

‘Angels in Machines’: Tracing the Proto-Posthuman in Alexander Pope’s ‘The Rape of the Lock’¹

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Abstract

While a number of scholars have begun to consider and analyse the relation between posthumanist thought and the eighteenth century, few have attempted to read the work of Alexander Pope through a posthumanist lens. This article calls attention to this critical gap and examines a variety of posthuman sites and figures in ‘The Rape of the Lock’. Using posthumanist, cyborg, and monster theories, it looks at ways in which this poem negotiates and challenges the traditional binaries of male and female, human and animal, human and object. The article does not attempt to locate the contemporary cyborg in the eighteenth-century, but recognizes the value of using the notion of the cyborg and other posthumanist paradigms to re-approach and reread eighteenth-century texts. Such a reading provides a framework from which to analyse the transgressive elements of Pope’s text and draws attention to the ways in which this poem disrupts the very dichotomies that it seems to put forward.

Keywords: Alexander Pope, ‘The Rape of the Lock’, Donna Haraway, posthumanism, cyborgs, 18th-century British Literature, poetry, transgression, gender binaries, feminist theory

Over the past two decades, the field of posthumanist studies has grown extensively, with projects ranging from an engagement with posthuman ethics,² posthumanist analyses of some of the most canonical works in Western literature,³ and even a consideration of the ways that posthumanist concerns are reflected in children’s literature.⁴ While this article does not reach as far back as Shakespeare in its engagement with what may be termed the ‘proto-posthuman’, it does look back at the early eighteenth century to consider Alexander Pope’s ‘The Rape of the Lock’ through a posthumanist lens. While I am not the first to consider the intersection between the eighteenth-century and posthumanist thought, relatively few studies have attempted this so far. One critic who has engaged with this field is Allison Muri, who uses cyborg

¹ I would like to thank Kevin J. Gardner and Marija Grech for their helpful and insightful suggestions and revisions throughout this project.

² See Patricia MacCormack, *Posthuman Ethics: Embodiment and Cultural Theory* (Surrey: Ashgate, 2012).

³ See, for example, *Posthumanist Shakespeares*, eds. Stefan Herbrechter and Ivan Callus (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012).

⁴ See Zoe Jaques, *Children’s Literature and the Posthuman: Animal, Environment, Cyborg* (New York: Routledge, 2015).

theory to examine the concept of the 'man-machine' from the late seventeenth century through to the early nineteenth century.⁵ Similarly, Adelheid Voskuhl looks at mechanical androids from the eighteenth and nineteenth century and argues, in part, that they reflect the 'sentimental culture' of the Enlightenment.⁶ Both Voskuhl's and Muri's studies are particularly useful for thinking about eighteenth-century proto-posthumanism and the way that the mechanisms and metaphors of the time anticipated some of today's cyborgian and posthuman figures. Even fewer critics have examined Pope's texts through a posthumanist lens. To my knowledge, only one such study exists: an article by Kathleen McConnell that relates the film *Artificial Intelligence: AI* to the Pygmalion myths and to 'The Rape of the Lock'.⁷ Although its primary concern is not Pope's text but the Spielberg film, McConnell's essay marks a significant step forward towards a posthumanist reading of Pope's poetry.

Following the works of Voskuhl, Muri, and McConnell, this article focuses specifically on Pope's 'The Rape of the Lock' and uses posthumanist theory as a framework from which to examine the transgressive nature of this text. The essay makes no attempts to discover the contemporary cyborg hiding in the eighteenth century. As Muri argues

[t]here is no such thing as the Enlightenment cyborg. To imagine the twentieth-century cybernetic organism in terms of a period encompassing the years 1660 to 1830 could seem anachronistic to say the least. From any perspective, the man-machine of the Enlightenment, a relatively short-lived figure in early modern philosophy and medicine, bears no resemblance to the physical reconstruction of the human form possible today, or to the imagined monsters of flesh, metal, and electronic circuitry featured in science fiction and film.⁸

This article does not constitute some attempt to anachronistically locate the contemporary cybernetic organism in the work of a posthumanist Pope; instead it draws on present-day posthumanist theory and criticism to arrive at a better understanding of the various sites of transgression that have been located in Pope's work. My reading emphasizes the fragility of conventional boundaries and binary oppositions between nature and artifice, man and woman, subject and object, and shows how Pope's text dismantles and deconstructs these oppositions even while it continues to set them in place. This posthumanist reading also offers a lens through which to understand the complex networks at play in Pope's poem – permeable networks of beings that reflect how individualized human subjects are constituted by the very environments in which they are immersed.⁹

⁵ See Allison Muri, *The Enlightenment Cyborg: A History of Communications and Control in the Human Machine, 1660-1830* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2007).

⁶ Adelheid Voskuhl, *Androids in the Enlightenment: Mechanics, Artisans, and Cultures of the Self* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013), 167.

⁷ Kathleen McConnell, 'Creating People for Popular Consumption: Echoes of Pygmalion and "The Rape of the Lock"', *Artificial Intelligence: AI*, *The Journal of Popular Culture* 40.4 (2007): 683-99.

⁸ Muri, *The Enlightenment Cyborg*, 3.

⁹ My reading of the poem draws and expands on Peter Stallybrass and Allon White's *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1986). By reading Pope's poem in relation to posthumanist theory, I am able here to go beyond Stallybrass and White's Bakhtinian understanding of transgression and present transgressive bodies as being embedded within, and constructed out of, the larger political, cultural and physical networks that determine them.

What exactly is the posthuman and what are its characteristics? We cannot identify a single unifying and complete definition of the posthuman and posthumanism. Indeed, scholars and theorists have often disagreed over how these terms should be used.¹⁰ For the purpose of this article, I use the term *posthuman* to refer to a body in which the human and the nonhuman—whether in the form of the animal, the machine, the artificial, or the technological—meet. Of particular interest here is the notion of the cyborg, theorized by Donna Haraway as ‘a cybernetic organism, a hybrid of machine and organism, a creature of social reality as well as a creature of fiction’.¹¹ The cyborg is a site at which organism and machine meet, mix, and bleed into each other. It is this meeting, mixing and bleeding that calls into question and collapses the many binaries and oppositions with which the human has traditionally defined itself and the world around it. As Haraway argues, ‘[c]yborg imagery can suggest a way out of the maze of dualisms in which we have explained our bodies and our tools to ourselves’.¹²

Pope’s poem sets the stage for a number of such cyborgian meetings and merges. The poem’s very form, the mock heroic, in itself already cuts across the boundaries of genre to bring together extreme points of contrast: low culture, through the poem’s ‘not at all exalted’ action of cutting off a piece of hair, converges with high culture in the poem’s form and epic imagery.¹³ In this sense, the poem constitutes an ideal site for the transgressing of other boundaries and the challenging of other binary oppositions. Male and female, human and animal, human and object—these so-called opposites are often conflated with one another in the poem, anticipating the cyborgian transgressiveness described by Haraway.

A Life of Deformity

Before looking directly at ‘The Rape of the Lock’, I will briefly consider how certain biographical elements of Pope’s own life could be related to the posthumanist themes considered in this article.¹⁴ Pope was no stranger to “strange” bodies. His contraction of Pott’s disease at the age of 12 resulted in a curved spine, a humpback, and other physical difficulties. By the time he wrote and published ‘The Rape of the Lock’, Pott’s disease had significantly changed Pope’s body. As Maynard Mack notes, when Pope met William Wycherley in 1704, he was ‘by this time [already] (so far as we can tell) beginning to be stooped’.¹⁵

¹⁰ For an overview of the use of this term, see Cary Wolfe, *What is Posthumanism?* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010), xi-xiv.

¹¹ Donna Haraway, ‘A Manifesto for Cyborgs: Science, Technology, and Socialist Feminism in the 1980’, *The Haraway Reader* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 7.

¹² Haraway, ‘A Manifesto for Cyborgs’, 39.

¹³ Maynard Mack, ‘Mock Heroic in *The Rape of the Lock*’, in *The Rape of the Lock: A Casebook*, ed. John Dixon Hunt (London: Macmillan, 1968), 154.

¹⁴ For those unfamiliar with Pope’s poem, I will provide some brief context here. In 1711, at his friend John Caryll’s request, Pope wrote two cantos of the poem after Lord Petre, the son of a prominent Catholic family, stole a lock of hair from Arabella Fermor, the daughter of another prominent Catholic family. The incident outraged Arabella, whom Petre was courting, and caused a schism between the two families. Caryll suggested that Pope write the humorous poem to make light of the situation and reconcile the families. Pope published the completed poem in 1714, but it seems that the poem only prompted more animosity between the families.

¹⁵ Maynard Mack, *Alexander Pope: A Life* (New York: Norton, 1985), 97.

As a result of these deformities, Pope's critics often referred to him using animal imagery, presenting his body as a site of monstrosity and transgression—a site where human and animal meet. The playwright Thomas Southerne affectionately called him '[t]he little Nightingale', commenting on the musical quality of his voice.¹⁶ But others were less kind, and the bestial nicknames far more antagonistic. One famous caricature from 1729¹⁷ depicts Pope as a human-ape hybrid, as one who is a 'poor imitation of a man in his body'.¹⁸ Earlier critics made equally harsh attacks on Pope. Sir John Dennis, for example, describes Pope as a snake with a 'great deal of Venom', a 'hunch-back'd Toad', and a predatory creature with 'Teeth' and 'Claws'.¹⁹ Dennis's characterization of Pope positions him not simply as a single animal, but as a variety of animals, crossing not just the human-animal boundary but boundaries between animal species. These cruel attacks were intended to ridicule Pope as deformed, inferior, and subhuman; yet, interestingly enough, the portrayal of Pope's body as liminal—as neither fully human nor fully animal, and as positioned between different human and animal species—highlights a similar liminality and transgressiveness in his work, a transgressiveness that I here conceive of and analyse as the proto-posthuman.

As Majorie Nicolson and G.S. Rousseau note, as a result of his disease, Pope was also dependent on 'rigid "stays" which alone permitted him to stand'.²⁰ According to Mack, Pope's physical body became 'wrapped and shriveled' as his disease progressed and his body 'required the support of "an iron case"'.²¹ The human-machines that Pope describes in 'The Rape of the Lock' ironically anticipate his own ultimate reliance on 'an iron case' and the cyborgian merge of flesh and metal into which his own body developed.

Posthuman Belinda?

The first apparently transgressive body that Pope presents to us in 'The Rape of the Lock' is Belinda's, a body defined primarily by its blurring of that which is assumed to be natural and that which is artificial. As Sarah Kember explains, one fundamental aspect of the posthuman is 'its essential nonunity as a natural/ artificial entity'.²² Certainly, Belinda is not a posthuman cyborg who augments her body through technological modifications as we commonly perceive them today, but she nevertheless augments her body in other ways. Belinda's reliance on cosmetics and other beauty products, for example, highlights the way that her body is constructed not merely out of that which is natural, but also out of that which we think of as artificial. In her essay on 'cyber gardens', Shelley Saguaro argues that such 'low-tech' modifications serve to reinforce our cyborg identities. 'Our lived existence', Saguaro claims, is not only

¹⁶ Mack, *Alexander Pope*, 97.

¹⁷ *Fronti Fides* (1728), The British Museum, London.

¹⁸ Mack, *Alexander Pope*, 474.

¹⁹ John Dennis, 'Reflections Critical and Satyrical, upon a Late Rhapsody, Call'd, An Essay Upon Criticism', *Spectator* 29 June 1711, in *Pamphlet Attacks on Alexander Pope 1711-1744*, ed. J.V. Guerinet (New York: New York University Press, 1969), 3.

²⁰ Majorie Nicolson and G.S. Rousseau, *This Long Disease, My Life': Alexander Pope and the Sciences* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1968), 53.

²¹ Mack, *Alexander Pope*, 804.

²² Sarah Kember *Cyberfeminism and Artificial Life* (New York: Routledge, 2003), 143.

‘dependent on computerized systems and technological advancements’, but also depends on ‘less radical’ supplements: ‘pills, potions, cosmetics, lotions, bleaches, dyes, whiteners, bronzers, silicone, collagen and so on and on’.²³ These so-called artificial items contribute to our constructed sense of self and form an intrinsic part of what we think of as our ‘natural’ selves. Pope’s poem illuminates this relationship between the supposed ‘natural’ body’ and its ‘artificial’ supplements, revealing nature and artifice to be deeply interrelated.

Throughout the poem, Pope describes how Belinda constantly modifies and augments her ‘natural body’ by applying makeup:

The Fair each moment rises in her Charms,
Repairs her Smiles, awakens ev’ry Grace,
And calls forth all the Wonders of her Face;
Sees by Degrees a purer Blush arise,
And keener Lightnings quicken in her Eyes.²⁴

The beauty products Belinda applies to her lips do not enhance them but ‘repair’ them, the colour she applies to her face gives her a ‘purer’ or, one could add, more natural blush than her face could ever produce, and her eyes are ‘brighter’ and ‘keener’ than they could ever have been if left bare. As Murray Krieger argues, here the artificial is constructed as being even ‘purer’ than the natural:

The Belinda who, fully created in artifice, is to enter honor’s world on the Thames and in Hampton Court, is not a woman but a goddess, a disembodied image: she is the insubstantial Belinda, composed of smiles that have been repaired and of the ‘purer blush’. Deprived of the imperfections that mar—even as they humanize—flesh and blood reality, the painted blush is indeed aesthetically purer than a natural blush, an improvement on it.²⁵

The natural body is presented as being insufficient in itself—as being dependent on and in need of the artificial to make it whole. One could draw here on Jacques Derrida’s notion of the ‘supplement’ to argue that there is an ‘originary’ lack in Belinda’s supposed ‘natural’ and ‘original’ lips that needs to be repaired.²⁶ Such a Derridean reading calls into question the distinction between the ‘natural’ and the ‘artificial’, showing the two to be intricately intertwined. Instead of merely *adding* some artificial cosmetic to her natural lips and face, Belinda repairs a presumably broken smile and paints on a face that is more natural and purer than the one she had on. The seemingly artificial here becomes a way to achieve the seemingly natural. It is this process that blurs the boundary between the artificial and the natural, questioning the opposition between the two and showing the one to be always constructed in the other.

The blurring of the boundary between the natural and the artificial is taken one step further in the poem with the objectification of Belinda. The suggestion that

²³ Haraway, ‘A Manifesto for Cyborgs’, 210.

²⁴ Alexander Pope, ‘The Rape of the Lock’, in *The Poems of Alexander Pope*, ed. John Butt (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1963), 1.141-42. Henceforth cited in text as (RL, canto. line/s).

²⁵ Murray Krieger, ‘The “Frail China Jar” and the Rude Hand of Chaos’, *The Centennial Review* 5.2 (1961): 180.

²⁶ See Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997), 145: ‘As substitute, it [the supplement] is not simply added to the positivity of presence, it produces no relief, its place is assigned in the structure by the mark of an emptiness’.

Belinda's smile is broken and in need of repair already draws our attention to the way that Belinda's body can be perceived as a constructed object. In the second section of the poem, as Belinda sets out by barge on the Thames, Pope's descriptions allow us to conflate Belinda with the very barge that bears her. Belinda, described as the 'painted Vessel' whom the Sylphs protect and help repair through cosmetic paint, becomes equated with the painted sea vessel (RL, 2.47). As Stewart Crehan explains, '[t]he human subject in the poem is little more than a moved object, as Belinda becomes a "painted Vessel" gliding down the Thames'.²⁷ Robert W. Williams also argues that Pope here uses a variety of phrases to align Belinda and the boat:

The words 'issuing forth', 'Launch'd', 'Bosom' (reinforced by 'Breast' a line later), suggest amplitude and great physical 'presence'. Belinda, it is said, is the 'Rival' of the sun, and must therefore manifest an air of command which comes from herself. She does not walk out of her dressing-room, she 'issues forth'. This sense of strong physical 'presence' is carried further to her dress, and she is imaged as a ship in sail, for it is she who 'Lanch'd' on the river; the volume of her skirts becomes the volume of the sails, and she appears to move upon the water of her own volition. She is, to all intents, her own ship, an image picked up again in II, 47:

But now secure the painted Vessel glides.

Belinda, as we know from canto I, is certainly 'painted', and as Aubrey Williams points out (*Casebook*, 235n.) the pun on 'vessel' (Woman as the biblical 'weaker vessel') relates readily to the other 'China' imagery of the poem.²⁸

The conflation of Belinda and ship marks a collapse in the sharp distinction between subject and object—Belinda is, at a literal level, the subject who embarks and disembarks the ship, but she is simultaneously also equated with the very object that she uses. Beyond this (or perhaps as a result of it), the description of Belinda as a ship also draws attention to the way that the human is constructed out of the objects that it supposedly only uses. In the poem, it is quite literally through these descriptions of Belinda as ship, of Belinda as an object made true and pure as it is painted and repaired, that Belinda's identity takes shape. The so-called natural human self, this poem seems to suggest, is not distinct from the artificial object; both are intrinsic to and implied in the other.

This argument so far suggests that Belinda can be seen as a fluid subject that moves between the supposedly definite categories of human and object, nature and artifice. Here, one may recall Haraway's assertion that the notion of the cyborg frees us from the 'maze of dualisms in which we have explained our bodies and our tools to ourselves'.²⁹ According to Haraway, the transgressive figure of the cyborg has the potential to deconstruct fundamental distinctions between the human, the animal and the machine; but, more importantly it has the potential to dissolve the binary oppositions and power dynamics inherent to traditional conceptions of human selfhood—oppositions related to gender, class and race. Although the objectification of Belinda as ship may appear to undermine the distinctions between subject and object, the natural

²⁷ Stewart Crehan, "'The Rape of the Lock' and the Economy of 'Trivial Things'", *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 31.1 (1997): 47.

²⁸ Robert W. Williams, 'Fate and the Narrative of *The Rape of the Lock*', *Sydney Studies in English* 11 (1985-86): 33.

²⁹ Haraway, 'A Manifesto for Cyborgs', 39.

and the artificial, it simultaneously also reasserts powerful gendered and imperialist paradigms that consume this liminal figure and its potential for cyborgian transgression.

Indeed, the poem's objectification of Belinda draws attention to the way that this figure is constructed out of a complex network of cultural and political bodies that assert their power over her. This network is a product of the British Empire's trade, commerce, and colonialism with and in other countries, and the ship that Belinda is conflated with may be thought of as a transatlantic object that moves goods and ideas between and beyond national borders. Belinda uses commodities from other nations, but she is herself also a commodity. As Laura Brown rightly argues, 'Belinda's self-generating aesthetic derives from her tendency to merge with the commodity, and it produces a consequent problem of identity that we have already noted: which is Belinda, and which is the goddess of the commodity?'³⁰ By aligning Belinda with a ship that participates in a global system of trade, the poem emphasizes Belinda's status as an object that is a product of this very transatlantic network.

Consequently, the poem's commodification of Belinda effects and legitimizes the 'rape' not only of her lock of hair, but also of her body and her self as a whole. As a commodity created out of and traded within this transatlantic network, Belinda is subject to the colonial imperialism of the British Empire. Belinda's commodified body, as well as the many goods of Arabia that the poem describes, are valued solely for their consumption. If Belinda does indeed represent a blurring of the boundaries between subject and object, the natural and the artificial, this ultimately serves to reassert and reestablish imperial power hierarchies rather than to subvert them. Whether commodified subject or anthropomorphized object, Belinda remains consumed by the tyranny of colonial and imperial power.

Beyond Life-Death

Perhaps a worthier focus for this analysis is the poem's Sylphs. As many critics have noted, Pope's use of the Sylphs stems from his reliance on Rosicrucianism, a spiritual movement that arose in the early seventeenth century and claims to have access to esoteric knowledge. As such, the Sylphs exist in the spirit world; however, they are not purely spiritual.³¹ As transmogrified coquettes, they are quite literally *post*-human figures that continue to exist after death. Describing this transmogrification, Ariel whispers into Belinda's ear,

As now your own, our Beings were of old,
And once inclos'd in Woman's beauteous Mold;
Thence, by a soft Transition, we repair
From earthly Vehicles to these of Air. (RL, 1.47-50)

The Sylphs' posthumous existence questions the supposedly stable boundaries separating life and death, matter and spirit. We learn that at the moment that women die (and seemingly stop living), they still remain alive and make a 'soft Transition' from the human body to the Sylph body, or from the 'earthly Vehicles to these of Air'. This change or 'soft Transition' marks a gentle shift from human embodiment to the

³⁰ Laura Brown, *Alexander Pope* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell Inc, 1985), 44-5.

³¹ For an exhaustive examination of Pope's use of the Sylphs, see Pat Rogers, 'Faery Lore and the Rape of the Lock', *The Review of English Studies* 25.97 (1974): 25-38.

embodiment of the Sylph. The use of the term 'Vehicles' here suggests that while there is indeed a shift from the 'earthly' to that which is composed of 'Air', the resulting form is one that is neither purely material, nor merely ethereal. Life and embodiment, the poem suggests, cannot be reduced to some mere physical or material state; life includes the posthumous existence of the Sylphs, and their existence disrupts our definitions of life and the human body.

But beyond this posthumousness—beyond the 'postness' of the Sylphs' existence that challenges the strict boundaries of life and death—the Sylphs may also be said to constitute cyborgian creatures in which the human and the animal meet and converge. Pope's portrait of Sylphs hovering over the Thames, for instance, highlights the fluidity of their identities:

Some to the Sun their Insect-Wings unfold,
Waft on the Breeze, or sink in Clouds of Gold.
Transparent Forms, too fine for mortal Sight,
Their fluid Bodies half dissolv'd in Light.
Loose to the Wind their airy Garments flew,
Thin glitt'ring Textures of the filmy Dew;
Dipt in the richest Tincture of the Skies,
Where Light disports in ever-mingling Dies,
While ev'ry Beam new transient Colours flings,
Colours that change whene'er they wave their Wings. (RL, 2.59-68)

It is well known that Pope modelled his Sylphs on Milton's angels from *Paradise Lost*; yet, here the Sylphs are described as having insect wings, rather than the wings of angels or perhaps even fairies. The image of the Sylphs hovering suggests, as Charles Martindale argues, 'the transparency and brilliancy of insects flying in the sunlight'.³² Later in the poem, this animal imagery is reinforced as Pope describes Ariel's 'Purple Pinions opening to the Sun' (RL, 2.71). The use of the term *purple* emphasizes Ariel's royal qualities, but more significantly for my argument here, the passage also describes these wings as *pinions*, a term usually used to refer to the wings or feathers of a bird. Endowed with bird- or insect-wings, the Sylphs appear as both human and animal in their posthumous existence.

Haraway has described the cyborg as a figure of fluidity and permeability. Read quite literally, this permeability defines the Sylphs' bodies, which are composed of 'Transparent Forms', 'fluid Bodies half dissolv'd in Light' (RL, 2.61-2). This fluidity of form challenges traditional conceptions of unity and divisibility: when a Sylph is 'accidentally severed in two' (RL, 3.150) its 'Airy Substance soon unites again'. (RL, 3.152) This gives a new understanding to the notions of wholeness and fragmentation and calls attention to the ways in which these figures question the so-called 'laws of nature' that restrict the human body to a single form.

Reading the Sylphs in light of this proto-posthuman framework calls attention to the fluidity of the Sylphs' bodies, as neither fully alive nor dead, neither fully human nor animal and neither fully permeable nor impermeable. This fluidity also seems to extend to the Sylphs' gender. These creatures are described as being 'freed from mortal Laws' and are able to 'assume what Sexes and Shapes they please'. (RL, 1.69-70) In

³² Charles Martindale, 'Sense and Sensibility: The Child and the Man in "The Rape of the Lock"', *The Modern Language Review* 78.2 (1983): 278. For more on Pope's interest in insects and the microscopic, see Nicolson and Rousseau, 'This Long Disease, My Life', 243-51.

their original mortal form, the Sylphs were women, but Ariel, together with a number of the other Sylphs, are male. Pope, in his mock-heroic manner, describes the Sylphs in military terms, referring to them as ‘the light *Militia* of the lower sky’ and ‘lucid Squadrons’—descriptions that emphasize their masculinity, according to traditional gender conventions. (RL, 1.42, 2,56) This description of the Sylphs as militant and masculine figures is especially striking given that the Sylphs were previously coquettes—figures defined by negative stereotypes of femininity. The bodies that were once overtly feminine here become very clearly masculine.

At first glance, the Sylphs’s transformation from female to male may appear to constitute a blurring of gender boundaries and a questioning of any understanding of gender as something inherent, essential, fixed or immutable. Yet, the Sylphs’ gender fluidity is neither as radical nor as fluid as it initially appears. The female humans do indeed switch genders as they transform into Sylphs, but the gender identities that they assume are not fluid and do not transgress or problematise traditional gender binaries any further. The masculinity of the Sylphs, as well as the stereotypical femininity of their previous human identities, actually serves to reassert the very gender divide that it seems to disrupt. Ariel adopts a traditional masculine role by becoming an authoritative male figure who actively attempts to protect Belinda’s chastity, thereby seeking to control female sexuality. Ariel believes that the Sylphs need to guard and protect the ‘purity of melting maids’ or any woman who is ‘fair and chaste’ and ‘[r]ejects mankind’ (RL, 1.67, 68, 71). According to Krieger, ‘[i]t is he [Ariel], anxious to protect his own, who keeps her [Belinda] safe from assault and seduction’.³³ The masculine Ariel conceives of Belinda as one to be possessed and in need of protection. Here, the apparent fluidity of the Sylphs is contained and undermined by a reassertion of traditional gender binaries and structures in which female sexuality is strictly controlled and monitored by men.

Cyborgian Spaces: The Transgressiveness of the Cave of Spleen

The first half of this essay has looked at how particular characters or types of characters blur the boundaries between subject and object, nature and artifice, body and spirit, life and death. But, as I have shown, by using these figures to undermine such binary oppositions, Pope’s poem simultaneously also reasserts conventional gender paradigms and power relations that neutralize any potential for cyborgian transgression. My search for the proto-posthuman in Pope’s text, now turns to a consideration not of a *figure* or a *character* in the poem, but of a *space*: the Cave of Spleen. In the poem’s third canto, after the Sylphs withdraw from Belinda, the gnome Umbriel descends into the Cave of Spleen, enacting a parody of the conventional epic decent into the underworld. This cave, I argue, may be thought of as a posthuman space that, like the cyborg identities described by Haraway, draws attention to the ways in which women’s identities are constructed out of otherness. The cyborgian space of the Cave of Spleen, I suggest here, disrupts the very divisions and power dynamics that the poem itself seems to set up between male and female identities.

As several critics have shown, in the poem the cave almost certainly represents the womb or the female body more generally. Pat Rogers, for example, explains that the underworld to which the gnome Umbriel descends is the ‘Spleen, the source of female

³³ Krieger, ‘The “Frail China Jar” and the Rude Hand of Chaos’, 186.

affectation, breeder of hysteria and wild delusions, "Parent" both of paranoia and the creative urge'. The 'spleen', he adds, is probably 'a euphemism for the womb—at least the disorders rampant in the Cave are all strongly inclined towards sexual and procreative functions'.³⁴ Likewise, Christa Knellwolf notes that the images of the Cave subtly evoke the conventional depictions of the womb: 'Umbriel's journey through the underworld is implicitly an account of the presumed landscape of the female psyche. The scenery makes use of stereotypical allusions to the womb, although the mythologizing narrative distracts our attention from the fact that it is primarily a description of the inside of the female body'.³⁵ Like Plato's cave, read by Luce Irigaray as 'a metaphor for the inner space, of the den, the womb or *hystera*',³⁶ the Cave of Spleen functions here as womb and hysteric site.

But this is not merely a site of hysteria that is gendered female. This cave is a chaotic mixture of dark and light, land and air, object and subject, and, more importantly for my argument, male and female. The Cave of Spleen has 'Lakes of liquid Gold, *Elysian Scenes* / And Crystal Domes, and Angels in Machines' (RL, 4.45-6). The cave is a space of fluidity. The stable classical body disappears in the Cave of Spleen; instead, grotesque and posthuman bodies appear, constantly expanding, changing, and disrupting traditional categories. Pope writes, 'Unnumber'd Throngs on ev'ry side are seen / Of Bodies chang'd to various Forms by Spleen' (RL, 4.47-8). Bodies are no longer bound by form:

Here living *Teapots* stand, one Arm held out,
One bent; the Handle this, and that the Spout:
A Pipkin there like *Homer's Tripod* walks;
Here sighs a Jar, and there a Goose-pye talks;
Men prove with Child, as pow'rful Fancy works,
And Maids turn'd Bottles, call aloud for Corks. (RL, 4.45-6)

The chaotic fusion of seemingly contradictory beings, of transmogrified teapots and jars, here is certainly not simply a feminine space; the Cave of Spleen is a cyborgian space that prompts fluid movement between conventional categories. Most obvious are the men who are pregnant or 'prove with child'. This calls into question our concepts of the human body and, in particular, the ways in which we categorize bodies by gender.

In the same way that men are now capable of the traditional female activity of child-bearing, the women, in the Cave of Spleen, burst out of their conventional identities. The passage calls attention to the maids, as bottles, who seek out sexual intercourse by 'call[ing] aloud for corks'. This sudden crying out for corks rejects normative views of feminine sexuality as repressed, nonsexual, and passive and instead presents women as rightly having their own sexual desires. Again, this site highlights transgressive male and female bodies, moving beyond stable notions of gender. These are bodies that are neither male nor female in the ways that we traditionally define them. The Cave of Spleen acts as an imaginative space that frees us from the strict binary

³⁴ Pat Rogers, *An Introduction to Pope* (New York: Routledge, 2014), 38.

³⁵ Christa Knellwolf, *A Contradiction Still: Representations of Women in the Poetry of Alexander Pope*, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1998), 144.

³⁶ Luce Irigaray, *Speculum of the Other Woman*, trans. Gillian C. Gill (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985), 243.

oppositions set up elsewhere in the poem and emphasizes the fluidity with which these bodies act.

The fluid and transgressive bodies in the Cave of Spleen are not merely generated in this fictional posthuman cave; rather, this section of the poem itself functions as a posthuman matrix that generates fluid bodies and disrupts the poem's own oppositions between male and female, human and animal, human and object, life and death. Similarly, as I have shown, the poem also offers other occasional sites or cyborgian transgression (whether in the case of Belinda's body, or that of the Sylphs') that, at least momentarily, dismantle some of these binaries. If the figures and characters described in Pope's poem cannot be said to be posthuman or cyborgian in themselves, the poem does nevertheless afford us a glimpse of cyborgian spaces in which conventional divisions and boundaries are transgressed or at least suspended.

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„Îngeri în mașini”: În căutarea proto-postumanului în poemul „The Rape of the Lock” al lui Alexander Pope

Rezumat

În timp ce un număr mare de cercetători a început să considere și să analizeze relația dintre gândirea postumanistă și secolul al XVIII-lea, puțini au încercat să citească opera lui Alexander Pope dintr-o perspectivă postumanistă. Acest articol vine să completeze acest gol și examinează o varietate de locuri și figure postumane în poemul „The Rape of the Lock”. Utilizând teorii ale postumanismului, ale cyborg-ului și alte teorii despre monștri, articolul analizează modul în care poemul negociază și provoacă binarul tradițional femeie-bărbat, uman și animal, uman și obiect. Scopul articolului nu este acela de a localiza cyborg-ul contemporan în secolul al XVIII-lea, ci acela de a recunoaște valoarea utilizării noțiunii de cyborg și a altor paradigme postumaniste pentru a reaborda și a reciti textele iluministe. O asemenea lectură creează un cadru prin care se pot analiza elementele transgresive ale textului lui Pope și atrage atenția în legătură cu modalitățile prin care poemul perturbă chiar dihotomiile care par a-l pune în mișcare.