

## Cave of Spleen - a feminist perspective: Status of women in early 18th century England



The Cave of Spleen: Aubrey Beardsley's illustration for Pope's "The Rape of the Lock"

By Pragya Ranjan

"The Rape of the Lock" by Alexander Pope published in 1712 is a mock-heroic narrative which satirically glorifies trivial incident of cutting of locks of protagonist Belinda. This poem was written in the Augustan Era (1660-1784) which is marked by the period of scientific reason and rationality, whose effect can be seen on the writers of those times. This timeline is particularly important to analyse the episode of the Cave of Spleen.

First we need to understand the importance of Spleen in the early 18th century literature. The spleen referred to both the organ present on the left side of the human body near the stomach, and also the disease caused by the inability of the said organ to absorb humour, melancholy or black bile resulting in black vapours which disturbs a person mentally (Babb, Lawrence. "THE CAVE OF SPLEEN." *The Review of English Studies*, vol. os-XII, no. 46, 1936, pp. 165–76, <https://doi.org/10.1093/res/os-XII.46.165>). This disease was so frequent that it came to be known as the English Malady, but not as frequent in men as it was in women. The argument was that the animal spirits- 'clear and subtle fluids which were believed to flow in the nerves and to serve as a medium of communication between the mind and the organs of sense and mot'(ROBIN, P. ANSELL. *OLD PHYSIOLOGY IN ENGLISH LITERATURE: A Thesis Submitted to the University of London for the... Degree of d. Lit,1911, pg 108-14 and 139-75*) - was weaker in women than in men, hence easily disordered. The primary physical symptoms of Spleen included abdominal pain and headache as given by Richard Blackmore, the author of 'Treatise of the Spleen and vapours'. While mentally, the symptoms were similar to depression and bipolar, including fits of hysteria, uncontrollable rage, panic fear, terrifying nightmares and hallucination in some cases.

Given the background, Pope's personification of the Queen of Spleen and Umbriel's metaphorical journey into the Cave of Spleen is used to satirise the upper-class women of the early eighteenth century, since Spleen was considered to be a disease which only affected the upper class and elite. This is exhibited in Johnathan Swift's "Modern Lady" who suffers from the spleen because she is spoiled and idle: she complains of it first because she has lost at cards the previous night and later because she fears her party will not appear for tonight's game (Swift, Jonathan. "Journal of a Modern Lady". 44, 198-99, 216; *Poems 2:446,457*). It also comes into notice in Swift's "Gulliver's Travels: A Voyage to the Country of the Houyhnhnms". He says while referring to European Yahoos that 'true seeds of spleen, which only seizeth on the lazy, the luxurious, and the rich' (Swift, Jonathan. "Gulliver's Travels". Edited by Namita Sethi, Critical Edition, Worldview Publications, 2023., Pg 236).

As Umbriel further advances into the Cave of Spleen, he finds women turned into inanimate objects like Teapot, Pipkin, Jar and Goose-pye. Richard Burton says, "A melancholic (another name for Spleen in the 17th century) may suppose himself to be a dog, cock, bear, horse, glass, butter.... all-glass, a pitcher, and will therefore let nobody come near him" (Burton's Anatomy, pg 463).

Further Umbriel finds pregnant men and maids in bottle asking for phallus, "Men prove with Child, as pow'rful Fancy works, And Maids turn'd Bottels, call aloud for Corks" which represent the maladies resulting from the repression of sexual desires. This suggests that women, especially upper class bourgeois women are not in control of their own body or responsible for their own action, as they are the creatures driven by irrationality and sexual desires arising out of the malfunction of their brain caused by spleen. Hence, making women incapable of intellectual reasoning and displaying appropriate emotional reaction to a situation.

Umbriel addresses the Queen of Spleen as 'Parent of Vapours and of Female Wit, who give'th Hysteric or Poetic Fit'. The womb (Greek hystera) was thought to be the cause of irrational behaviour (hysteria) in women ( Pope, Alexander. "The Rape Of the Lock". Edited by Harriet Raghunathan, Critical Edition, Worldview Publications, 2014., Footnote 60), thus espouses the shame around female organs and the lack of control over their sexuality. Women in 18th CE who engaged in the intellectual and rational behaviour of writing were considered irrational, solely on the basis that the Spleen has taken over their conscience which has driven them insane (poetic fit).

The two handmaids, Ill nature and Affectation elaborates further on the issue of the status of women being heavily dependent on the outward appearance and superficial mannerism. Ill nature is depicted as an old, unmarried woman thus a social outcast, while Affectation is young and rich, still her inability to speak properly due to lisp prevents her from holding a reputable social status because of her inability to get married to a person of rank.

Umbriel proudly lists his notorious acts to defame innocent women -'rumpled Petticoats, or tumbled Beds, or caus'd Suspicion when no Soul was rude'-as if those women rightly deserved it and at account of which he impresses the Queen to give him a bag with 'the force of female lungs, sighs, sobs, and Passions, and the War of Tongues' for Belinda. All these actions suggest two things. First it signifies, after the cutting of her locks by Baron, Belinda is not considered pure or chaste anymore. Hence the sylph left, who was meant to take care of her; and Umbriel, the gnome took his place and caused her more disappointment and suffering. This idea reinforces how men have the power over a woman's honour and how easily it can be taken away from her even if she hasn't transcended the boundaries along which the society defines chastity.

Second, Pope suggests by the humor and pun directed towards Belinda's rage and ferocity that she was overreacting over the loss of her hair against her will and consent, thus completely invalidating her emotions.

The Rape of the lock was written in an era when scientific explanation was sought for every disease, be it physical or mental. Psychological disturbance was believed to be associated with some or the other kind of physical ailment or malady. The poets of those times preferred not to relate their personal experiences of depression, spleen or hysteria in their work, as it was believed that someone who is intellectually sound couldn't experience these disturbances. However, Anne Finch was the only woman of the time who related her personal experience in her poem 'The Spleen', thus justifying her emotions as valid. She expresses feelings which her contemporary poets would feel it necessary to distance or disguise in such fictions as Pope's Cave of Spleen (ROGERS, KATHARINE M. "Finch's 'Candid Account' vs. Eighteenth-Century Theories of the Spleen." *Mosaic: A Journal for the Interdisciplinary Study of Literature*, vol. 22, no. 1, 1989, pp. 17-27. JSTOR, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/24780450>. Accessed 29 May 2023).

As it is already known that Pope was physically deformed since his childhood as he suffered from Pott's

disease and hence, he was barely 4 foot 5 inches in height. As a result, he had to face mental turmoil all his life because of the absurd comments and refusal of women to engage with him romantically. It might be possible that he himself was suffering from some symptoms of Spleen (which today is known as depression) but could not let others know about it, hence successfully projected his own feelings to his female characters for comic relief. The Pope saw spleen as unhappiness or ill-humour which a rational person should be able to control. On his deathbed, he declared that he had never been "hippish," i.e. suffered from spleen, in his whole life ( ibid), which further raises suspicions as to why he viewed it necessary to publicly justify himself when he didn't suffer from spleen in the first place. In conclusion, the episode of the cave of the spleen gives an insight into how women were perceived in early 18th century England and absurd scientific explanations given to prove women as irrational beings. It also critiques the triviality and vanity of the upper-class society, mocking their exaggerated focus on superficial matters. The Cave of Spleen is a critical episode from the point of view of feminist thinkers, raising questions about society's control over women's sexuality and invalidation of their emotions.

FRIDAY, JUNE 02, 2023

SHARE

## Comments

[Post a Comment](#)

## TRENDING

