

A Question of Competence:
The Card Game in Pope's *The Rape of the Lock*.
A Response to Oliver R. Baker*

KATHRYN WALLS

Oliver R. Baker claims that previous commentators have failed to provide sufficiently comprehensive glosses on the game of *Ombre* as described in *The Rape of the Lock* iii.25-100. Noting that “[w]ithout a credible reconstruction of the three hands, informed readings of the card game [...] are not possible” (Baker 210), he attempts to supply such a reconstruction. Baker is of course right to imply that we cannot determine the significance of Pope’s description of Belinda (contemplating her hand) as “[t]he skilful Nymph” (iii.45) until we have assessed her strategies in the light of the rules of the game. But I am not convinced that his reconstruction (of, that is, the hands) is an advance upon that of Geoffrey Tillotson (dismissed by Baker as one of several who have tried but “failed to untangle Pope’s enigma,” 211).¹ Tillotson is not Baker’s sole target, but I have in what follows used his influential account (“Appendix C” in the second volume of the Twickenham edition of Pope’s works) to stand for the broad spectrum of interpretations to date that Baker finds so inadequate.²

We might begin with the question: how different is Baker’s reconstruction of the hands from Tillotson’s? The answer, surprisingly enough, is: scarcely at all. True, Tillotson hypothesizes certain preliminaries (a bid by Belinda, discards on the part of all the players), while Baker (213-14) chooses to read Pope’s silence on these points as indicating, quite unambiguously, that Belinda does not bid (she plays,

*Reference: Oliver R. Baker, “Pope’s *Ombre* Enigmas in *The Rape of the Lock*,” *Connotations* 17.2-3 (2007/2008): 210-37.

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

according to Baker, *sans prendre*), and that the other players choose not to discard (cf. Tillotson 388-89).³ It is also true that Tillotson takes the liberty of allocating specific values to the non-court cards—a liberty resisted by Baker.⁴ Otherwise, however, it would have to be said that his versions of both the Baron's hand and that of the anonymous third player are identical with Baker's own (as set out on 221). As for Belinda's hand, there is only one difference: where Tillotson allocates Belinda a non-court diamond, Baker allocates her a non-court club in its place, attributing her with a void in diamonds. Thanks to this latter point, his reconstruction of the hands is actually identical to one put forward by Edward G. Fletcher in 1935.⁵

This problematic non-court card, whether diamond or club, is the one played by Belinda when following (one of) the Baron's first two diamond leads on the sixth and seventh tricks. Here it is important to note that Baker agrees with Tillotson on Belinda's possession of the Queen of Clubs, and on her use of the said non-court card (either before or after her Queen of Clubs) at this stage of the game.⁶ The essential question, then, is whether that non-court card is a diamond or a club. Baker's conclusion that it must be a club is based upon his interpretation of iii.75-80:

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.

According to Baker, these lines intimate "that Belinda and the Knight slough their losing clubs and hearts on the Baron's two diamond leads—a second disordered heap of Belinda's clubs and the Knight's hearts on top of the first—'[h]eaps on [h]eaps' (iii.86) indeed" (219). As Baker reads it, then, the diamonds of iii.79 are the Baron's victorious leads, lying confused with the trumped hearts (of the Knight) and Belinda's (also trumped) clubs—these latter including the Queen of

Clubs as well as the non-court club that Baker thinks Belinda played on the sixth trick (and that Tillotson thinks she played on the seventh).

Until now, however, Pope has distinguished very clearly between the victorious cards and those that are trumped. These defeated cards include the “two captive Trumps” of iii.50, and the Knave of Spades that “[f]alls undistinguish’d *by the Victor Spade*” at iii.64 (first italics mine). It seems most unlikely that he would change his approach here by confusing the victorious diamonds with the (as it were) wounded or even dead “troops” that they have “broken” and “conquered.” If a diamond is in the heap, it must be as a trumped card, not as a victor. In other words, the trumped cards must (as Tillotson and others have concluded) include (from Belinda) a diamond, along with the third player’s pair of hearts and Belinda’s Queen of Clubs. It would be a mistake, by the way, to allow Pope’s plurals to complicate the matter. A single card is (and was) normally described as the “six [or, of course, any other number] of *diamonds* [plural].”

Baker claims that his (in my view, highly dubious) reconstruction of Belinda’s hand has implications not only for the game, but also for her approach to it.⁷ Believing that Belinda’s strength in clubs is greater (by one card) than generally thought, Baker argues that Belinda should have declared clubs as trumps—and, what is more, ventured for the *Vole* (225-26). But if Tillotson is right (as, in my view, is evident from iii.75-80), Belinda’s strength in clubs is no greater than her strength in spades, and her decision to declare spades as trumps is perfectly sensible.⁸

But Baker’s dissatisfaction with Belinda’s approach extends beyond her supposedly unwise choice of trumps. As Baker notes (222), while the Baron is playing his last card (the Ace of Hearts), “[t]he King *unseen / Lurk’d in her Hand*” (iii.95-96; italics mine). From this, Baker concludes that Belinda has been unaware of her possession of the King (having held it tucked behind the Queen of the same suit) until losing her Queen of Hearts in the eighth trick. It is for this reason, Baker thinks, that she does not play it in the fifth trick as (according to Baker, at least) she ought to have done. But while it certainly emerges

that Belinda's King of Hearts would have drawn the Baron's Ace of Hearts and brought her immediate victory, it remains doubtful as to how Belinda (or anyone else) could have anticipated this.⁹

This having been said, Belinda can scarcely merit the epithet "skilful" if she has literally mishandled her hand. A very large question must remain, however, as to whether she is guilty of any such clumsiness. Baker's accusation depends upon his implicit interpretation of "[t]he *King* unseen" (iii.95) as (and the paraphrase here is my own) 'the king, *previously* unseen by Belinda.' There are two (overlapping) inferences involved, and it seems to me that neither carries conviction. First, it is unlikely that Pope would describe the King of Hearts as unseen by Belinda when (as no-one could deny) Belinda *has* seen it—especially if, as Baker claims, she has only just done so. It will be evident, then, that Baker's "by Belinda" inference depends for its viability on his "previously" inference. But while "previously unseen" happens to be one of the definitions of "unseen" given in the *OED*, the citations reveal that the word was applied *not* to items or people that might have escaped notice (as Baker supposes the King of Hearts has escaped the notice of Belinda), but to genuinely strange and/or unprecedented phenomena (miracles, monstrosities, prodigies).¹⁰ "[U]nseen" is, anyway, open to a more rewarding interpretation. Taken to mean "unseen *by the other players*," it works to project Belinda's delighted sense (once the Baron has led his Ace of Hearts, but in the seconds before she trumps it with her king) that he does not know what is coming to him. For a delectable moment, the relieved Belinda may contemplate the imminent effect of her (as she has just realized) powerful card on her perhaps over-confident and unsuspecting, or "unseeing," opponent.

Believing as he does that Belinda is far from "skilful," Baker finds line 45 ("[t]he skilful Nymph reviews her Force with Care") "wickedly ironic" (223). On the contrary, however, what evidence we have suggests that Belinda plays her game quite competently. But although the irony that Baker sees may be a mirage, line 45 still invites the reader to smile. We do not smile, however, at Belinda's supposed lack of intelli-

gence. (Indeed, at ii.9-10 she was credited by Pope her with a “sprightly” and even “quick” mind.¹¹) We smile, rather, at her innocence. Belinda has not yet learned to be nonchalant about social occasions. She expects much from her visit to Hampton Court, as we may deduce from her *toilette* at i.21-48, her glowing demeanor at ii.1-14, and (paradoxically, but most tellingly) the excessiveness of her despondency (and her expression of it) after the “rape”—this last being evident from, for example, her lament at iv.149-50: “Happy! ah ten times happy, had I been, / If Hampton-Court these Eyes had never seen.” When it comes to *Ombre*, she “burns” to join the others at her table (cf. iii.25-26), and she wants—even expects—to win (iii.27-28).¹² Then, when she does so, her reaction is the very opposite of urbane: “The Nymph exulting fills with Shouts the Sky, / The Walls, the Woods, and long Canals reply” (iii.99-100). Pope’s description of her at iii.45 as a “skilful Nymph” reviewing her “Force” (or hand) “with Care” thus accords with his account of Belinda throughout. She is concentrating hard, applying her (perfectly respectable) intelligence to her hand with an intensity that is as touching as it is amusing.

But to acknowledge that Belinda has her wits about her is not to deny that she has what Baker rightly characterizes as “a fabulous hand” (222). Her success is largely (though not solely) attributable to the cards she has been dealt. Pope’s representation of the game embodies this point through its alternation of contrary perspectives. According to one of these, the “real” people are in control (“Thus far both Armies to *Belinda* yield” iii.65; “The *Baron* now his *Diamonds* pours apace” iii.75). According to the other, the cards are larger than life, brimming with motivation (borrowed, one suspects, from their players) and agency:

The *King* unseen
Lurk’d in her Hand, and mourn’d his captive *Queen*.
He springs to Vengeance with an eager pace,
And falls like Thunder on the prostrate *Ace* (iii. 95-98)

Indeed, it is quite obvious that (as in most card games) the cards determine the decisions of the players at least as much as the players

determine the functions (or, as Pope represents them, the initiatives and relative strength) of the cards.

Ultimately, however, the “Fate” (iii.66) that is symbolized by and disposes the cards is really Pope, whose purpose (if we may infer it from the effect) was to produce, at the very center of his pivotal canto, a parabolic action that parallels, in miniature, the beautifully shaped action of the poem as a whole.¹³ But there is a contrast between these smaller and larger actions. As noted by Ralph Cohen, Belinda’s success is due entirely to her male cards—her three *Matadores*, her King of Spades, her King of Hearts.¹⁴ But the cards would seem to be stacked against her in the larger game, whose rules approximate those of life itself. Pope intimates as much (albeit through tactful euphemism) when he describes the distinct minority of court cards that are female: the “four fair *Queens* whose hands sustain a Flow’r, / Th’expressive Emblem of their *softer* Pow’r” (iii.39-40; italics mine).

Victoria University of Wellington
New Zealand

NOTES

¹All quotations are from Geoffrey Tillotson’s edition.

²Geoffrey Tillotson, “Appendix C” 383-92. This is a revised version of Appendix C as it appeared in the first (1940) edition. But my references to Tillotson apply equally to both versions.

³In accordance with his belief we should not assume any preliminaries (including the existence of earlier rounds [or *tours*]) that Pope has not mentioned, Baker suggests that the adverb “singly” in “At *Ombre* singly to decide their Doom” (iii.27) could mean that “Belinda will be *L’Hombre* for this *tour*, or that this contest will entail only one *tour*, or both” (211). But Pope is making a joke of the fact that in *Ombre* the player for whom the game is named (*L’Hombre*) is *always* pitted against two others. As appropriate to the mock-heroic, he makes it sound as if Belinda is taking on an almost insuperable challenge.

⁴As I read him, Tillotson (388) expects his readers to appreciate that his attribution of values to the *plebeian* cards (as in the earlier reconstructions upon which his own is based) is arbitrary—although he does not make this fully explicit (cf. “After the discard the cards *might* stand as follows” [389; italics mine]). At any rate, as Baker himself notes, Pope arranges the game in such a way that “the

numerical value of every non-court card [...] is inconsequential" (213). As for the preliminaries (whether as previously hypothesized, or as constructed by him), Baker does not go so far as to suggest that they have any bearing on how we might interpret Belinda's skill—although he does call the Baron a "novice or a nincompoop, or both" for not having taken the opportunity to discard "his fourth-ranked singleton heart" (222). If we assume that the preliminaries have proceeded according to Baker's reading, Baker is probably right to consider the Baron foolish for not discarding that heart.

⁵It seems to me that Baker blurs this point when he describes his reconstruction as "similar" (rather than identical) to one of Fletcher's. After all, his reconstruction differs only in that Fletcher attributes values to the (losing) non-court cards—and such attributions in Fletcher are frankly arbitrary, as noted at the beginning of his article (cf. Fletcher 30). As explained below, however, Fletcher's notion of the order in which certain cards are played does differ slightly from Baker's. For Fletcher's reconstructions, see his "Belinda's Game of *Ombre*." Fletcher is cited by Baker in note 27. In his efforts to correct earlier reconstructions that ignored Pope's reference to clubs at line 79, Fletcher offers two (as he sees it) viable accounts of the game, one of which has Belinda playing a non-court heart (which he supposes to be a seven) in Trick VI and the Queen of Clubs in Trick VII, and one of which has her playing a non-court club (a three) in Trick VI and the Queen of Clubs in Trick VII. The latter anticipates Baker's in that it involves the attribution of a non-court club as well as the Queen of Clubs to Belinda. It differs only in having Belinda play the non-court club before she plays the Queen of Clubs. On this point Fletcher's suggestion actually seems to me more likely than Baker's, given that Belinda's instinct might have been to save her Queen (for a possible trumping opportunity) until she had no option but to play it. But, as will become evident, I am not convinced that Belinda has a non-court club (*Basto* of course excepted) in the first place.

⁶Although Tillotson and Baker also differ as to whether Belinda plays her Queen of Clubs on the sixth (Baker) or seventh (Tillotson) trick, this difference is of no importance. It is merely an extension of their (above-noted) first difference. To explain: if (as Tillotson thinks) Belinda were in possession of a diamond, she would have been compelled to play it on the sixth trick—so saving the Queen of Clubs for the seventh. If, however (as Baker thinks) she had a non-court *club* in the place of Tillotson's diamond, she might have played the Queen of Clubs for the sixth and saved the non-court club for the seventh. But (*pace* Baker, and cf. note 5, above) there is no reason why she should not have played her (supposed) non-court club before relinquishing her Queen of Clubs on the seventh trick.

⁷In addition to the argument summarized below, Baker (222) sees Belinda's supposed void in diamonds as posing a risk that she should have taken into account before declaring trumps—although he offers no explicit judgement as to whether or not she appears to have done so. In any case, since the club that Baker gives her proves no more advantageous to her game (when, that is, the Baron takes the sixth and seventh tricks) than the diamond that Tillotson gives her, this point seems to dissolve into irrelevance.

⁸I need to add that, while Baker argues that Belinda's *best* choice would have been clubs, he also claims that her *better* choice (better than spades, that is) would have been hearts (223). He attributes her failure to recognize this to her failure to notice her King of Hearts in her hand (222). I do not see, however, how (even with the King of Hearts taken into account) Belinda could have realized that hearts would have offered her a better chance of winning than spades (where she is equally strong). Baker's note 26 on the excellence of Belinda's chances with hearts as trumps seems to assume that she could have known that the holder of the Ace of Hearts (who happens to be the Baron) would be lacking in the non-court hearts that would have enabled him to preserve that Ace to gain a trump (and the lead) for himself.

⁹On the basis of the unpublished advice of Dermot Morrah (a devotee of *Ombre*) W. K. Wimsatt, Jr. allows that Belinda should perhaps have interpreted the third player's Knave of Clubs on the fourth trick as an indication of the Baron's possible strength in Clubs (139-40). If she had done so, she would (or should) have been dissuaded from leading the King of Clubs. This having been said, Wimsatt eschews the ironic reading of "skilful." He writes, equivocally, that "[i]t is by the standards of the polite card table (not necessarily profound) that we shall measure her skill. She is no doubt skilful in her own esteem" (141). On the question of the third player's playing of the Knave of Clubs, I would suggest (although this has no bearing on the essential issue of *Belinda's* competence) that he has made a mistake. Pope's elaboration on the pre-eminence of the Knave of Clubs in *Lu* (iii.61-62) seems to suggest that for one awful moment the third player has become confused as to the game he is supposed to be playing.

¹⁰OED "unseen" *ppl. a. and n. 2.*

¹¹Cf. "Her lively looks a sprightly Mind disclose, / Quick as her Eyes, and as unfix'd as those" (ii.9-10). Pope's emphasis, as conveyed by his final adjective "unfix'd," is on Belinda's romantically uncommitted state. But he also compliments her mind in no uncertain terms by calling it "sprightly" and "quick." See OED "sprightly" *a. and adv. 2.c.*, and especially OED "quick" *adj., n.¹, and adv. 20.a.*: "Of the mind and its qualities or operations, esp. wit: alert, active, keenly perceptive; ready, lively, agile."

¹²Baker implicitly interprets the "Thirst of Fame" that "invites" Belinda to play (iii.25) as that of one of the other combatants—whose desire, as Baker sees it, is foiled (210). But Pope is writing allegorically here. Belinda is, I think, prompted by her own longing for glory.

¹³(i) Given that, as he notes, play is anti-clockwise, Baker is able to deduce from the last trick (in which the Baron's Ace of Hearts is followed and trumped by Belinda's King, iii.95-98) that the Baron must be seated to the left of Belinda, and that the third player must therefore be on Belinda's right (see 212, and notes 15, 16). While he claims that "this seating detail does not matter" (215), the order of play (when Belinda is leading, Belinda-third player-Baron; when the Baron is leading, Baron-Belinda-third player) is dramatically significant. Once the Baron has taken over the lead, and the final position is taken by the third player, Pope

needs to understate the existence of that (uninteresting) third player in order to pre-empt any anti-climactic effect—or, in other words, to keep the opposition between the Baron and Belinda to the fore. There is, for instance, no mention of the third player once the Baron's Knave of Diamonds has drawn and trumped Belinda's Queen of Hearts (iii.87-92). (ii) The game, beginning at line 25, concludes at line 100. The mid-point of canto iii (which contains a total of 178 lines) comes at line 89, just before the final trick.

¹⁴While the King of Hearts is motivated by courtly love, this is only as (one suspects) a girl like Belinda would want him to be. In other words, his Queen's hold over him may be read as a displacement of Belinda's innocent romantic hopes (or, perhaps, her girlish illusions).

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