Close Reading versus Accretions of Dubious Scholarship: A Question of Competence A Response to Kathryn Walls[*]

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Three years before Alexander Pope published the five canto version of his mock-epic verse satire, these two couplets appeared in his major work, *An Essay on Criticism* (1711):

> True Wit is Nature to Advantage drest,
> What oft was Thought, but ne'er so well Exprest,
> Something, whose Truth convinc'd at Sight we find,
> That gives us back the Image of our Mind:
> (Pt II, 297-300)

Evidently I do not have to worry about mind-matching with Kathryn Walls. On the other hand, *Connotations* is a journal where all shrines of orthodoxy and 'settled science' are exposed to critical debate and where those found wanting are either modified or kicked over. Demonstrating that Pole, Tillotson, and Wimsatt were in error should not be heresy. I do not deny that Tillotson's "Appendix C—Ombre" has been influential. Unfortunately, that is the problem. Published in 1940 for volume two of *The Twickenham Edition of the Poems of Alexander Pope*, he chose to neither revise it for the second edition in 1953 nor for the third edition in 1962. For seven decades it has been misleading in terms of violating not just close reading of Pope's text, but violating

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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; Kathryn Walls, "A Question of Competence: The Card Game in Pope's *The Rape of the Lock*. A Response to Oliver R. Baker," *Connotations* 19.1-3 (2009/2010): 229-37; Kathryn Walls, "An Addendum to 'A Question of Competence: The Card Game in Pope's *The Rape of the Lock*,'" *Connotations* 20.1 (2010/2011): 34.

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

the contemporary rules of *Ombre* and the fundamental tenets of good card play. Pope's enigma has a solution, provided we adopt the precept that Sherlock Holmes urges on his companion Doctor John Watson: "How often have I said to you that when you have eliminated the impossible, whatever remains, *however improbable*, must be the truth?"[1]

There are no differences between the 'as played' hands for the Baron and the Knight given by Tillotson in the *Twickenham editions* and those published in *Connotations*, except that I have not arbitrarily assigned values to the non-court cards. My disagreement with Tillotson, and with Walls who writes to defend his solution, involves two of the nine cards held by Belinda:

Twickenham editions	*Connotations 2007/2008*
Belinda	**Belinda [Elder Hand]**
A♠^{1} 2♠^{2} A♣^{3} K♠^{4}	A♠^{1} 2♠^{2} A♣^{3} K♠^{4}
K♥^{9} Q♥^{8}	K♥^{9} Q♥^{8}
6♦^{6}	Void in ♦
K♣^{5} Q♣^{7}	K♣^{5} Q♣^{7} ♣^{6}

As shown above, Tillotson gives Belinda two clubs to the queen-king and a singleton low diamond, whereas in the *Connotations* derivation Belinda has three clubs to the queen-king and a diamond void. On tricks six and seven Belinda and the Knight are sloughing *losers* on the Baron's diamond leads. But whether, in my solution, Belinda sloughs her club queen on the sixth or seventh trick is unknowable and immaterial: a *loser* is a *loser*. This part of my derivation of Belinda's hand hinges on the close reading of six couplets which apply only to the sixth and seventh tricks:

> The *Baron* now his *Diamonds* pours apace;
> Th' embroider'd *King* who shows but half his Face,
> And his refulgent *Queen*, with Pow'rs combin'd,
> Of broken Troops an easie Conquest find.
> *Clubs*, *Diamonds*, *Hearts*, in wild Disorder seen,
> With Throngs promiscuous strow the level Green.
> Thus when dispers'd a routed Army runs,
> Of *Asia's* Troops, and *Africk's* Sable Sons,

> With like Confusion different Nations fly,
> Of various Habit and of various Dye,
> The pierc'd Battalions dis-united fall,
> In Heaps on Heaps; one Fate o'erwhelms them all.
> (iii.75–86: emphasis in the original)

My inference for tricks six and seven comes from the line, "*Clubs, Diamonds, Hearts,* in wild Disorder seen" and seems obvious—whoever is sloughing clubs on those two disordered heaps, it cannot be the Knight who only had a singleton club which we know he sloughed on the fourth trick. The Baron leads his king and then his queen of diamonds (iii.75–77) and "of broken Troops an easie Conquest find[s]." Two diamond tricks, two heaps of cards "in wild disorder [are] seen" and these cards are "clubs, diamonds, [and] hearts"—where I acknowledge Pope's use of the plural forms. A few lines earlier Pope writes, "The *Baron* now his *Diamonds* pours apace," from which we have no difficulty inferring that he has consecutive leads and that each is a diamond (iii.75). To try and argue that a plural is really a singular is unconvincing (Walls 231). To me it seems that Walls permits the accretions of scholarship to influence close reading (cf. Baker 211-12).

Applying Occam's razor, my interpretation is: two heaps, two tricks, two clubs, two diamonds, and two hearts. In other words—six cards—two diamond leads from the Baron, two heart sloughs from the Knight, and two club sloughs from Belinda. Perhaps a diagram which applies only to tricks six and seven will help:
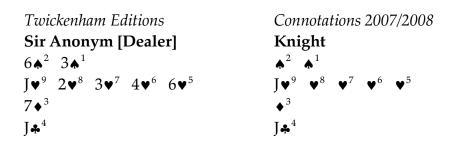
	♥	Q♣			3♥	Q♣
K♦		Q♦	rather than Tillotson's	K♦		Q♦
	♥	♣			4♥	6♦

Diamonds, hearts, and clubs   *Diamonds, hearts, and a club*

Pope does not let these six couplets apply to the eighth trick as here we know Belinda sloughs her heart queen, and the Knight has only hearts left anyway. This is why Belinda must have three clubs to the

queen-king and why she cannot have a *plebeian* diamond to follow suit and play on the sixth trick. So, Pole (1873-74) misinterpreted these six couplets making an error that Tillotson did not correct. Consequently, Tillotson's reconstruction is incorrect (cf. Walls 231). Pope, never a pedant about scansion, and this line is particularly strained, could have written it differently, but he did not.

It is important to recognise that these two hands, Belinda's and the Knight's, must be derived simultaneously. If my interpretation of the plurals is correct—despite the irregular scansion in that line—then the only way Belinda can be playing a singleton diamond on the sixth trick is for the Knight to be playing a club on that trick, too. And that would require altering the Knight's hand, the two versions of which are shown below:

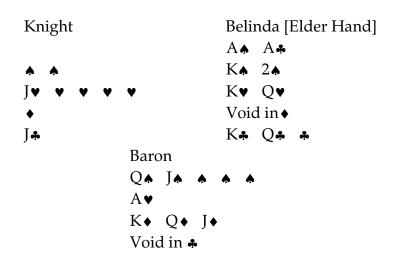| *Twickenham Editions*	*Connotations 2007/2008*
Sir Anonym [Dealer]	**Knight**
6♠² 3♠¹	♠² ♠¹
J♥⁹ 2♥⁸ 3♥⁷ 4♥⁶ 6♥⁵	J♥⁹ ♥⁸ ♥⁷ ♥⁶ ♥⁵
7♦³	♦³
J♣⁴	J♣⁴

The major difference between these is that Tillotson follows Pole even to the extent of assigning identical numerical values to the non-court cards; for which, of course, there is neither necessity nor textual justification.[2] I also disagree on the seating and therefore on who is the Dealer, but these two details affect neither the derivation nor the card play, just the drama.[3]

In my 2007/2008 article, I argued that the Knight's non-court diamond and his club knave must be singletons unless you intend to make a very poor player of him (Baker 217-20). He may be one; but this should emerge from his play and not be taken as an assumption to aid a proposed reconstruction. On the face of it, sloughing the club was not a particularly good play; sloughing one of his four *plebeian* hearts would have made more sense, but we cannot rewrite this portion of Pope's satire.[4] At the end of the fifth trick, all eleven spade trumps have been played.[5] In the only instance of a lead being

trumped in this *tour* the Baron trumps Belinda's club king lead with his fifth-ranked spade queen to win the trick and take control. Moreover, after the fifth trick the rest of the play is no-trump—whatever is led, the other players must follow suit, or slough something else if they cannot. Tricks six to nine will be taken by the highest-ranked card played in the suit which is led. If, as I surmise, neither of the other players had any diamonds left by trick six, any diamond leads by the Baron, the three lowest non-court cards would have taken the tricks as readily as the three court cards—and for the Baron, a pity he did not have a fourth diamond.

Some confusion arises from the improper use of card game nomenclature. When Walls writes, "the trumped hearts (of the Knight) and Belinda's (also trumped) clubs" (230), she does not appear to recognize the distinction between plain trick taking and trumping—perhaps she means sloughed rather than trumped? This highlights the Baron's error in not discarding his fourth-ranked heart ace.[6] His spade queen is a 'stopper'—Belinda may make her lowly *ombre* but she cannot make *vole* in spades, even if they were split six-five-nought-nought: Belinda with six, the Baron with five, the Knight with a void, and none in the *talon*. They were not. For a fee—one lesser counter—the Baron has the possibility of drawing: another heart (pity, but no harm); a club (no harm, he exchanges a club void for a heart void); another spade trump (magic, but in this case impossible, as they are all in play, although he cannot know this); or another diamond (wonderful, if he ever gets the lead after all the trumps have been drawn, he can impose Codille).

Some readers may wonder what this exchange is all about. It concerns a reconstruction I propose to replace those currently available in print and electronically. Some card games foster an understanding that rational behaviour requires reaching conclusions and making decisions by examining the available evidence. I did not label the players Nincompoop, Nymph, and Knight. In fact, I wrote, "scholars can engage whichever theoretical approach suits the needs of their literary analysis" (Baker 226-27).[7] If my reconstruction is in error, the resolu-

tion resides in reasoned demonstration not contradiction. To recapitulate, play is counter-clockwise and because Belinda is seated to the right of the *Dealer*—an instance of *place* being important—hers is the *Elder Hand* which has the powerful privilege of leading whomever wins the auction to declare the trump suit.[8] Momentarily forget the poem: pick a seat, print out Seymour, Cotton, and Cotgrave from ECCO and EEBO, and then figure out what you would do if you were Baron, Nymph, or Knight at Hampton Court Palace for a day with a pocketful of guineas and these cards.[9]

Knight   Belinda [Elder Hand]

                                        A♠ A♣

♠ ♠   K♠ 2♠

J♥ ♥ ♥ ♥ ♥   K♥ Q♥

♦   Void in ♦

J♣   K♣ Q♣ ♣

     Baron

     Q♠ J♠ ♠ ♠ ♠

     A♥

     K♦ Q♦ J♦

     Void in ♣

Whether Belinda plays badly, perhaps deliberately bidding the 'wrong' suit, was always beyond the scope and intent of my reconstruction. That said, a case can be made for blaming the *Sylphs*. Lacking a reliable reconstruction, or perhaps because the significance of precedence was deemed irrelevant, critics have overlooked the following three couplets. Depending entirely on how we interpret

   Soon as she spreads her Hand, th' Aerial Guard
   Descend, and sit on each important Card:
   First *Ariel* perch'd upon a *Matadore*,
   Then each, according to the Rank they bore;
   For *Sylphs*, yet mindful of their ancient Race,
   Are, as when Women, wondrous fond of Place.
   (iii.31–36: emphasis in the original)

we are presented with a bizarre either / or dilemma, highlighted by the phrases "sit on each important Card" (iii.32) and "wondrous fond of Place" (iii.36). Black aces excepted, trump suit selection determines the *importance* of any card. Strangely, this *importance* is evident to the *Sylphs*, "Soon as she spreads her Hand" (iii.31). But this is seven couplets before "The skilful Nymph reviews her Force with Care" (iii.45), which is just before she says, "*Let Spades be Trumps!*" (iii.46). Pope might only be making the satiric point that some women were preoccupied with—*race* and *place*—pedigree and social status. But it is hard to believe that Pope creates his machinery and then gives Belinda's *Sylphs* no significant role in the first mock-battle beyond the decorative one of perching unseen on her cards. How these preoccupations lead to a flawed evaluation of Belinda's hand and a *sans prendre ombre* bid in the 'wrong' suit must, alas, be the topic of a separate full length article.

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NOTES

[1]See chapter six of *The Sign of Four* (1890) by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle.

[2]Curiously, Pope's text only tells us about one of the Knight's nine cards and when he plays it—the knave of clubs on the fourth trick; the rest are partially cloaked in mystery (Baker 216-17). We are left to derive the other eight from the rules—following suit when possible, and from a sense of good card play. We can only speculate, but it is possible the Knight's club slough is described because a sense of good card play would dictate him sloughing something else. This is satire: Pope does not create these cantos to praise *le beau monde*, he wants to bury them. How better than to show *la belle et les beaux* playing the one card game absolutely *de rigueur* at Court very badly? There is also no point in creating an enigma of these three 'as played' hands and then making the puzzle too difficult if not well nigh impossible for contemporary audiences to solve.

[3]For the *tour* they play in spades, and for the *tour* they might have played in clubs, the drama is increased enormously by placing Belinda, the *Elder Hand*, to the right of the Baron. On the ninth trick she immediately slams her king on the Baron's ace of hearts lead, and in the *tour* they might have played—having sloughed his spade queen on the previous trick—the Baron looks on hopelessly as she leads her plebeian deuce of spades.

[4]For example, the Knight's knave of hearts can only be assured of taking a trick on consecutive high heart leads if he has two *plebeians* to play on a king, followed by a queen lead. He might get lucky and see the queen fall on a king lead, in which case one *plebeian* is better 'aid' than none.

[5]Having nine of the eleven black trumps in play is unusual; having all eleven most unusual—about once in every 177 *tours* dealt, or once in every four or five complete games. If Belinda held the top five, she would have claimed a "lay down" before the first trick was even played. Since she made no such claim, the Knight should know that the spade knave and queen must be split between the *talon* and the Baron, but whether the split is 0-2, 1-1, or 2-0 will soon become evident.

[6]For those who see classical allusions everywhere, the Baron's ace of hearts is the Achilles heel of his defence, matching Turnus's fatal decision to wear Pallas's sword belt during his duel with Aeneas. This epic allusion fits Belinda's exultations (iii.99–104) which echo the battlefield dispatch of Turnus.

[7]Having derived my solution to Pope's enigma, I was surprised to see that Belinda's spade bid was an error and that with skilful play a *sans prendre vole* in clubs was there for the taking. From this surprise it was evident, to me at least, that there was only ever one *tour* and that Belinda, the Knight, and the Baron, each for differing reasons, played with their 'as dealt' hands. From this, it is also evident that Belinda's wild celebrations are ridiculous (iii.99-100, and 105-06). She celebrates a struggle to make a paltry *ombre* in spades when anyone who "o'erlooks the Cards" will see the *sans prendre vole* in clubs—a rare feat well worthy of celebration—which Belinda manages to overlook (i.54). I do not see how this observation qualifies as dubious (see Walls 231). It is the fabrication of a suppressed round of discards and values for the non-court cards, for which there is no textual evidence, that is dubious, as is arguing that a plural is a singular.

[8]Hint: whatever the Baron or Knight might bid they suffer *Codille*. Belinda can make her *ombre* in any suit, including diamonds, even if the others hold the *Manille*.

[9]Never entirely respectable because of applications to gambling, combinatorics was still in its infancy during the early eighteenth century. Nevertheless experienced gamesters had a sense of the likelihood of selected outcomes. The logic behind the arithmetic can be very tricky, excuse the pun; and, I acknowledge the patient guidance of Dr. David J. Leeming and Dr. Jill S. Simmons, Department of Mathematics and Statistics, University of Victoria. Calculations reveal just how fantastic Belinda's hand was. The chance of having no black aces is comparatively high—about three in five, whereas the chance of being dealt a void in any one of the four suits is about one in five, but the chance of being dealt both black aces is about one in twenty-two.