

Virgin Idols and Verbal Devices: Pope's *Belinda* and the Virgin Mary

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"True Poesy, like true Religion, abhors idolatry"
Edward Young, *Conjectures on Original Composition*, 1759¹

Everyone knows that when the heroine of Alexander Pope's mock-epic *The Rape of the Lock* exclaims, "Oh hadst thou, Cruel! Been content to seize/ Hairs less in sight, or any Hairs but these," she is talking about her virginity (IV. 175–176).² Most critics take Belinda's distress over losing a lock of hair to be an indication of her problematic privileging of reputation over virtue, or sign over referent.³ The superficial Belinda values the hair on her head—a visible sign of her virginity—more than her pubic hair, which is presumably more connected to real virtue because of its physical proximity to her hymen. Belinda's obsessions with visual signs and with her virginity fit the Protestant stereotype of the idolatrous and sexually deviant Catholic, a figure whose appearance in anti-Catholic propaganda provides an important context for Pope's poem. By analyzing *The Rape of the Lock* through the lens of anti-Catholic critiques of virginity, idolatry, and the Virgin Mary, this essay makes it possible to read Belinda's outcry not as evidence of her problematic devaluation of virginity and over-investment in visible signs, but rather as indicative of the poem's own skeptical attitudes about the sanctity of virginity and about the possibility of knowledge beyond the material world.

The Rape of the Lock fictionalizes an incident that disrupted an elite Catholic community: a "well-bred" young man (Lord Petre, who supplies the basis for the Baron in the poem) clipped a lock of hair from a young woman (Arabella Fermor, who becomes Belinda in the poem) whom he may have been courting (I.8). As a satiric "poème à clef," the poem inherently raises questions about mimesis, the relationship between referent and representation. Moreover, the central tension in *The Rape of the Lock* lies in the relationship between the literal and the symbolic. The action hinges on the connection of Belinda's hair to her actual, physical virginity, a crucial dimension of the poem that critics have often referenced but whose significance is commonly ignored.⁴ The style in which Belinda wears her hair, mostly piled up but with two long curls on each side of her neck, was a customary fashion for young marriageable (virgin)

women. The locks are thus a material signifier of virginity, something whose material existence is otherwise difficult to determine. The cutting of the lock is, then, a symbolic rape, and the poem investigates the power and relevance of such a symbolic act.

Like the poem, the Church of England's critique of Catholics at this time centers on problems of signification and representation. Protestant theologians and propagandists excoriate the idolatry of Catholicism, in particular the worship of saints, especially Mary, and the doctrine of transubstantiation.⁵ From their perspective, Catholicism privileges visual symbolic practices and propagates the erroneous notion that icons can stimulate spirituality. Protestantism, by contrast, prioritizes language; only words—specifically “the word” of the Bible—can lead to God. The Protestant critique of mariolatry argues that Catholics worship Mary instead of God (the thing that she represents or mediates for) and thus that veneration of Mary is idolatrous. Protestants worry not so much that physical representations (of Mary or God) will be substituted for the real thing, but more that Mary will be substituted for God; that is, they worry that the thing intended to represent God's goodness (Mary) instead becomes the focus of worship.

In addition to idolatry, the issues of virginity and celibacy are crucial to the debates between Protestants and Catholics that I am proposing are a key context for understanding Pope's poem. Catholicism maintains a belief in the spiritual advantages (if not total superiority) of virginity over marriage, while Protestant reformers attack the Catholic emphasis on celibacy and virginity. As Lawrence Stone has argued, “holy matrimony” plays a considerable role in the English transition from Catholicism to Protestantism that is threatened at the end of the seventeenth century but that is so definitively completed during the eighteenth century.⁶ Two historical circumstances make virginity an especially charged issue in the period immediately preceding Pope's poem. The hymen resists new scientific epistemologies, which are founded on sight and materiality, and thus presents epistemological and representational dilemmas to enlightenment modes of discourse.⁷ Moreover, the sexual excesses of the late Stuart monarchy, with its Catholic inclinations, mean that the links between virginity, sexuality, and religion are unstable at this time.

As the quintessential virgin who attracts idolatrous worship, Mary is an important figure in the transition to a permanently Protestant England. She presents challenges to Reformation theologians, who denounce Mary's capacity for mediation, her perpetual virginity (as both fact and ideal), and the tendency of her worshipers toward idolatry. Protestant writers criticize the manner and extent of Catholic worship of Mary but still uphold her as “Blessed among women.” Mary's virginity at the time of her conception of Jesus is important to this status, just as a woman's virginity at marriage matters under Protestant ideals of femininity, but Mary's “perpetual” virginity, both as fact and as an ideal, presents more vexing theological problems. Mary's espousal to

God is the model for the female commitment to life in a convent as a nun, something that Reformation theologians and their adherents clearly oppose. Reformers are thus in the awkward position of challenging Mary's perpetual virginity, her divinity, and her capacity to become an idolatrous object of worship, while simultaneously advocating the importance of virginity at marriage.

Debates over the Virgin Mary at this time are, ostensibly at least, more about idolatry than virginity. But both virginity and idolatry are crucial for the Reformation cause. Moreover, they are inextricably connected, since idolatry is driven by the desire to materialize something—like virginity—valuable but unavailable to the eye. A popular, often reprinted tract from 1641 demonstrates just this relationship. The Protestant polemicist Thomas Master levels an especially strident critique of Mary that illustrates the connection between idolatry of Mary and Mary's virginity.⁸ Starting with a concept of "woman" as inherently debased, Master articulates the degradations that make Mary even more debased than other women, settling on virginity as the ultimate source of negation:

Virgin is below woman. A cipher bears no proportion with a number, and a virgin is a very cipher in nature, it hath no being or name, God made it not (6).

Invoking the definition of a cipher as something empty or void, Master argues that Mary and her virginity have nothing worthy of worship. "Cipher" can also mean something that is unclear, that needs a "key" or an interpretation.⁹ In either case, a cipher involves a crisis of significance: something that is meaningless can take on false meanings and something obscure may or may not have meaning. Mary's virginity is precisely the reason that she should not be idolized, but of course it is virginity's status as a "cipher" that creates the conditions for its idolization.

While Mary was controversial during the Reformation, debates about her flourish again beginning in 1688, when she becomes a focal point of anti-Catholic sentiment. Whereas in the sixteenth century, the Protestant Queen Elizabeth had been able to retain Mary as a figure for Protestant femininity through her self-presentation as the "virgin queen," at the end of the seventeenth century, Mary becomes an important dividing line between Protestants and Catholics, and she figures prominently in anti-Catholic writing. The most important stimuli for this renewed anti-Catholicism—and especially for critiques of marionism—are the revolution of 1688 (sparked by the birth of a supposititious Catholic heir) and the Jacobite uprisings that follow. James II's Catholic tendencies had long been a source of concern for his Protestant subjects, but it was the imminent (and long-awaited) birth of a child that sparked the crisis. Protestant fear of a Catholic heir (along with very real Catholic desire for such an heir) fueled suspicion that the queen would try to procure a male baby and pass him off as a legitimate heir by secreting him into her bed "reak-

ing and hot from the Womb" via a warming pan.¹⁰ Mary of Modena was aligned with the Virgin Mary: rumors circulated that she claimed to have received a visitation from the Virgin and that the Pope sent her the Virgin's clothes. As a result of these rumors, forty witnesses officially testified to the genuineness of the birth, though of course it was the heir's Catholicism, and not his legitimacy, that concerned Protestants. The warming pan myth depends upon the stereotype of Catholics as deceitful plotters, equally capable of naively believing in miracles and cynically faking them; it also depends upon impugning Mary and the virgin birth. The birth of a Catholic heir-apparent led to the Protestant revolution of 1688 and to periodic uprisings of his supporters throughout the first half of the eighteenth century. It also led to renewed anti-Catholicism, which focused on Mary, on idolatry, and on sexuality.¹¹

Alexander Pope was uniquely situated to exploit the highly charged debates around Mary, virginity, and Catholicism. Pope was born in 1688; in fact, he was born within twenty days of the anxiously anticipated heir. The members of Pope's family were practicing Catholics, and consequently over the course of the next several decades they suffered discrimination and deprivation. Pope himself never renounced Catholicism, although he was not fully participating in that faith by the time he wrote *The Rape of the Lock* and although such renunciation would have had significant benefits. As Catholics, Pope and his family could not vote, live within ten miles of London, serve in Parliament, own a school, or travel abroad for education, among other restrictions. As a young Catholic born into this bitterly oppressive time, his first exposure to reading was through his father's library, which included, according to Pope, "All that had been written on both sides" about the religious controversies of the time.¹²

The Rape of the Lock and the debates over Mary both revolve around attractive virgins at the center of controversies involving the interpretation of bodily signs, problems of faith and secularization, and the fragmentation of a community. Like the debates about Mary, the poem investigates the danger of idolatry, the relevance of symbolic action, and the importance of female virginity. Both the poem and the religious debates address the anxiety of the loss of a signified once an object attains symbolic status, and thus both address the problem of idolatry in general and the specific dangers that inhere in idolizing virgin women. Like the debates over Mary, the poem links idol worship to representations of virginity: the lock, which should simply represent virginity (which in turn, is supposed to represent virtue and future chastity) becomes a fixation in itself. In fixating on the lock, actual virginity becomes less important than evidence of virginity, and, even more problematically, virtue or inner qualities become less important than physicality. There are allegorical and parodic connections between Belinda and the Virgin Mary: both receive visitations that foretell a peculiar change in the status of their virginity; both become objects of veneration and stimulate idolatrous behavior; and both experience

assumption. But I am not arguing either for direct influence or allegory. Instead, I read these texts together because they emerge from the same cultural moment: one in which female virginity is a contested ideal subject to accusations of idolatry, in which the sign of virginity is so highly charged that it can be used to debate the meaning of signs in general, and in which religious views on virginity, idolatry, and symbolic action will have important implications for literary history.

The Rape of the Lock engages debates about idolatry and representation on the level of both form and content. Critics of seventeenth-century poetry like Malcolm Ross and Barbara Lewalski have traced changes in English poetic practices that result from the Reformation. Ross argues that, as a result of the Protestant critique of transubstantiation, poetry was aesthetically debased.¹³ Lewalski, in response, argues that the Protestant revolution in poetics created a radically new poetic tradition, one in which spiritual truths could be represented in figurative language.¹⁴ While the idolatrous practices of the Catholic characters in *The Rape of the Lock* are clearly criticized for their lack of spirituality, the poem itself does not offer—on the level of either form or content—a meaningful alternative. It criticizes both Protestant and Catholic symbolic practices and, most radically, it is even skeptical about secular, poetic modes of meaning. There is ultimately no spiritual or symbolic truth behind the language or actions of the poem. *The Rape of the Lock* parodies the search for symbolic meaning in the material world, and it iconoclastically derogates both secular and spiritual things: the icon, virginity, and the “word.” I argue that it is no coincidence that female virginity is the “material thing” that provides a vehicle for this critique.

The very specific dates 1688–1714 provide the context for my reading of *The Rape of the Lock*; they encompass the time from the Protestant revolution through one of the most significant Jacobite uprisings; they also coincide with increased criticism of Mary; and finally, the dates bookend Pope’s birth and the publication of the full five-canto version of *The Rape of the Lock*. In what follows, I analyze the poem alongside the theological debates over the Virgin Mary. My argument moves, like the Protestant critique of idolatry, from questions about mimesis to a crisis of meaning that verges on the abyss of skepticism. I begin by analyzing the poem’s representation of Catholic characters; I then move to the poem’s narrative structure and poetics, and I conclude with a discussion of the poem’s relationship to its critics, suggesting that this relationship is intimately shaped by the poem’s idolatrous subject and its immersion in theological debates about signs.

The characters in *The Rape of the Lock* are based on real Catholic people, and the poem subtly satirizes their predictably Catholic over-investment in visual

icons and their resultant inability to distinguish the literal from the symbolic. Though Belinda and the Baron champion opposite sides in the debate over the lock, they share a similar view of the relationship between the literal and the symbolic. Belinda confuses the symbolic with the literal, and she “overreacts” (according to most undergraduates and not a few critics) because her hair is not her hymen and thus her dismay (as if she had been actually raped) is unfounded and frivolous. Her oft-quoted exclamation “Oh hadst thou, Cruel! Been content to seize / Hairs less in sight, or any Hairs but these” suggests that she has invested too much in the symbolic realm, being more concerned with her hair—and thus the appearance of her virginity—than with her hymen and her literal physical virginity (IV. 175–176). The Baron, for his part, immediately invests his idolatrous energies on the lock itself and not Belinda (“Th’ adventurous *Baron* the bright Locks admir’d,” II.29). He is a fetishist who habitually fixates on symbolic objects as a source of satisfaction and whose interest in the symbolic may well preclude an interest in the literal.¹⁵ There is, for example, no indication that his desire for the symbolic representation of her virginity extends to an interest in Belinda’s actual virginity. Like the stereotypically corrupt Catholics of Protestant polemic, Belinda and the Baron do not understand the limits on the representational function of objects. The poem opens with parallel scenes in which Belinda and the Baron engage in rituals that conflate physical or symbolic objects with writing, suggesting that their shared problem is their Catholic tendency to give priority to objects over words.

At her dressing table, Belinda lines up “Puffs, Powders, Patches, Bibles, Billet-doux” (I.138). Alliteration connects the three physical objects (puffs, powders, and patches) and the two objects associated with words (Bibles, billet-doux). The near alliteration of “p” and “b,” as well as the fact that all these objects coexist on Belinda’s dressing table, suggests that Belinda treats the physical and the linguistic comparably; in fact, she has turned the linguistic into the physical (she is not reading either the Bibles or the billet-doux). The multiplication of things reduces their specificity: their individual functions are subordinate to their collective augmentation of her attractiveness. Even the specificity of the Bible as “the word” is eliminated by the plurality of “Bibles” as well as the Bibles’ alliterative association with love letters. From a Protestant perspective, of course, Belinda is a typically corrupt Catholic, turning words into icons, and worshiping things, and herself, rather than the word of God.¹⁶ Belinda’s lock is the main icon here, and even this is implicated in her corruption of words. The letter talks of “wounds” and “charms”; that is, it speaks the language of symbols, idols and fetishes, and Belinda herself may then (according to Geoffrey Carnall) use this already corrupted language to create another fetish, the lock (I.119).¹⁷ The object of worship is thus several degrees removed from what began with only a loose (metonymic and alliterative) connection to “the word” (the Bible). Belinda’s dressing-table altar is the place where the lock is literally produced and also where it is turned into an icon. The poem shows us how the lock is physically made, and also, through

metonymy and alliteration, how it is transported from a physical object into a representation of itself. And Belinda's focus on this item (the lock and the billet-doux that creates it) interrupts the speech of advice and warning given to her by her protective spirit, Ariel.

The Baron's parallel scene, in which he traffics in the symbols and words of courtship, demonstrates the effects of Belinda's construction: Belinda's careful preparation of her hair evokes an idolatrous response in him, as we are told "Th' adventrous *Baron* the bright Locks admir'd, / He saw, he wish'd, and to the Prize aspir'd" (II.29–30). The Baron's idolatry figures him as a parody of a Marian worshiper, even more corrupt than Belinda. Like Belinda, the Baron has books at his altar, but his are "French romances," not the Bible (II.38). Though he is constructing a ritual, he is imploring "ev'ry Pow'r" for help, suggesting that he does not recognize one true God (II.36). Like a mariolater, the Baron "gives the creature worship due only to the creator"; thus he is an idolater in both senses: he worships images and false gods.¹⁸ His interest in Belinda's hair explicitly connects him with one of the most criticized of Catholic practices: the acquisition of relics, among the most sought-after of which were the hairs of martyred virgins. In the hopes of obtaining his idealized object, which is a symbol of virginity but not inherently valuable, the Baron sacrifices his previous objects of worship, "the Trophies of his former Loves," in a fire that he lights with billets-doux (II.40). Through its visual impact on the Baron, the lock has become an idolatrous object of worship that loses its referent. From the Baron's perspective, the lock does not have a relationship to spiritual value, and neither is it connected to Belinda, as evidenced by his desire to detach it from her. Thus, his relationship to the Bible and the word of God is even further removed than Belinda's, and his investment in idolatrous objects even more corrupt.

These Catholic characters are almost like Protestant caricatures of Catholics: their fixation on the symbolic causes them to misread, misvalue, and improperly worship. They focus their idolatrous energy on Belinda's lock, a material, visible sign of her virginity. The lock's visual attractiveness creates a desire for the lock itself and situates value in the lock, not in the virginity that it represents and not in Belinda as a marital or sexual partner. Visual signs create desire ("He saw, he wish'd, and to the Prize aspir'd") but also distort and divert desire along a chain of metonymy that disposes both religious and social symbols of meaning and thus that threatens both theological and enlightenment epistemologies. Belinda's iconic beauty, for example, has the potential to deceive its admirers regarding the status of her virginity. Her face could hide her faults, the poem tells us, "if *Belles* had Faults to hide" (II.16). The satiric "if" here of course suggests that whether Belinda or any other woman has a "fault" that her beauty might hide is an unanswerable question. The poem reveals that physical and visible idols of virginity (like the lock) are created, perversely, in response to virginity's lack of materiality and visibility and thus may bear no relation to empirical reality. When Belinda makes her

resplendent entrance to the pleasure party decked with a “sparkling *Cross*,” the Catholic investment in the visual demonstrates its dangerously sacrilegious power (II.7). Though a cross is the one visual symbol approved by Protestants, this cross, though sparkling, cannot compete with Belinda’s beauty, which she has deliberately constructed to be idolized. The proximity of the cross to her beautiful bosom invests the cross with erotic rather than spiritual power. “*Jews* might kiss and *Infidels* adore” Belinda’s cross, indicating that Belinda’s beauty has the potential to divest religious symbols—not just secular values like virginity—of their significance and power (II.8). The speech of the prudish Clarissa attempts to inject a value system based on something other than physical beauty and visibility, but her words cannot compete with the frenzy created by the visual spectacle of Belinda’s beauty and her distress. Murray Kreiger describes the character’s confusion of sign with referent as a “logical fallacy of metonymy” that creates errors in interpretation.¹⁹ My point is that their metonymic desire goes beyond error to the heresy (from the perspectives of both Christianity and the enlightenment) of a meaningless world. Belinda’s beauty, so dependent on idolatry, competes not just with her own virginity (a material reality), but also with religious meaning: it is a cipher in the sense that it divests of meaning everything with which it comes into contact.

While my reading so far positions the poem as an ideologically Protestant satire of idolatrous Catholicism, the characters can be equally faulted from the perspective of orthodox Catholicism. The Catholic defense of the use of idols is fragmented, but in its most vehement incarnation, it completely turns the tables on the Protestant critique. Lewis Sabran argues that religious and secular idols are no different.²⁰ John Gother claims that Catholics do not worship idols; they merely use representations to bring to mind the original.²¹ One of the major interlocutors in this debate is France’s Bishop of Meaux, Jacques Bénigne Bossuet, who is widely published in England and who is a major target of English Protestant critique. Bossuet argues that the distinction drawn by the Protestant writers between words and idols is false:

Are not paper and letters the work of mans hand, as well as sculpture and painting? But who does not see that in all these things we regard not what they are, but what they signify?²²

Bossuet (echoing Augustine and thereby linking theology, epistemology, and linguistic theory) does not merely defend the Catholic implementation of visual idols. Instead he claims that words (and by implication the Bible) are just as symbolic and just as much a physical product of humans as any other object.²³ Bossuet directly attacks the Protestant belief that the imaginative use of physical objects is sacrilegious; on the contrary, he celebrates the spiritual and symbolic potential of the concrete.

Protestant writers claim that by focusing on words rather than objects, they create a spiritual communion with God that is not vulnerable to the aesthetic pleasure evoked by physical objects. Bossuet responds to this assertion by contending that the Protestant's literal approach is in fact more debased:

But whilst they glory in being more spiritual than we, and of paying to the divinity a purer adoration; they are in effect carnal and gross, because they follow nothing but their sense and humane reason, which persuades them that a man cannot be a God (23).

Bossuet here focuses on the problem of faith, arguing that imagination and symbolization underpin the religious beliefs of Christianity. On both sides of the debate, the spiritual reigns supreme over the physical, but for Bossuet, the physical icons of Catholicism, joined to the human imagination, can lead to spiritual truths. For Bossuet, the Reformation insistence on the physical as debased indicates that Protestants lack an understanding of the way that God is in all things. Catholic spirituality and faith, by contrast, rely upon the ability of humans to understand how physical objects can point beyond themselves.

From the point of view of Bossuet's Catholic doctrine, the problem with the Catholic community in *The Rape of the Lock* is not that they ascribe too much power to symbols, but that in fact they do not ascribe enough. Belinda values her lock only insofar as it relates to a physical ideal of virginity (her pubic hair), not to a higher ideal of virtue or devotion to God. Virginity is not a holy ideal in this English Catholic community, and the Catholic characters in the poem have lost the ability to see how objects (or words) can point (very far) beyond themselves; Belinda can only move through alliteration or metonymy, linking her lock to her pubic hair and her billet-doux to the Bible, but neither words nor images transcend the material world. The characters can thus be faulted from a Protestant perspective for their over-investment in idolatrous objects. But they can also be criticized, from a Catholic perspective, for a failure of symbolic and spiritual imagination as well as for their denigration of virginity's spiritual potential. This is why readers can criticize Belinda both for undervaluing her virginity, by putting more value on her curls than her actual virginity, and for overvaluing it, by resisting its loss, as if it had transcendent value. The poem blurs the line between sacred and secular ideals of virginity and between Protestant and Catholic perspectives on idolatry, and this ambiguity is precisely what gives Pope's satire its double-edged subtlety.

If sacred hermeneutics endeavor to know something about God, then narrative poetry, we might assume, will reveal intangible truths about its actions and characters. Both sacred and poetic hermeneutics, that is, strive to tran-

scend the material. The problem with idolatry, from a Protestant perspective, is that it embodies the sacred rather than providing a means for transcendence of the material world. While *The Rape of the Lock* satirizes the idolatrous behavior of its characters, the poem's irony inheres in the fact the poem itself never transcends the material world. In the last section I showed how the sacrilegious idolatry of the characters in *The Rape of the Lock* makes their world both superficial, in that it relies on visuals, and byzantine, in that Belinda's overdetermined virginity produces an untenable situation for her. In this section I argue that the poem's iconoclastic project extends to secular and poetic modes of meaning, producing a superficial and bewildering world for the reader. The narrative structure and poetics of *The Rape of the Lock* prevent the emergence of a symbolic meaning that would fill the void created by the poem's iconoclastic representation of its characters. As such, the poem is truly iconoclastic and profane, equally skeptical of both sacred and secular interpretive practices.

Virginity makes the perfect vehicle for a satire of theological and poetic hermeneutics, because virginity presents particular problems for theorizing the relationship between the mind and the body and thus between the material and the immaterial, the sacred and the secular. The original theological justification for virginity depends upon the notion that virginity of the body can lead to elevation of the soul. St. Paul, for instance, says, "she that is unmarried . . . may be holy, both in body and spirit."²⁴ Theological virginity is firmly rooted in the belief that there is an inherent connection between body and soul. But eighteenth-century anxiety about virginity depends precisely on its lack of physicality and visibility; the status of virginity is not visibly present on a body, and physically visible signs (like Belinda's lock) may lie by suggesting that a young woman is a virgin when she is not.²⁵ Virginity's material inscrutability is the reason it simultaneously attracts idolaters and iconoclasts. The Protestant critique of idolatry endeavors to sever the body/soul connection that veneration of virginity entails by decrying the worship of all corporeal images. William Sherlock, for example, argues "to worship such corporeal beings, as may be represented by Images, is to worship corporeal Gods, which is Idolatry."²⁶ Mary's very embodiment—her humanity, her maternity, and her virginity—make her more accessible to idolatrous representation than God. Furthermore, the ambiguity of her physicality—a pregnant virgin, mortal and yet assumed into heaven like a deity—makes her a special temptation to idolaters and a special problem for theological debates about the mind/body connection.²⁷ Thus Mary has particular relevance to questions, fervently raised at this time, about the body: What do the visible signs of the body mean? How does the body relate to a person's "character" or spirituality? What is the relationship between human corporality and divinity? Because her virgin (and arguably divine) body encloses secrets not visible to the eye, Mary epitomizes the danger of relying on visual signs. Yet this is precisely why she becomes the focus of idolatrous worship grounded in vision and visions.

It is a commonplace that Reformation theologians deemphasize the body and the visible or tangible physical world; instead, they privilege the word of God as manifested in the Bible. The Protestants who write about Mary at this time deemphasize the body of Mary by insisting upon the power and mystery of “the word” (as that which can impregnate Mary) and on the stability of the meaning of scriptural language. Their aim is both to prevent Mary’s body from emerging as an icon to be worshiped and to question the value of a virgin body, of virginity, and of the body in general. The Protestant writer William Clagett illustrates this redefinition of virginity in a tract on Mary. In a revision of the Pauline formulation that virginity inheres “both in body and in spirit,” Clagett says that God has “No less regard to a holy mind than to a holy body.”²⁸ Whereas Paul gives the body equal status with the soul and even an ability to affect the soul, Clagett’s “no less” indicates a priority of intangible values over material ones. Moreover, Clagett shifts the inner quality at stake in Mary from the “spirit” to the “mind,” that is, from a religious value to a secular one. Protestant discourse on the Virgin Mary thus devalues virginity as a spiritual ideal and denies a link between the physical body and subjectivity or spirituality.

The Rape of the Lock seems similarly committed to deemphasizing the body; however, contrary to Protestant theology, it ultimately rejects the notion that something outside the physical can be known. Belinda hopes that she can control what is *seen*: she wishes that “hairs less in sight” had been violated. While the characters rely on such superficial visual symbols, the poem criticizes this emphasis on appearances and thus seems to promise a different system of epistemology and morality. The hymen is the physical object that is presumably most at stake in any discourse about the rape of a virgin, but as a strategy for uncovering the truth about Belinda, the poem’s investigation of Belinda circumvents the hymen, an indicator of physical virginity, in favor of the heart, the place where (according to Robert Erickson) emergent ideas about gendered subjectivity are being located exactly at this time.²⁹ And in fact the poem suggests that Belinda’s heart is the key to her dilemma, as the “earthly lover” lurking there is what debilitates the sylphs who usually accompany and protect her (and who provide another kind of icon of her virginity). From the physical icon of the lock, which can be made to lie, the poem moves metonymically, at Belinda’s own suggestion, to her pubic hair, which adjoins the hymen but does not lead to it. Instead, the pubic hair is a liminal space, a way of suggesting that we are proceeding to the “inner” Belinda, an interior that promises to reveal subjective rather than physical truths. In short, we skip the hymen and head for the heart.

Although the heart promises access to nonphysical aspects of Belinda, in fact the heart turns out to be just another physical object. Belinda’s heart is described as a physical space. We learn of the “earthly lover” just before the rape occurs, suggesting that Belinda’s emotional state at least partially

accounts for the violation, but the “earthly” lover lurks “at” not “in” her heart. The pronoun “at” (along with the description of the lover as “earthly” and “lurking,” words which imply physical embodiment) indicates an actual physical space, not necessarily an emotional truth. Also, the fact that the lover is “at” rather than “in” the heart suggests a lack of completion. In the action of the poem, the revelation of the earthly lover “at” her heart is the fatal fact, the one that makes the rape possible. The Baron’s action of cutting off her hair—authorized by the presence of the earthly lover—erases the visual representation of her virginity, including the sylphs, even though her heart has been penetrated neither by the earthly lover nor by the narrator and readers. The poem’s pretension to transcend the physical thus turns out to be a form of coquettish striptease: it empties the idol (the hair) of meaning and it entices the reader with a promise of a more veracious and important kind of meaning (the heart), but the poem does not fill the void created by its own iconoclasm.

Like the narrative movement towards Belinda’s heart, the poem’s figurative devices expose idolatry without attempting to fill the void of meaning created by this evacuation. For example, just as Belinda relies on what can be seen, many of the poem’s verbal devices are linked to the visual. In addition to alliteration, two of the most important poetic devices of the poem are synecdoche and metonymy. Pope makes things that are visually connected to people, or a part of them, stand in for them. For example,

Sir Plume of amber snuffbox justly vain
And the nice conduct of a clouded cane (IV.123–124).

Sir Plume’s character is defined by the material and visible icons with which he is associated. According to Clarence Tracy, Pope gives his readers an “illusion of reality” by evoking character through objects associated with various people, and Ellen Pollack adds that the poem “criticizes the sterility of a world in which appearances have actually become substitutes for the things themselves.”³⁰ The poem neglects to provide its characters with interior thoughts and feelings, and it even avoids describing their “real” physical qualities (for instance, we know Belinda is beautiful, but we don’t know what she looks like). Instead, characters are constituted by the objects they possess: Belinda’s icons make her beautiful and Sir Plume’s snuffbox makes him vain. This quality of the poem is usually, and very rightly, considered to be a comment on the emergent world of consumerism (Laura Brown’s argument is most influential on this point) or as evidence, as Ellen Pollack thinks, of its misogyny.³¹ But the poetic devices of synecdoche and metonymy also relate to larger epistemological and theological questions about the possibility of reaching meaning through visual signs and verbal devices.

The poetic devices that are linked to the visual (and thus to idolatry)—metonymy, synecdoche, and alliteration—are in conflict with two other

important aspects of Pope's aesthetic: couplets and zeugmas. The idolatrous verbal devices, which give an illusion of meaning and depth, are constantly interrupted by the poems' couplets and zeugmas, which audibly and cognitively interrupt the slippery forward movement of the metonymy and alliteration. In so doing, these verbal devices iconoclastically disrupt the poetics of the visual: they insist that contiguity and visuality do not constitute meaning. The following lines, which describe the strategies of the sylphs to keep the icon intact, illustrate this poetic tactic:

With varying Vanities, from ev'ry Part,
They shift the moving Toyshop of their Heart;
Where Wigs with Wigs, with Sword-knots Sword-knots strive,
Beaux banish Beaux, and Coaches Coaches drive.
This erring Mortals Levity may call;
Oh blind to Truth! the *Sylphs* contrive it all! (l.99–104)

Notice the sylphs' strategy: they constantly shift from object to object in order to maintain the icon of virginity intact. Alliteration ("Beaux banish Beaux") linguistically reinforces this physical movement, and synecdoche (especially "Wigs" for "Beaux") repeats the idolatry that has caused the conflict. But the couplet form, which insists on sending the eye and the mind backward in order to explore the relationships between things (in a telling example, moving backwards from "heart" to "part"), rhythmically interrupts the idolatrous movements of the sylphs and of the poetic devices based on physicality. W. K. Wimsatt argues that Pope's rhymes "impose upon the logical pattern of expressed argument a kind of fixative counterpart of alogical implication."³² My point is that in the case of this poem, the couplets interrupt, and therefore foreground for examination, the alogical associations formed through the idolatrous practices of alliteration and metonymy. Whereas Wimsatt finds that rhymes, as an "amalgam of the sensory and the logical," are the "icon in which the idea is caught," I am arguing that Pope's rhymes are iconoclastic (165).

The main critical debates about *The Rape of the Lock* from the last twenty years have focused on the poem's obsession with materiality. For the most part, critics have come to the poem from a perspective that privileges the symbolic over the literal, subjectivity over objectivity, and the sign over the referent. For example, Laura Brown's influential argument, that the tensions in the poem result from the paradoxes of early capitalism and its focus on material objects, and Ellen Pollack's feminist critique of the poem for denying Belinda interiority, both rely on a Protestant (and Platonic) privileging of intangible value over the debased material world. My point is that, when viewed as a participant in these historically specific debates over idolatry, Pope's poem may actually be seen as enacting a critique of a Protestant semiotics that privileges the intangible over the tangible. Malcolm Ross has shown how Protes-

tant semiotics detaches the sign from any material or ontological reality (the Eucharist is not really Christ's body) and replaces materiality with psychology (Christ's body is present in the memory of the recipient of the Eucharist). That is, the Reformers separated symbol from truth and transformed the Eucharist from a corporate act to an individual subjective recollection (35). The problem with idolatry, of course, is that it makes the opposite move: in separating the material from the immaterial, it retains solely the material. I am not arguing that *The Rape of the Lock* tries to recuperate idolatry, but I do argue that neither does it try to replace materiality with a disembodied, transcendent value (whether spiritual or psychological). In fact, in its insistence on the limitation of meanings in the physical world, (what Helen Deutsch calls its "continual dead-ends") the poem parodies both the materiality of idolatrous Catholicism and the disembodied ideals of Protestantism.³³

The demystification of virginity by exposing the visual and verbal devices that construct it as an object of worship reveals the poem to be radically skeptical about virginity's relationship to spiritual practice or, in fact, to any non-physical meaning.³⁴ In response to the issues raised by the debates over Mary, which concern the linkage of female virginity, ideal femininity, spirituality, and interpretive practice, the poem offers a resolution that is based on detaching ideals of virginity from spirituality. In this sense, it supports the Protestant ideal, crucial to England's emergent Protestant identity, of femininity grounded in secular virginity and holy matrimony.³⁵ But in its radical questioning of the capacity of secular things to embody symbolic meaning, Pope's poem takes iconoclasm beyond the single issue of virginity. Both the physical and the figurative function in the poem to resist rather than to create meaning: the verbal devices lay bare the process whereby visual things get meaning in order to demystify secular things, like virginity, that have the symbolic charge of a sacred thing. This is why the poem ends with the parodic assumption of Belinda's hair; a meaningless and replaceable material object that has incurred sacrilegious idolatrous worship is the only thing eligible for transcendence. In short, the poem's narrative structure and formal features continually deny the "leap of faith" required to believe that a human might be divine or that a hair (or even a hymen) might reveal subjective character traits.

Because of the poem's pervasive thematic and structural resistance to spiritual and symbolic meaning, critics of the poem find themselves in the same position as Belinda, at risk of making too much of a symbol. For example, critics of the poem have alternately tried to discover subjective truths about Belinda and to criticize that project, a perspective that usually ends up, paradoxically, by criticizing Belinda for not having any subjectivity. As Stewart Crehan suggests, the effort to analyze Belinda in a way that creates or completes her subjectivity

inevitably feels stilted: Belinda is simply not real; her existence is only symbolic (55). Of course all literary characters are merely symbolic, but this poem, rather perversely, constantly debunks the power of symbols. Symbolic things (like the lock or Belinda herself) cannot, the poem implies, be subject to meaningful analysis. For Kenneth Gross, idolatry debates raise questions about human imagination and the limits of human reason: can humans know anything outside themselves or can they only re-make the world in their image?³⁶ My point is that readers of *The Rape of the Lock* find themselves in the fun-house of the latter option. Far from being able to distance ourselves from the frivolous characters in the poem, we find ourselves in the same position as those characters, unable to find transcendent meaning, left only with aesthetic admiration of the visual or the verbal beauty.³⁷ Pope's mock-heroic elevates the frivolous to the level of epic in a parallel move to the action of the poem, Belinda's obstinate distress over a secular symbolic action. In both cases, anyone who ascribes religious or interpretive power to the secular symbol risks the charge of pride and thus risks satire. Pope himself in his satiric *The Key to the Lock* suggests that the attempt to read allegorically or symbolically will subject one to satire.³⁸ He specifically criticizes the search for allegorical meaning in the poem by mocking the idea that someone would take Belinda as representing "The popish religion or the Whore of Babylon" (29). As we have seen, the effort to uncover subjective depth or symbolic meaning for Belinda can proceed only by analyzing visual and verbal symbols, which the poem insists is fraught with the possibility of frivolity. This poem à clef resolutely resists a key and, like Mary's virginity and Belinda's beauty, relentlessly ciphers meaning.

Thomas Woodman argues that Pope makes a "religion" of poetry; that is, Pope has a moral commitment to the truth behind art. But this poem resists the kind of truth that the religious debates insist upon.³⁹ In a religious semiotic, symbols, figurative language, and examples function to point to a higher truth, one that needs to be arrived at through interpretation but one that nonetheless has some unified, transcendent meaning.⁴⁰ As John Prendergast and many Catholic defenders contemporary with Pope argue, the two churches' positions on the relation between the truth and its representations (whether linguistic or visual) do not differ significantly.⁴¹ Prendergast claims that the positions of both religions on transubstantiation "affirm the symbolic reality of mediation which allows signs to function in the first place" (65). Catholic and Protestant disputants may debate the use or meaning of symbols, but the presence of a higher meaning (and, in fact, the same meaning) is not disputed.⁴² By contrast, Umberto Eco describes the attraction of human symbols as lying precisely in their vagueness: their "fruitful ineffectiveness" in expressing a final meaning.⁴³ This is why Mary with her paradoxical "fruitful virginity" is the patron saint of *The Rape of the Lock* and the central object of dispute in these theological debates about signs.⁴⁴

Although Pope's poem pretends toward a "Moral" (in fact, this is why

Pope claims to have inserted Clarissa's speech) the long history of debate over the poem's meaning, the inability of the signs and figures in the poem to construct stable meaning, and Pope's own resistance to such a "Key" suggest that the poem is ultimately committed to resisting a unified interpretation. The icons of Belinda's virginity, as well as Belinda herself, are exposed by the poem's verbal devices as ultimately vacuous. The poem reveals metonymy, synecdoche, and alliteration to be analogous to idolatry, ways of constructing meaning through physical relationships and, as such, practices that can never be theological or even reliably meaningful. I am suggesting that the poem is radically skeptical, heterodox both to Christian hermeneutics and to enlightenment epistemologies (though perhaps not to modern poetics). Years later, in *An Essay on Man* (1733–4), Pope will argue that the human condition substantially limits human knowledge, but this earlier poem is even more skeptical. Fully ironic and fully iconoclastic, *The Rape of the Lock* implicates its readers, as well as the characters and its own narrative voice, in the attractions and the dead-ends of any idolatrous search for meaning. This is why of all Pope's work, it is *The Rape of the Lock* that has sustained the most critical interest: a debate that remains mired in literal meanings and aesthetics and that rarely approaches consensus on the higher truths (or symbolic meanings) in which the poem may participate. Pope's renovation of the virgin idol shows why virginity was a likely vehicle for this critique of both sacred and secular epistemologies, as debates about the sacredness of words hinged on the sacredness of Mary's ambiguous and paradoxical virginity and because virginity's resistance to being "seen" meant that at this time, nothing could be more "in sight" than the beautiful virgin idol.

NOTES

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1. *Conjectures on Original Composition* (1759), 57. Young criticizes Pope for idolatrously worshipping writers ("His taste partook the error of his Religion" [67]). I will argue, conversely, that *The Rape of the Lock* is anti-idolatrous.

2. Alexander Pope, *The Rape of the Lock*. *The Twickenham Edition of the Poems of Alexander Pope*, John Butt, et al., Eds. 11 volumes (London, 1939–69): II. All further references will be to this edition.

3. See for example Ellen Pollack, "The Rape of the Lock: A Reification of the Myth of Passive Womanhood," in *The Poetics of Sexual Myth* (Chicago, 1985), 77–107. Hereafter cited in the text. See also Earl Wasserman, "The Limits of Allusion in *The Rape of the Lock*," in *Pope: Recent Essays by Several Hands*, Maynard Mack and James Winn, Eds., (Hamden, 1980), 224–246, an important essay that analyzes the relationship between the material and the transcendent. 4. Stewart Crehan argues that critics misread the poem when they assume an idea of virginity that was not yet current. Part of my point in this essay is to situate a discourse on virginity in the historically specific context of Catholic-Protestant debates over idolatry. See "The Rape of the Lock and the Economy of 'Trivial Things.'" *ECS* 31.1 (1997): 45–68. Hereafter cited in the text.

5. Throughout this essay, I use the term “Protestants” loosely. I am dealing mainly with Church of England Protestants, not dissenters, though dissenters were often even more virulently anti-Catholic.

6. Stone, *The Family, Sex and Marriage in England, 1500–1800* (London, 1977). On the importance of Protestantism to the emergence of British national identity, see Linda Colley, *Britons: Forging the Nation, 1707–1837* (New Haven, 1992) and Patrick Collinson, *The Birthpangs of Protestant England* (Houndsmill, 1988).

7. For a longer explanation of the relationship between the new science and virginity, see Corrinne Harol, “Faking it: Female Virginity and Pamela’s Virtue,” *Eighteenth-Century Fiction* 16.2 (2004): 197–216.

8. Master, Thomas. *The Virgin Mary. A Sermon preach’d in Saint Mary’s College Oxon, March, 1641*. London, 1710. Hereafter cited in the text.

9. The OED shows that both meanings would have been in use at this time.

10. Quote is from *Amours of Messalina Late Queen of Albion* (London 1689), 59, an anti-Catholic allegory of the incident.

11. For background and astute analysis of the warming pan myth, see Rachel Weil, *Political Passions* (Manchester, 1999), 86–104.

12. Pope to Atterbury, 20 November 1717, quoted in Maynard Mack, *Alexander Pope: A Life* (New York, 1985), 31.

13. Malcom Ross, *Poetry and Dogma* (New Brunswick, 1954). Hereafter cited in the text.

14. Barbara Lewalski, *Protestant Poetics and the Seventeenth-Century Religious Lyric*, (Princeton, 1979).

15. For a discussion of the Baron as fetishist, see Jeffrey Myers, “The Personality of Belinda’s Baron: Pope’s ‘The Rape of the Lock,’” *American Imago* 26 (1969): 71–77.

16. Ronald Paulson points out Belinda’s dual role as idol and idolater, *Breaking and Remaking* (New Brunswick, 1989), 51. Paulson sees Pope as part of a Georgian “remaking” that follows the more iconoclastic poetry of Jonathan Swift, but I am arguing that Pope is more radically iconoclastic even than Swift.

17. Carnall suggests that she may actually use the pages of the Bible to make the curl, since curls were made with paper. See “Belinda’s Bibles,” in *Alexander Pope: Essays for the Tercentenary* (Aberdeen, 1988), 130–8.

18. For a discussion of this aspect of marionism, see Samuel Freeman, *A Discourse Concerning Invocation of Saints* (London, 1684), 8–9.

19. See “The ‘Frail China Jar’ and the Rude Hand of Chaos,” in John Dixon Hunt, “*The Rape of the Lock*”: A Casebook, (London, 1983), 203.

20. Lewis Sabran, *A Letter to a Peer of the Church of England*, (London, 1687).

21. John Gother, *A Papist Misrepresented*, (London, 1685), 2.

22. Jacques Bénigne Bossuet, *A Pastoral Letter from the Lord Bishop of Meaux to the New Catholics of his Diocese Exhorting them to keep their Easter*, (London, 1686), 17. Hereafter cited in the text.

23. Augustine says, “it is servile to follow the letter and take signs for the things they signify.” See *On Christian Doctrine*, D.W. Robertson, Translator (Indianapolis, 1958), 87.

24. 1 Corinthians 7.

25. In an interesting twist, though, both Mary and Belinda’s bodies lie in ways exactly opposite to one that men worry about. Theresa Colletti argues that the representational and epistemological crisis around Mary derives from the fact that, though quintessentially virginal, her pregnancy makes her “appear” to no longer be a virgin. See “Purity and Danger: The Paradox of Mary’s Body and the En-gendering of the Infancy Narrative in the English Mystery Cycles,” in *Feminist Approaches to the Body in Medieval Literature*. Linda Lomperis and Sarah Stansburg, Eds. (Philadelphia, 1993), 65–95. Mary’s is a case where visual “evidence” does not reliably point to the truth: a pregnant virgin, but where the fallout from that deception will be born by the woman, rather than by a man who may be deceived by her. There is no suggestion that Belinda’s locks are a deceptive representation of her virginity, but once they are cut, she, like Mary, comes to have a body which signals

lack of virginity despite the "truth." Thus the virginal bodies of both Belinda and Mary do seem to lie about the status of their virginity, though in a way that disavows the male anxiety that this possibility presents.

26. *A Preservative Against Popery* (London, 1688), 35.

27. For examples of the treatment of Mary's body, see Thomas Lewis, *An Inquiry into the shape, the beauty, and stature of the person of Christ, and of the Virgin Mary. Offered to the consideration of late converts to popery* (London, 1735); Georges Hickes, *Speculum Beate. Due Praise of the Virgin Mary, by a True Catholick of the Church of England* (London, 1686), 1–5; and Thomas Master.

28. Clagett, *A Discourse Concerning the Worship of the Blessed Virgin and the Saints* (London, 1686), 3–4.

29. For interesting analyses of the relationship between the physical heart, whose circulatory functions were just being accepted, and the emotional heart, an important locus for the cult of sensibility, see Robert Erickson, *The Language of the Heart, 1650–1750* (Philadelphia, 1997), and Scott Manning Stevens, "Sacred Heart and Secular Brain," in *The Body in Parts: Fantasies of Corporeality in Early Modern Europe*, David Hillman and Carla Mazzi, Eds. (New York, 1997), 263–82. The connections between the heart (as physical and emotional) and virginity (as physical and moral) are interesting. Both are parts of the body undergoing radical re-thinking, and both are strongly implicated in the emergent standard of sensibility.

30. Tracy, *The Rape Observ'd* (Toronto, 1974), 77. Tracy finds these symbolic synecdoches quite evocative, suggesting that "we know all we need to know" about Sir Plume through his objects (xxiv). I agree in principle, but disagree over what it is that we actually know. I don't find the objects as significant as the fact that Plume is investing them with symbolic power. To the extent that Tracy and other critics also invest these objects with symbolic power, I argue that they miss the point of the poem's skepticism about the possibility of interpretation.

31. Laura Brown "Imperialism and Poetic Form," *Alexander Pope* (London, 1985): 6–45. See also Ellen Pollack and Stewart Crehan.

32. See *The Verbal Icon: Studies in the Meaning of Poetry* (Lexington, 1954), 153. Hereafter cited in the text. For more on the logic of Pope's rhymes, see Hugh Kenner, "Pope's Reasonable Rhymes," in *Pope: Recent Essays by Several Hands*, Maynard Mack and James Winn, Eds. (Hamden, 1980), 63–79.

33. *Resemblance and Disgrace: Alexander Pope and the Deformation of Culture* (Cambridge, 1996), 52.

34. M. Halbertal and A. Margalit explain that the historical reason that images and not language are potentially idolatrous is that "with pictorial representations there is always the fear that the representing object will at some stage be transformed into the permanent dwelling place of God . . . whereas language does not create an object that can undergo such a transformation." *Idolatry* (Cambridge, 1992), 52. My point is that Pope's poem, though an object that can undergo transformation, resists idolatry by resisting meaning.

35. Nancy Armstrong has emphasized the importance of female virtue and chaste matrimony to Britain's middle-class capitalist economy. See *Desire and Domestic Fiction: A Political History of the Novel* (Oxford, 1987).

36. Kenneth Gross, *Spencerian Poetics: Idolatry, Iconoclasm and Magic* (Ithaca, 1985), 34–7.

37. While the resistance to stable meaning opposes idolatry, the beauty and technical perfection of Pope's poem, which are so often remarked upon, threaten to turn his secular poem into an idolatrous object (in Augustine's terms, something not useful but merely enjoyable).

38. *A key to the lock; or, A treatise proving, beyond all contradiction, the dangerous tendency of a late poem, entituled, The rape of the lock, to government and religion*, by Esdras Barnivelt, apoth. [pseud.] 1715. Pope parodies the Protestant notion that the Bible could be used as an interpretive key to all human events.

39. Woodman, "Pope: The Papist and the Poet," *Essays in Criticism* 46.3 (1996), 219–33.

40. See John Wallace, "Examples are Best Precepts: Readers and Meaning in Seventeenth Century Poetry." *Critical Inquiry* 1.1 (1974): 273–90, and Stewart Crehan.

41. Prendergast, John, "Pierre Du Moulin on the Eucharist: Protestant Sign Theory and the Grammar of Embodiment." *ELH* 65 (1998): 47–68. Hereafter cited in the text.

42. Both sides are thus trying to align themselves on the side of spirituality and faith, against a more objective, scientific approach to knowledge, and both are trying to claim jurisdiction over knowledge that must be interpreted. Thus, while they argue with each other, both sets of religious writers are also clearly staking out a critique of the eighteenth-century scientific revolution.

43. Eco, *Semiotics and the Philosophy of Language* (Bloomington, 1986), 130. Ruth Vanita argues that when the literal becomes symbolic or suggestive, its radical potential surfaces. I am arguing thus that the relish with which Pope's poem spins out of meaningfulness is radically secular and literary, rather than religious. See *Sappho and The Virgin Mary* (New York, 1996).

44. For an example of this common usage, see the Catholic Church's *Primer. The office of the Blessed Virgin Mary* (London, 1732), 79.