

## Card and Courtship Plays at Hampton Court Palace: *The Rape of the Lock* and the Origins of Game Theory A Response to Sean R. Silver\*

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My response to Sean R. Silver's article begins with a digression.<sup>1</sup> One of the great card-game movies of all time is *The Cincinnati Kid* (1965) with Steve McQueen, Edward G. Robinson and a host of Hollywood luminaries. They play Five-card stud which like many card games has its unique nomenclature and rules.<sup>2</sup> On screen, as they play out the final hand for what becomes a thirty-thousand dollar pot, the dealer and others who are watching speculate on the possible outcomes: their dialogue informs those unfamiliar with high stakes poker of what is going on. Nevertheless, those among the audience who understand poker will get much more out of the climax than those who do not.

The stakes are meaningless numbers until we realise that the story is set in depression-era New Orleans, where, for example, a brand new 1932 Model B Ford two-door coupe would sell for less than five-hundred dollars. Today these stakes sound even lower, but something else has happened. The most popular poker game is now Texas Hold'em, not Five-card stud. Fortunately, the ten rankings of five-card poker hands—from a royal flush down to a high card—are unchanged. With this context intact, anyone watching the final hand and familiar with poker can adjust for the distortion in dollar values since the 1930s. Both McQueen and Robinson start this hand with ten thousand dollars in Franklins and Clevelands. Their bets and raises range

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\*Reference: Oliver R. Baker "Pope's Ombre Enigmas in *The Rape of the Lock*," *Connotations* 17.2-3 (2007/2008): 210-37; Sean R. Silver "*The Rape of the Lock* and the Origins of Game Theory," *Connotations* 19.1-3 (2009/2010): 203-228.

For the original article as well as all contributions to this debate, please check the *Connotations* website at <<http://www.connotations.de/debbaker01723.htm>>.

from five hundred to five thousand dollars. But only those who know what comprises a straight flush and know that it beats a full house will understand Robinson's quip about "making the wrong move at the right time."<sup>3</sup>

If a movie from less than fifty years ago can present interpretive challenges, we should not be surprised that an early eighteenth-century verse satire presents a few more. Except that this is mock-epic, for a contemporary audience the climax to the card game in *The Rape of the Lock* should be just as dramatic as is the showdown in *The Cincinnati Kid*. Unfortunately, *Ombre* did not evolve: it became extinct, and three centuries later we have lost all familiarity with its rules and nomenclature and, with those losses, the interpretive context. An *acid test* for satire is that you have to have some in the audience who *just don't get it*. But when no one *gets it*—it is not even funny; yet to explain humour is to snuff it. To help illustrate this loss, in his verse satire *A Session of the Poets*, John Wilmot, second earl of Rochester, ridicules a string of his contemporaries.<sup>4</sup> The stanza lampooning Aphra Behn employs an *Ombre* allusion as a power metaphor and a euphemism which never caught on sufficiently to become idiomatic in the English language<sup>5</sup>:

The *Poetess Afra*, next shew'd her sweet face,  
And swore by her *Poetry*, and her black *Ace*,  
The *Lawrel*, by a double right was her own,  
For the *Plays* she had writ, and the *Conquests* she had won:  
*Apollo*, acknowledg'd 'twas hard to deny her,  
Yet to deal franckly, and ingeniously by her,  
He told her were *Conquests*, and *Charmes* her pretence,  
She ought to have pleaded a *Dozen* years since.  
(73-80; emphasis in the original)

As Silver points out, *Ombre* is only one of many games *le beau monde* are playing with each other that afternoon, but it is fatal to mix them up. Once the card game is isolated—taken away from whatever else happens before, during, and afterward—we have a fair chance of reconstructing the three 'as played' hands. Once we have unpicked

this single *tour*, and close reading is always hard work, we can put this first mock-battle back into context—court belles and their beaux socialising at Hampton Court Palace near the end of Queen Anne’s reign—and then see whether the card game tells us anything new about the players and whether this knowledge shapes our appreciation of Pope’s verse satire, and hence the relevance of a Game Theory approach to Literature.

The necessary mathematics for this approach can get very hairy very quickly, and there is merit in keeping the decision matrices simple. My criticism of previous *Ombre* reconstructors is that, because they were not delving sufficiently into the rules of play, their ‘decision models’ were misleading. There is more to poker than knowing how to rank a five-card hand, just as there is a lot more to *Ombre* than sorting and ranking a nine-card hand. For those familiar with contract bridge, Belinda celebrates wildly after struggling to make a bid of one spade: whereas if her singleton spade deception works, and it should, she will make a grand slam in clubs—something really worth celebrating (Baker 224-25). What Belinda could have accomplished should be as dramatic as the showdown in *The Cincinnati Kid*. What she actually accomplishes is the dramatic equivalent of Robinson folding immediately after the third *up* cards are dealt and McQueen bets another three grand.

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>It is a pleasure to respond to Sean R. Silver’s article, not because he agrees with my derivation; in fact he avoids saying so. But he recognises that my focus was on the card game somewhat enigmatically described in Canto III, and he has taken my solution as a vehicle toward using Game Theory in Literature. My solution yielded several surprises: I saw immediately that, with skilful play, a *sans prendre vole* in clubs was there for the taking. Moreover, many earlier reconstructors’ assumptions of more than one *tour* and a suppressed round of discards in this *tour* masked a number of playing alternatives that Pope’s contemporary audiences might have appreciated.

<sup>2</sup>Throughout this paper I have deliberately used terms in common, albeit informal usage which have their roots in gambling. *Showdown* is a poker term—to *show* your ‘face down card’ to your opponent when all betting on that hand is over. The *Cleveland*, which carries a likeness of President Grover Cleveland, is the one thousand dollar bill (and is no longer in circulation). The *Franklin*, which carries a likeness of Benjamin Franklin (who was never a President), is the one hundred dollar bill. Conversely, a 1932 Model B Ford two-door coupe, a favourite among hot rodders, is a *Deuce coupe*.

<sup>3</sup>Poker experts disagree on when Robinson should have folded, but many suggest after the third [face] *up* cards are dealt and McQueen’s bet is three thousand dollars.

<sup>4</sup>See *Poems on several occasions by the Right Honourable the E. of R*— (Printed at Antwerp [i.e London: s.n.], 1680) 111-14. PDFs of the text can be found on Early English Books Online (Bibliographic Number: Wing / R1753). It was likely written in November or December 1676 by Rochester or his coterie. The text is also included in George de Forest Lord’s *Poems on Affairs of State: Augustan Satirical Verse 1660–1714*, vol. 1 (New Haven, CT: Yale UP, 1963) 352-56, and elsewhere. Any confusion with similar titles can be resolved from the first couplet: “Since the *Sons* of the *Muses*, grew numerous and loud, / For th’ appeasing so factious and clamorous a Crowd.”

<sup>5</sup>Little is known about the early life of Aphra Behn (1640-1689): widowed in her early twenties, she never remarried. Among the few surviving portraits one held by St Hilda’s College, Oxford, shows she was a stunning full-figured brunette. Supporting herself by writing she became an accomplished playwright, poet, and novelist. The moment the connection is made between ‘her black *Ace*’ and *Spadille*, the ace of spades in *Ombre*—always the top-ranked trump card whichever suit is selected; which when led forces any other *Matadors* into play; but which cannot be forced itself; and, carrying rule immunity privileges permitting a renege on a trump lead—lewd inferences arise that even the most vinegar of prudes cannot ignore.