Tatler, George Aitken (ed.), 4 vols. (London, 1898), 1, pp. 262-8.



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Cambridge University Press 978-0-521-18085-6 - The Enduring Legacy: Alexander Pope Tercentenary Essays Edited by G. S. Rousseau and Pat Rogers Excerpt More information

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Ah, Sir! Mistake no more, the divinest *Modification* of the *Soul* for a meer Appetite common to *Brutes*, with *Human Nature*; but far, far beneath the Dignity of a rational and immortal Being.¹⁴

Another of these letters is 'Sent with the HISTORY of the Count DE GABA-LIS' (I, p. 82), in Ozell's translation, published by Curll after The Rape of the Lock. The writer imagines an interview with the Count himself, and threatens him with

a tremendous Hero in the Company, who would kill him slapdash with a Fuzee, and by Dint of Arms, or an Innate presence of Mind... eternally silence his mystic Eloquence.

(1, p. 83)

The hero is 'a *Stoick*, and *so rigid a Stoick*, that he will certainly despise your Arguments, and prefer the Contemplation of his dear self before the delectable Company of the most beautiful *Gnome*, *Nymph*, *Sylph*, or *Salamander*' (I, p. 83). The Count replies:

O, how I long to convert a STOICK! they are the most Difficult to be gained . . . but when they are enlightened by the glorious Mystery of the perpetual CABALA, there are none of the Brethren more constant, more zealous, or a greater Honour to our Illustrious Society. (1, p. 84)

The Count's companion sees the point; projecting a 'Metaphysical Union' between the hero and one of the airy ladies, she observes:

Certainly you cannot wish him a more suitable Match, he is a *Philosopher*, he is a *Stoick*, he loves nothing that is *imperfect*, nothing that is *vulgar*, where then can he hope for a more sublime Consort than one of these *etherial Nymphs*, who being formed of the purest, the most subtile Part of the *Elements*, is entirely free from the Defects and Vanities of our *frail Sex*.

(I, p. 84)

A note identifies the hero as a Captain Hemington, 'an Admirer of Corinna, who . . . held a Philosophical Correspondence with her, concerning the true Nature of Love and Friendship' (I, p. 83n); in a later letter, Pylades calls him the 'Rosycrucian' (I, p. 108). In the second volume (Lady Mary Chudleigh's letters to Corinna), there is another reference to Hemington's 'designed Match with the Aetherial Nymph mentioned in Count Gabalis' (II, p. 250) and, earlier, a conversation between Lady Chudleigh, Mrs Bridgeman, Corinna and Hemington. This refers back to the Gabalis materials in Volume I and adds:

Mr. Hemington, said my Lady, has desired me to chuse him a Wife, and I would have your Advice. What think you of CORINNA? I think, said I... the Captain is so refined a Philosopher that my Friend the Count DE GABALIS would be the fittest Person... to direct his Choice. One of his SYLPHS, or GNOMES would make an admirable Consort for a Person of such a Metaphysical Constitution.

(11, p. 79)

In The Platonic Lovers (1720, 1729, and 1732) dedicated to Judith Bond, with the first edition carrying another pastoral title in 'Clio and Strephon', we find

¹⁴ Richard Gwinnett, Pylades and Corinna (London, 1732), 11, p. 33.



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passages that are reminiscent of the *Eloisa* ('You may admire me, *all the Ways* you can, / Give me the *Lover*, but keep back the Man', p. 79), ¹⁵ and a passage rehearsing some of Ariel's themes:

Oft have I pray'd, and Heav'n has heard my Pray'r,
To grant a Lover made like thee of Air,
For I am tir'd with being long pursu'd,
By low Desires of mortal Flesh and Blood,
A greater Complement you cou'd not pay,
Than throwing all the Dross of Love away,
Then coming to my Bosom thus refin'd,
And leaving Sex and Interest behind . . .
What tell-tale Sylph familiar to my Heart,
Cou'd this dear Secret to my Ear impart,
One Way there was my nicer Taste to move,
And that alone was Numbers dress'd in Love.

(p. 64)

The resonances of this last couplet in familiar Renaissance imagery of immortality through verse will be clear. The allusion to the sylph evidently needed no expansion; the poem ends with a stellification of the lovers. The author adds that

a Subject more noble and delicate than *that* of Honourable Love, (and it is upon *that* the following Verses were form'd) cannot enter into the Heads or Hearts of Men and Women . . . (p. 64)

The subtitle of the *Pylades and Corinna* correspondence is in fact *The Honourable Lovers*. Honour is a word for 'platonic love'; it is as the familiar lines from *The Rape* suggest the 'Word with Men below' (I, p. 78).' The collation of these contexts indicates, as Ariel says, that 'Tis but their *Sylph*, the wise Celestials know.'

John Norris' attitude toward love physically expressed and the appropriateness of a stoic converted both resemble Ariel's advice in his opening address, when he punningly encourages Belinda to beware of Man and hence of Ombre and Night/Knight, lest she descend from the shady spaces of philosophy and pure love. The passages I have cited from *Pylades and Corinna* suggest that others easily saw the relationship between Pope's machinery and platonic love. Not all (not even, in fact, the author of *Platonic Lovers*, or Dunton himself) are without mortal longings as they expatiate over the scene of pure love. Many before Richardson's Lovelace (who had no liking, as we all know, for Norris) are inclined to think that pure love ends where platonic love always does. In Susannah Centlivre's *The Platonick Lady* (London, 1707), Lucinda asks: 'Is not Friendship the noblest Aim of human Kind?' and Belvill replies: 'Had your Parents thought so, the World had never known your Charms' (p. 18). In his *The Antiplatonick*, Cleveland says:

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¹⁵ The platonic lovers (London, 1732), pp. 60-5.



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Love, that's in Contemplation plac'd, Is *Venus* drawn but to the waste. Unless your Flame confess its Gender, And your Parly cause surrender, Y'are *Salamanders* of a cold Desire, That live untouch'd amidst the hottest fire.¹⁶

The Spectator (1, p. 387) suggests that the platonic stance may be a mask for impotence.

Tatler 32, chiefly about the problems of platonic love (1, pp. 262–8), begins with Norris and starts the satire of no. 63 on Mary Astell, who, as Madonella, 'had long since taken her flight towards the etherial mansions' (11, p. 103) and founded, as noted in 32 and here elaborated, a monastic school for young ladies, where needlework gave way to academic subjects:

Only on holidays the students will, for moderate exercise, be allowed to divert themselves with the use of some of the lightest and most voluble weapons; and proper care will be taken to give them at least a superficial tincture of the ancient and modern Amazonian tactics.

The Amazons, with Pope's Thalestris leading, are familiar figures. Mary Astell has a long section in her *Essay in defence of the female sex* on 'Amazons, why they rejected the Society of Men'. ¹⁷ Wasserman gives extended meaning for Pope's Amazons through a Virgilian context of thwarted marriage. ¹⁸ While the *Tatler*'s concern in the Madonella parody is probably his resentment of a learned lady taking her cause too far, other lines suggest worry about a decline in marriage (p. 261), talk nervously of the marriage laws (p. 223) and discourse on ways and means for encouraging marriage and repeopling the island.

Even at a time when, as Lawrence Stone tells us, there was an articulate theory of companionate marriage, 19 there was evidently counsel for withdrawal to a learned life in quasi-retreat, like retreat in the spiritual life, feared lest it cancel marriage altogether. Thomas Salmon's *Critical essay concerning marriage* urges his readers 'not to leave the Road that Nature has trac'd out, and aspiring to be Angels before our Time, render our selves less able to perform the common Offices of Humanity'. ²⁰ In a very real way, the platonic stance, expressed in the anti-marital, Amazonian, battling images of the kind Brigid Brophy renders remarkably in her essay on the 'Rococo seducer' (Pope's Baron is a pale Don Giovanni) was probably associated with the pressures

¹⁶ John Cleveland, Works (London, 1687), p. 11.

¹⁷ Mary Astell, Defence of the female sex (London, 1696), p. 24.

Earl Wasserman, 'The limits of allusion in The Rape of the Lock', Journal of English and Germanic Philology 65 (1966), 425-44.

¹⁹ Lawrence Stone, *The family, sex and marriage in England, 1500–1800* (New York, 1977), pp. 325–41.

²⁰ Thomas Salmon, Critical essay concerning marriage (London, 1724), p. 16.



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against learning for women.²¹ The *Tatler* Amazon practising with her fan is only early assertiveness training.

Pope's early translations of Chaucer are also preoccupied with marriage. He chooses the Wife of Bath and the Merchant. Martinus Scriblerus is at his most comic in the novel of the Double Mistress, when he attempts a set of Siamese twins, most inconveniently joined and sounding in their names (Lindamira and Indamora), as in Martinus' action, like characters out of heroic drama or those vast romances, gilt and French, that are the repositories of the Platonic stance. The talk of Platonics is clearest and most suggestive in *Three Hours after Marriage*. Fossile administers drops to the ladies in a classic replay of the old virginity test. Phoebe Clinket, tireless poetess, type of many female scribblers in and outside Pope's circle, says that she can drink without fear; her 'Love was always Platonick'. You are rather a *Cartesian*. (Clinket) Ah dear Uncle! How do the *Platonicks* and *Cartesians* differ? (Fossile) The *Platonicks* are for *Idea's*, the *Cartesians* for Matter and Motion' (p. 39).

This sly comment is more direct in the Mechanical Operation of the Spirit: 'Lovers, for the sake of Celestial Converse, are but another sort of Platonicks, who pretend to see Stars and Heaven in Ladies Eyes, and to look or think no lower; but the same Pit is provided for both.'23 Swift underlines the disparity between profession and practice and the parallel between ordinary conduct and a more philosophical stance. An earlier part of this passage goes at the subject in a different way that can, by general allusion to Swift's use of occult imagery in the Mechanical Operation and in the Tale, move us from the sylphs as proselytizers for Platonic love to the sylphs in a different kind of inspirational role. '[H]ow unaccountably all Females are attracted by Visionary or Enthusiastick Preachers, tho' never so contemptible in their outward Men [sic] . . . however Spiritual Intrigues begin, they generally conclude like all others . . .' (p. 288).

Queen Henrietta Maria, Catholic and proselytizer for the Platonic, is an apt image of the constellation of notions that I think are operative in Pope. Her entirely chaste Amazonian costume on the occasion of one of the dramas she encouraged is only a minor detail, although it leads us into the reason why: she illuminates Pope's position about platonic love. ²⁴ She performed then in a masque, having earlier shocked the court by appearing in the Sieur de Racan's pastoral drama, *Artenice*. ²⁵ As Sensabaugh and others tell us, she was a

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²¹ Brigid Brophy, 'The rococo seducer', The London Magazine 2 (1962), 54-71.

²² Pope, Gay, Arbuthnot, Three Hours after Marriage, in Burlesque plays of the eighteenth century, Simon Trussler (ed.) (Oxford, 1969), p. 125.

²³ Jonathan Swift, A tale of a tub, Guthkelch and Smith (eds) (Oxford, 1958), pp. 288-9.

²⁴ Carola Oman, *Henrietta Maria* (London, 1936), p. 109. See also Brooks-Davies, p. 182: 'it is this courtly background of the Caroline masque that Pope revives in *The Rape*'.

²⁵ John Harris, Stephen Orgel and Roy Strong, *The king's arcadia: Inigo Jones and the Stuart Court* (London, 1973), pp. 159-60.