The Rape of the Lock is not a metaphysical poem, even though in one important respect it follows Samuel Johnson’s description of that genre as entailing a ‘kind of discordia concors’. The Rape yokes together two heterogeneous entities that would not normally be found in each other’s company; on the one hand it derives from Milton’s Paradise Lost the epic dimensions of the world of angels, on the other hand the poet peoples this world with sylphs and nymphs that properly belong to the world of fairie. The metaphysical poets were criticised in the eighteenth century for their perverse ingenuity and ‘false wit’, even though they wrote their verse in a vein of high seriousness. Pope’s mock epic is the acknowledged epitome of ‘true wit’, but seriousness is not something that Pope would claim for his supernatural agents—the spirits that he referred to as the ‘machinery’.

Pope derived his spirits from Rosicrucian doctrine, as he explained in the dedicatory epistle to the second edition of his poem in 1714, and thereby for a moment created the impression that he relied upon a solid and authentic philosophy. Yet he knew, probably all too well, that Rosicrucians were generally denounced as a ‘sect of mountebanks’ and in all likelihood he made the reference to create a suggestion of erudition that on second reflection might easily be discarded. In like manner, his

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1 In his ‘Life of Cowley’, Samuel Johnson defined a metaphysical conceit as a discordia concors and added: ‘the most heterogeneous ideas are yoked by violence together’ (quoted from M. H. Abrams, G. Harpham, A Glossary of Literary Terms [Boston, 2005], p. 43).

2 ‘Machinery’ (cf. deus ex machina) was a general term for supernatural agents such as angels, demons, spirits or gods. See Addison’s remark in note 9 below.

application of the machinery suggests to the reader a pneumatological metaphysics that is soon belied by the irony and satire of his burlesque. Thus in an unexpected way—and possibly without the author's express intention—The Rape of the Lock came to reflect enlightened ideas and sceptical attitudes regarding supernatural agency. In the age of reason the witty satire might be construed to vent the metaphysical doubts of Locke or Hobbes. Whereas Milton in Paradise Lost (from which The Rape derived some of its epic grandeur) had indecisively wavered between a Ptolemaic and a Copernican perception of the cosmos, Pope in his depiction of the universe of his nymphs and sylphs underwent the further impact of the mechanised world picture by introducing supernatural agents with shady credentials.

The origin of Pope's machinery has attracted the attention of a number of scholars who all point at the doctrine of elemental spirits as developed by the Swiss doctor and alchemist Paracelsus (Theophrastus Bombastus von Hohenheim, 1493–1541). The latter's ideas were popularised in Le Comte de Gabalis, a novel in the form of a series of dialogues by the abbé Nicolas Pierre Henri Montfaucon de Villars (1635–1673), Pope's immediate source. There is, however, a considerable difference between

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4 John Milton, Paradise Lost, ed. Alastair Fowler (London, 1964), 10.668–680: 'Some say he bid his angels turn askance / The poles of earth twice ten degrees and more / From the sun's axle' (Copernican view); 'some say the sun / Was bid turn reins from th' equinoctial road' (Ptolemaic view).
