

The Criterion

Volume 2020

Article 2

6-18-2020

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Recommended Citation

Masin-Moyer, Nina (2020) "The Battle for Love Under the Governance of Strict Social Codes," *The Criterion*: Vol. 2020 , Article 2.

Available at: <https://crossworks.holycross.edu/criterion/vol2020/iss1/2>

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The Battle for Love Under the Governance of Strict Social Codes

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In both Geoffrey Chaucer's "The Knight's Tale" and Alexander Pope's "The Rape of the Lock," strict social rules upheld by higher beings dictate the actions of men and women. Characters in both stories build shrines and pray to the powers of virtues to grant them their romantic wishes, all in the context of preparing for battle, either real or metaphorical. The parallel circumstances of Palamon seeking Emily and the Baron longing for Belinda (and her hair) reflect the control that social codes exert on the lives of all people. No cosmic power, however, can protect a woman from the rules that grant men dominance over them. While "The Knight's Tale" portrays such themes in a grand, romantic style, "The Rape of the Lock" presents similar ideas in a satirical, mock epic mode. Despite the opposite methods of storytelling and commenting on the norms of different time periods, both stories effectively convey similar ideas regarding a lack of human control within the strict confines of social rules that determine all people's destinies.

In the world of the "The Knight's Tale," one social tradition is the worship of love. Palamon's all-consuming chivalric love motivates him to marry Emily. The gods grant him his wish to do so because of his romantic motives and honorable spirit, which align with the code of chivalry that ruled the world of romance during the Knight's time period. Chivalry, honor, and courtly love were the most important codes for noblemen to follow. Chaucer recreates these structures in an ancient story that reflects his own values. The night before the tournament that will decide whether Palamon or Arcite will win the hand of Emily, Palamon prays at the temple of Venus, the goddess of love. The temple is decorated with all the facets of love, from, "[t]he broken slepes, and sikes colde" and "[t]he firy strokes of the desiryng," to the "Plesance and Hope, Desir, Foolhardynesse," (Chaucer l. 1920, 1922, 1925). Venus encompasses all the joys and pains of love that Palamon has experienced in his quest to win Emily. Palamon calls on all these forces in hopes that he will be victorious in winning Emily. The Knight also reveals the dominance of love over all other powers in describing the temple of Venus. He describes how, "[t]hus may ye seen that wysdom ne richesse, / Beautee ne sleight, strengthe ne hardynesse, / Ne may wiht Venus holde champartie" (l. 1947-9). Romance is the most powerful force and therefore Venus, its cosmic embodiment, controls fate like no other force can. Unlike Arcite, who prays to Mars, the god of war, Palamon

fighters not simply to win a tournament or to prove his cunning, but with the sole intent to marry Emily as the driving force behind all his actions. His choice of praying to Venus leads to his eventual triumph and marriage to Emily.

Palamon proves his adherence to courtly romantic values when he prays to Venus herself. He confesses how distraught his inability to have Emily has rendered him, telling Venus, “I am so confus that I kan noight seye” (Chaucer l. 2230). Palamon reveals how love and heartbreak have debilitated him beyond words, proving his dedication to the will of love. He goes on to explain that he asks not “for armes for to yelpe,” nor “tomorwe to have victorie,” nor “[o]f pris of armes blowen up and down” (l. 2238-9, 2241). Rather, he tells Venus that his only desire is that “I wole have fully possessioun / Of Emelye, and dye in thy servyse” (l. 2242-3). Palamon proves that he has no want for glory, fame, or military victory; he only needs Emily, and he is willing to die for her. He also promises that he will “holden werre alwey with chastitee” because his lust and desire overrule Emily’s, or any woman’s, wish for chastity (l. 2236). The only war he wishes to win is fighting for love against purity. Venus acknowledges his prayer through the shaking of her temple. Palamon, through a series of victories and losses, wins Emily because of his complete dedication to the cause of love above all else, unlike Arcite’s prayers to Mars for glory and victory. Palamon’s loyalty to the chivalrous promotion of love, which was considered the most important purpose for a man, allows him to prevail. His victory comes not from his own skills or Emily’s reciprocated love (or lack thereof), but from the gods who willed it to happen because he followed the right code of honor, a code aligning with the world in which the storytelling Knight lived.

Contrarily, Emily is governed by both chastity and marriage, so she goes to the temple of Diana, the goddess of chastity, before the night of the tournament. The temple of Diana is decorated “[o]f huntyng and shamefast chastitee” and depicts the scene in which “Attheon an hert ymaked, / For vengeance that he saugh Diane al naked” (Chaucer l. 2055, 2065-2066). In stark contrast to Palamon, praying before the lustful scenes in Venus’ temple, Emily worships a goddess that has the power to defend female purity, a value important both to her and the society of courtly romance that the Knight telling the tale lives in. The distinction that the Knight as a narrator raises between the temples of Venus and Diana creates a dichotomy between the ideal values that were expected of men and women.

Just as Palamon calls upon the pity of Venus, Emily also asks Diana to prove her adherence to the social norm of female chastity and her intense desire to remain loyal to that vow. Emily admits to Diana that she has had a “[d]esire to ben a mayden al my lyf” (Chaucer l. 2305). Emily also recognizes Diana’s great power when she tells her “[n]ow help me, lady, sith ye may and kan,” and, pledging her fealty, promises that if her prayer is answered that “whil I lyve, a mayde I wol thee serve” (l. 2312, 2230). Diana and her chastity are powerful forces in this romantic structure, yet Emily seems to know that her power is

limited because she asks that if she must marry one of the two men, that Diana will “[a]s sende me hym that moost desireth me” (l. 2325). Although Emily appears to have strong convictions for the personal and societal importance of chastity, she recognizes the power of men’s passion.

Regardless of Emily’s complete devotion to Diana, her prayer cannot be granted by the will of gods who value male honor and romance above female virginity. Diana appears at the pyre where Emily is weeping and declares that “[a]mong the goddes hye it is affermed, / And by eterne word writen and confermed, / Thou shalt ben wedded” (Chaucer l. 2349-51). Diana confesses to Emily that her marriage to either Palamon or Arcite is cosmically determined because there are forces greater than her that decide her fate. Diana continues, saying, “[t]hou shalt ben wedded unto oon of tho / That han for thee so muchel care and wo” (l. 2351-2). According to the social norms, the pain that the men have felt and the happiness they will get upon marrying Emily is greater and more important than Emily’s pain at losing her chastity and joy that she would feel remaining a maiden. The love that Palamon has for Emily is a force stronger than her desire for chastity because the romantic ideals of men are valued above the virginal desires of women in their society. Emily acknowledges the unbalanced power of men when she cries out, “I putte me in thy proteccioun, / Dyane, and in thy disposicioun” (l. 2363-4). Just as Palamon laid himself out before the will of Venus, Emily devoted herself to a vow of chastity and belief in the power of Diana. Despite her convictions, all her hope was destroyed by powers greater than her. No matter how chaste and pure Emily worked to become, her fate was sealed by the masculine powers of romance dictating the rules of courtly love.

Transitively, Alexander Pope’s “The Rape of the Lock” mocks the romantic storytelling style of “The Knight’s Tale” through an over-exaggeration of trivial issues and a mirroring of form. Both “The Knight’s Tale” and “The Rape of the Lock” reflect the power that societal roles hold over romantic gestures, but “The Rape of the Lack” employs a satirical form. Like in Palamon’s world, honor is the controlling force behind men’s actions. The Baron uses mementos from his past romantic conquests to build a shrine calling upon the powers he has over women in order to get a lock of Belinda’s hair. To build this shrine, the Baron collects “... three garters, half a pair of gloves, / And all the trophies of his former loves” (Pope l. 39-40). In this society, the Baron values his romantic experiences based on the material trophies (gloves and garters) of his relationships. While Palamon sees Emily as a distant, almost mythical entity to pursue, the Baron has a more intimate relationship with women and seeks to directly seduce Belinda so he can get her hair. By calling the elements of his shrine “trophies,” the Baron labels his past relationships as victories and conquests; though they are metaphorical battles, they are similar to the actual tournament Palamon must fight to win Emily. Instead of praying at a shrine built

on the grand, emotional aspects of love, the Baron builds a temple to the visual side of love, marking a shift over time in the social operations of courtship.

As the Baron continues to build the shrine, he fuels it with the passionate fire of romance to pray in the hope of obtaining Belinda's hair. The Baron employs tangible expressions of love in his shrine, "[w]ith tender billet-doux he lights the pyre, / And breathes three am'rous sighs to raise the fire" (Pope l. 41-2). The Baron specifically blows on the pyre three times, a highly symbolic number perhaps representing his prayer to the forces controlling his love as one might pray to the trinity. Though a less tangible but still evident show of love, the temple is lit by the affectionate words of love letters and the sighs of longing, thus fueling a fire representative of his lust for Belinda. Similar to the way in which the walls of Venus' temple are adorned with images of the many facets of love, the Baron's temple to the more general concept of love is built on the foundation of physical manifestations of love, and then is lit aflame with the language and communication of romance pertinent to the time period. The Baron constructs a shrine to love out of the elements of romance appropriate to the period in order to appeal to whatever forces control female adoration.

Similar to Palamon's confession of lovesickness and petitions to Venus to hear his prayer, so too does the Baron, "[t]hen prostrate falls, and begs with ardent eyes, / Soon to obtain, and long possess the prize" (Pope l. 43-4). By putting himself in the vulnerable position of literally laying down and pleading to have the woman he desires, the Baron is, like Palamon, showing his utter commitment to love. The Baron pledges his commitment to abide by whatever deities or forces control the world of romance. By following such rules, he eventually succeeds in cutting off a lock of Belinda's hair. However, he once again refers to Belinda's hair, and therefore Belinda herself, as a "prize," which explains why "[t]he pow'rs gave ear, and granted half his prayer, / The rest the winds dispersed in empty air" (l. 45-6). The Baron has not entirely pleased the "pow'rs" that he prayed to, failing to fully follow the virtue of honor that guides men. His reference to Belinda as a conquest shows that love may not be the Baron's only motivator. Like Arcite, he is driven by a desire for victory in a (metaphorical) battle. While the Baron may have shown his commitment to love and romance through the building of his shrine, his intention to cut off Belinda's hair as a "prize" is not an honorable act despite being driven by love, indicating Pope's mock heroic at work. Therefore, both Palamon and the Baron live within a societal structure that values romance and honor above all other virtues. When both men are vying for women, they pray at a shrine to forces of love within their respective social norms. Palamon prays with the promise of upholding grand acts of courtly romance and the victory of love above chastity, while the Baron sacrifices various objects of love in his promise to win Belinda. Both men seek to conquer the affections of women and are only able to do so by appealing to the social forces and the cosmic manifestations that control the framework in which the world of romance operates.

Just as the Baron's desire for Belinda is much more materialistically lustful than the grandeur of Palamon's love for Emily, so too are Belinda's actions controlled by materialistic sylphs guiding her to value her outward beauty and ladylike behavior. Instead of worshipping an independent deity, Belinda worships her own appearance which, unbeknownst to her, is controlled by the powers of sylphs who represent the social norms of womanhood. On her vanity, she has "[e]ach silver vase in mystic order laid" as if on an altar (Pope l. 122). By describing her "vases" as "mystic," Pope insinuates that her cosmetic products have some sort of higher power in the making of her appearance, suggesting the possibility of a deity's involvement. Belinda is then described as being "[f]irst, robed in white, the nymph intent adores, / With head uncovered, the cosmetic powers" (l. 123-4). Just as chastity is valued by Emily's society, Belinda also shows the importance of innocence and recalls the ritualism of ancient religions by dressing in a white robe, thus implying purity. She leaves her head exposed to show off her beautiful hair, an important feature in a woman's appearance. She is getting ready to employ "cosmetic powers," creating her appearance for the day, which sounds like a play on the word cosmic. Just as her containers are "mystic," so too is there a spiritual quality to Belinda's makeup. Although both Emily and Belinda appear to value purity, the initial description of Belinda's vanity reflects her devotion to appearance rather than ideological values.

Consequently, as a result of the unspoken rules of her society, Belinda worships her physical beauty, which is why the Baron's love is so closely tied to materialism. Unlike Emily, who is seen as a distant and passive figure of longing and characterized only by her chastity, Belinda is a physical being emphasized by the importance of her outward appearance. Looking in a mirror, "[a] heavenly image in the glass appears, / To that she bends, to that her eyes she rears" (Pope l. 125-6). Instead of the "heavenly image" being the figure of the goddess Diana or Venus, Belinda worships her own face in the mirror. She yields to the desire of having a beautiful face and molds herself to be pleasing to the eyes of men. While Belinda appears to be worshipping herself, she is really pledging herself to the ideals of beauty and romance that her society has set for women. Emily's social norms require her to be faithful to virtues like chastity and purity; Belinda is going through a similar process, but her society demands that she attend to her own appearance. Consequently, the two worlds operate on ideals of female desirability for men. Although opposite in these two stories, both women worship ideals that will attract men to them, regardless of their own desires. Though Belinda believes that she is independently choosing to create her image in this way, she is not aware of the influence of the sylphs that dictate her actions to follow the social code.

Belinda spends her morning going through the ritualistic process of putting together her hair, makeup, and clothing so "[t]h' inferior priestess, at her altar's side, / Trembling begins the sacred rites of pride" (Pope l. 127-8). Belinda's maid helps her, though she is trembling because she realizes how crucial it is for

Belinda's hair, face, and clothing to be perfect. As she begins to amplify her appearance with combs and jewelry, Pope describes how "[t]he various offerings of the world appear" (l. 130), as if the universe is worshipping Belinda herself as a goddess. However, Belinda worshipping herself and her having others fawn over her because of the way she looks is a result of the materialistic society that she occupies. Pope, in using language like "priestess," "altar," and "sacred rites," recalls old romantic tales such as "The Knight's Tale," thus satirizing the importance of getting ready in the morning by comparing it to religious rituals. Taking a step back, the importance of appearance seems almost ridiculous, but women put immense time and effort into it anyway because of unspoken social norms. The ideas that govern society have the power to make the absurd seem like life and death. The process shows women's prayers to the virtue of pride, reflecting outward beauty's importance to women in 18th century society, no matter how trivial it may seem compared to grander ideas of Emily's chastity or Palamon's lust.

Furthermore, just as the gods in "The Knight's Tale" and the virtues they represent control the outcome of the tournament, social constructs also control the situation in which Belinda's hair is cut, which is dramatized to feel as important as a fight to the death. Belinda putting on her perfect appearance is thus compared to going into battle. After an extensive list of the various exotic and expensive accessories Belinda uses to elevate her appearance, Pope describes that "[n]ow awful beauty puts on all its arms . . . and calls forth all the wonders of her face" (l. 139-42). In preparation of the day to come, Belinda uses her accessories and beauty as armour to protect herself and allow herself to take part in the world of men. Just as Emily has Diana as a protector against impurity, Belinda wields her beauty as armor to shield her from the desires of men. However, Pope reveals that it is not Belinda, nor even her maid, who puts up these protections of beauty, but the mystical sylphs who "surround their darling care; / These set the head, and those divide the hair" (l.145-6). Belinda is unaware of the sylphs' aid because she is "praised for labours not her own" (l.148). Unlike Emily, who prays directly to the manifestation of her dearest value, Belinda worships the work of the sylphs by proxy of herself. They are in control of assuring that Belinda's appearance falls in line with what the world expects of her.

Despite Belinda's being the object of perfect adoration on account of her beauty and the hard work of the sylphs to make her adhere to those expectations, these qualities are not enough against the power of the Baron and his masculine forces of love. The sylphs are able to see that "... black omens threat the brightest fair. That e'er deserved a watchful spirit's care" (Pope l.102-3). Belinda has perfectly followed societal expectations, but the sylphs know that something dangerous is coming. Despite all their efforts to prepare, they are not strong enough to prevent the Baron from cutting Belinda's hair. His desire for her beauty outweighs the powers of her appearance, despite her adherence to

societal standards. No matter how hard Belinda or the sylphs tried to maintain her charm, the Baron had the power to destroy her critical feature, her hair, because their society valued his desires the most. Despite being separated by time and culture, Belinda's situation parallels Emily's because both societies force men and women to follow strict rules but always prioritize the virtues of men above women if they come in conflict with each other.

Therefore, in both "The Knight's Tale" and "The Rape of the Lock," affection is a battle to be won when the desires of men clash with the values of women. Palamon, with the power of chivalric love on his side, fights in a tournament to win Emily's hand in marriage. The Baron, calling upon the forces of previous relationships, steals a lock of Belinda's hair to win her love, causing a satirical battle to ensue. Both Palamon and the Baron use their power as men to pray to higher powers and use the influence of social male dominance to win the woman of their dreams. Emily and Belinda, however, pray to virtues that are important to them and the social status of women at the time, but their prayers prove fruitless in their efforts to combat the wills of men. All four of these characters occupy worlds that force them to follow strict social codes and they believe that adherence to those rules will give them success. For the men, their worshipping of the code of honor allows them to be successful, and those prayers surpass the wishes that the women make. For women, the lack of control over their fates despite complete devotion to social constructs transcends time, space, and social norms. Consequently, men follow codes that will get them any woman they desire, whereas women are devoted to rituals that make them desirable to men.

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