

## ***The Rape of the Lock* and the Origins of Game Theory**

DRAFT: Submitted to *Connotations*

When I teach Alexander Pope's *The Rape of the Lock*, I generally spend an entire class on the game of cards. Early in the third canto the Baron and Belinda sit down to a game of ombre; what occurs over the "verdant field" of the card-table, described in the half-serious, half-teasing idiom of the mock-epic, forms the central set-piece of the poem. I find that students respond to the game best when they can see it—when the rudimentary rules are explained, and the students can see the game as it unfolds. To this end, I have experimented with a PowerPoint presentation which restages the game of ombre as though it were conducted at an online gambling website, what I call [www.rotlombre.net](http://www.rotlombre.net). The point is to streamline the rules of the game, to make it look more like a game that they know, Hearts or Texas Hold-'em, for instance. I aim, that is, to emphasize the social relations which the game itself organizes. The payoff moment—at least in terms of the pacing of the lecture—is the last, deciding trick, when the Baron leads with the ace of hearts. Belinda slaps down her "unseen... King," which "falls like thunder on the prostrate Ace" (Figure 1). Students, freed from thinking about the rules of play (is this "codille" or "vole"?), are prepared to discuss the sexual politics at play, the Baron's sad—and losing card—crushed by Belinda's gesture of masculine majesty. They therefore arrive at a provisional answer to the opening riddles of the poem, the twinned question of "what strange motive," would "compel/ A well-bred lord to assault a gentle belle," and "What stranger cause.../ Could make a gentle belle reject a lord?" They are ready to see the subsequent rape of the lock as a violent response to a spurned advance—a sexual assault meant, crudely, to reassert

the Baron's gender identity. And they are also prepared to open up discussion of other dimensions of the game, this Spanish game played in England. They are equipped to reapproach the assembled worlds of playing-card kings and queens—the poem's "swarthy Moors," "warlike Amazons," and so on—as a miniature mirror of the nascent British empire.

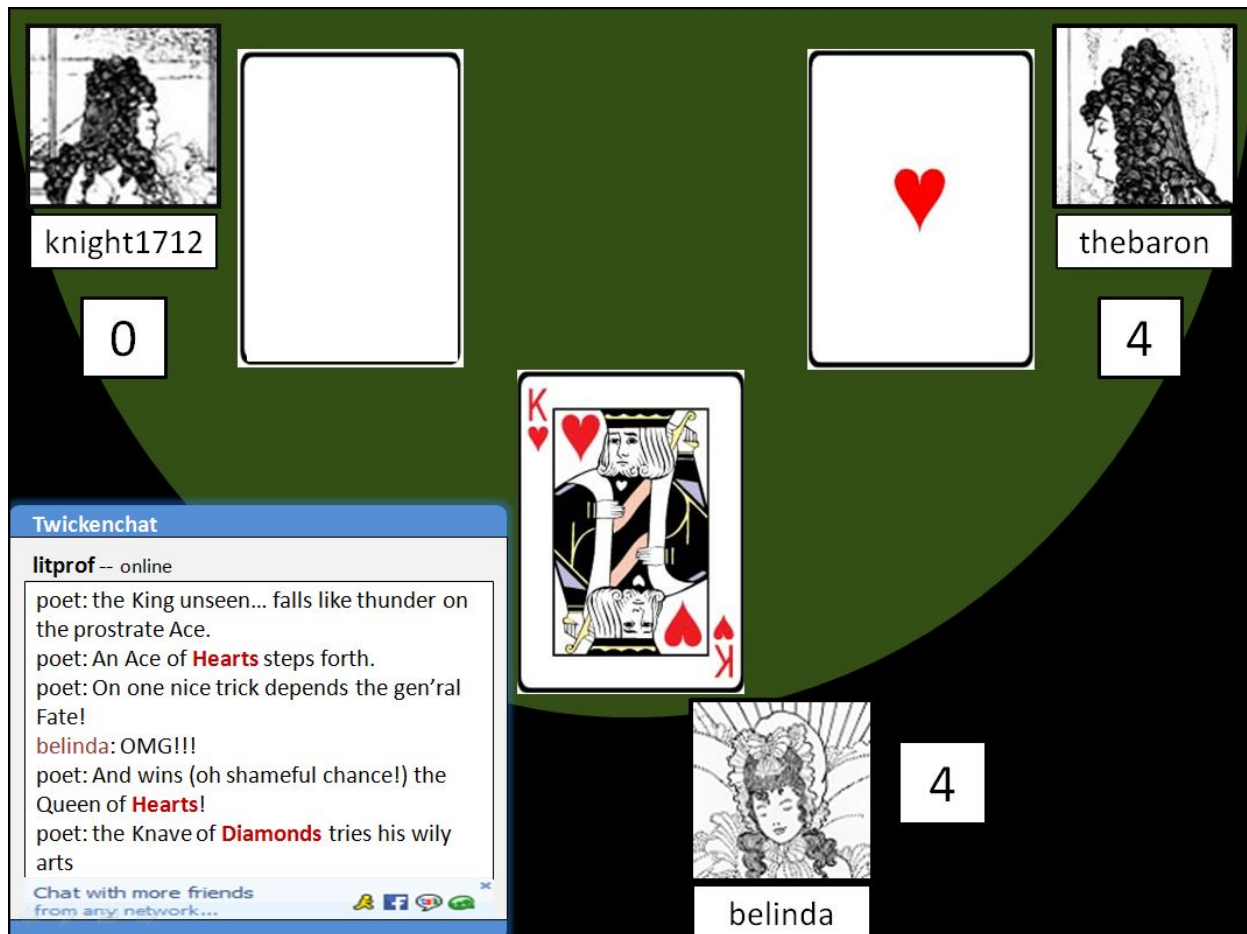


Figure 1. "The King unseen... falls like thunder on the prostrate Ace."

I mention this at length because it stands in contrast to what is emerging as a significant and distinct thread in discussions of *The Rape of the Lock*. There is a large body of recent work which treats the game as an opportunity to talk about something else, to turn the discussion to, for instance, the gender politics of Pope's eighteenth-century coterie culture, or the object world

of London's rapidly mercantiled economy.<sup>1</sup> This is of course the approach I adopt in the classroom. Beginning with William Pole's remarks in 1873, however, a number of scholars have developed readings of this scene which work to isolate the play of ombre from its cultural contexts—which turn to the game simply to discuss the game. The most recent among these, Oliver Baker's "Pope's *Ombre* Enigmas in *The Rape of the Lock*," may be taken as exemplary; Baker's method, which he indicates he developed in consultation with W.E. Markham and T.R. Cleary, develops what he takes to be a rigorous approach to taking the game on its own terms, in its own terms (233n1).<sup>2</sup> Rather than cataloguing the poem's complicated allusive webwork, or charting out its rich and complicated social embeddedness, Baker's approach instead develops a nuanced understanding of such issues as the order of play, the cards dealt, and the strategies and tactics of a hand of ombre. As he himself notes, Baker thereby stands as the latest standard-bearer of a surprisingly long and eclectic list of scholars, which includes such luminaries as

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<sup>1</sup> See, among others, Felicity Nussbaum, *The Brink of All We Hate: Satires on Women, 1660-1750* (U P of Kentucky, 1984); C.E. Nicholson, "A World of Artefacts: *The Rape of the Lock* as Social History," *Literature and History* (1979): 183-193; Laura Brown, *Alexander Pope* (New York: Basil Blackwell, 1985); Brown, *Ends of Empire: Women and Ideology in Early Eighteenth-Century English Literature* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1993); Stewart Crehan, "The Rape of the Lock and the Economy of 'Trivial Things'" in *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 31.1 (1997): 45-68; Beth Kowaleski-Wallace, "Women, China, and Consumer Culture in Eighteenth-Century England," *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 29.2 (1996): 153-67.

<sup>2</sup> Refer to Oliver R. Baker, "Pope's *Ombre* Enigmas in *The Rape of the Lock*," *Connotations* 17.2-3 (2007/8): 210-37.

Geoffrey Tillotson and William Wimsatt. His paper asks to be understood, therefore, as an entry in an established tradition of reading, an established body of work which seeks to analyze a game—this game—as an artifact with a self-sufficient critical vocabulary. In this sense, it is satisfyingly exhaustive, part of what might be recognized as a tradition of game-theoretical treatments of games as merely games.<sup>3</sup> Put differently, what we have here is a surprisingly resilient form of game-theoretical criticism: the seemingly closed loop of a game taken merely as itself.

Having said this, however, I would like to sound a note of caution. Baker's method is what he calls "unbiased close reading"; it is an attempt "to fully account for the content of Pope's forty couplets" (212, 211). One might begin nevertheless to suspect that Baker's unbiased approach is in fact attended by a host of biases—biases which, not surprisingly, occlude much of the potential "content" of Pope's eighty lines. It will be the work of this essay, therefore, to sketch out the critical assumptions underlying Baker's approach, this special form of game-theoretical criticism. This investigation will require a turn, for a moment, to the history of chess. I turn to chess, briefly, in part because it is the oldest game exhaustively to be represented in English-language literature; the body of writing on chess outweighs that of any other single game. But my point in the end will be to suggest that readings like Baker's of *The Rape of the Lock* have a wider salience; they illuminate a special way in which game theory, far from promising simply to exhaust literary representations like Pope's poem, may in fact depend upon literary representations—or, more broadly, cultural context—for its explanatory power

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<sup>3</sup> See, for instance, Baker 211-13, as this tradition has come to bear on readings of *The Rape of the Lock*.

altogether. Let me, then, lay all my cards on the table. It will be my argument that *The Rape of the Lock* is not explicable through a game theoretical approach. On the contrary, the game theoretical approach is explicable through *The Rape of the Lock*. In a wider sense, far from excluding the cultural contexts of Pope's world, the game theoretical approach continually rediscovers them, for game theory traces its origins to the very coterie culture which *The Rape of the Lock* describes. It emerges precisely from the card-playing culture of Alexander Pope's Twickenham—for culturally specific reasons which I will discuss in their place. This essay's final trick will therefore offer an alternative history of game theory itself, through a reading of Pope's poem. For *The Rape of the Lock*, in the end, captures not only a game and a world; it also offers an opportunity to revisit the assumptions of game theoretical readings of all sorts of encounters, including pastimes like ombre and chess—but also like love and war.

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Among the very first handful of books printed in English was the first English-language book on gaming: William Caxton's very free translation of an Italian original entitled *The Game and Playe of Chess Moralised* (1474). It is a curious book. As Jenny Adams notes, Caxton's translation, despite its title, "does not, in fact, have much to say about a game or about playing it." *The Game of Chess* traces, exhaustively, not so much the strategy and play of the game as, instead, its relationship to the world of feudal relations. "The work," Adams notes, "uses the chessboard and its pieces to allegorize a political community whose citizens contribute to the

common good.”<sup>4</sup> It begins therefore not with the pawns, which would be described in the first major book on the play of chess (by the composer and librettist François-André Danican Philidor) as the “soul of chess.”<sup>5</sup> Nor does it begin with board and the rules of the game. It begins instead with a description of the piece which would be most important in a feudal society: the king. It proceeds to enumerate the king’s various companions and counselors, numbering the pawns as the members of imagined professions: blacksmiths, drapers, farmers, etc... Chess, that is, becomes for Caxton a transparent excuse to introduce a culture.<sup>6</sup> Criticism has thus tended to focus on *The Game of Chess* as an example of a mirror for a magistrate, for *The Game of Chess* proposes a way of reading the State as a game with rules and procedures.

The textual representations of games in English may therefore be thought to have had, from their beginnings, a mixed mode of discourse. Books on games have been, on the one hand, purely self-referential, composed of the rules and procedures of the game itself; looked at in this

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<sup>4</sup> Jenny Adams, “Introduction,” to Caxton, *The Game and Playe of the Chesse* (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 2009), 4.

<sup>5</sup> François-André Danican Philidor, *l’Analyse du jeu des Échecs* (Paris, 1749): xix. Writes Philidor, “les pions... son l’âme des Echecs.”

<sup>6</sup> The best discussion of Caxton’s *The Game of Chess*, and of the allegorical uses of chess in the medieval period generally, is Jenny Adams, *Power Play: The Literature and Politics of Chess in the Late Middle Ages* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006), esp. 124-155.

Also refer to Adams’s “Longene to the Playe”: Caxton, Chess, and the Boundaries of Political Order,” *Essays in Medieval Studies*, 21 (2004): 151-166, which usefully summarizes other recent treatments of cultural and social considerations captured by Caxton’s treatise.

way, such a representation is interested strictly in how better to play a game as a game, with, that is, clearly definable procedures and objectives. Such representations have however also been, sometimes though not always at the same time, the mirrors of ostensibly unrelated modes of human discourse—politics, surely, but also love, business, and so on. Indeed, the predominantly “social” or “allegorical” forms of game-books, to borrow Adams’ language, seem to *predate* the first handbooks on what might be called the strategy and play of games. Caxton’s *Game of Chess* predates Gioachino Greco’s “The Royall Game of Chesse-Play,” the first such game-play handbook, by nearly 200 years. Is it possible, one might therefore wonder, that game theory is a relatively late development, which, rather than defining some essential substratum of the play of games, requires a prior cultural substratum to sustain it? The English republication of Greco’s book, which in part capitalizes on the reputed love for “The Royall Game” by the martyr-king Charles I, would seem to suggest that even such eminently analytical games as chess are rarely ever *simply* games.<sup>7</sup> There is some ideological or cultural remnant which clings to games—and which the fact of the game therefore offers continually to return to performance.

Chess has survived the royal culture in which it was originally embedded; like all games, it continues however to inhabit these two broad, by no means mutually exclusive, modes of discourse, what might be called the game-theoretical, and the “social” or “allegorical.” Representations can, of course, slope predominantly into one or the other form. Take, as a nearly pure example of a game represented in the first mode, the chess game between the

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<sup>7</sup> Greco, *The Royall Game of Chesse-Play, Sometimes The Recreation of the late King, with many of the Nobility, Illustrated With almost an hundred Gambetts, Being the Study of Biochimo the famous Italian* (London, 1656).

supercomputer HAL 9000 and Frank Poole in Stanley Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968). While killing time on a voyage to Saturn, astronaut Poole has challenged HAL to a game of chess, and has been hopelessly outplayed; HAL points out that he is about to win—says “I’m sorry Frank, I think you missed it. Queen to bishop three. Bishop takes queen. Knight takes bishop. Mate”—and Poole in fact resigns. Shortly afterwards, HAL inaugurates a plan to trap Poole outside the spacecraft, thereby, as it were, checkmating him in a surprisingly fatal way. But apart from simply anticipating the plot which is to follow, the issue which the film seems to pose through this chess set-piece is simply the very possibility of a computer playing a game at all. The way in which a computer plays chess becomes a way of posing the so-called “hard” question of consciousness, whether HAL is in fact sentient. Here it seems critical to think about the game as a game—which the players play with various levels of skill. Scholarly treatments of this game tend for this reason to focus on factual reconstructions of move orders, with a few speculations upon the logical precision of the “mind” of the supercomputer.<sup>8</sup> The best of these is I think Murray S. Campbell’s “An Enjoyable Game”; Campbell applies to HAL 9000 vs. Frank Poole the lessons he learned while tinkering with Deep Blue, the IBM supercomputer which

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<sup>8</sup> The position on-screen was reached in a game played by two German masters (Roesch-Schlage, Hamburg 1910); this game provides the most probable move order. Tim Krabbé, “Willi Schlage: The Only Unknown to Become Immortal Twice” (1999)  
<http://www.xs4all.nl/~timkr/chess2/schlage.htm> (5 May 2010).



defeated then-world-champion Garry Kasparov in a six-game showdown.<sup>9</sup> Campbell's essay adopts an approach which the film itself, in speaking the game's language, seems to prompt; he, like HAL, dwells extensively on move orders, variations, and improvements. The lesson he draws, in the end, is one of HAL's sentience, and perhaps insanity, determined precisely through the logical or illogical flow of the game. The fact that HAL is wrong about the mating line it sets out (there is a mating line, but not as HAL describes it) becomes in this mode of critical discourse a crucial explanatory clue.<sup>10</sup>

There is of course another way in which games enter into the world—in which the game articulates a different register of human discourse, structuring, for instance, romantic attraction or political struggle.<sup>11</sup> Take as an example of this social or allegorical mode of representation

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<sup>9</sup> In an odd, possibly proleptic twist, Campbell analyzes HAL, whose name is simply IBM shifted down one letter, through lessons learned in programming what in the world of *2001* must be his predecessor—IBM's Deep Blue.

<sup>10</sup> As Geoffrey Rockwell puts it—controversially, I think—“Most games have no purpose other than their play and for that reason games are played voluntarily for their own sake.” “Serious Play at Hand: is Gaming Serious Research in the Humanities?” *TEXT Technology* 12.2 (2003): 89-99.

<sup>11</sup> Caxton's *The Game of Chesse* (1474) treats chess as a political system; an earlier French translation treated it as an allegory for the emotions of two courting lovers (the anonymous *Les Echecs Amoureux*, composed circa 1400). Both are loose translations of Jacobus de Cessolis, *Liber de Moribus Hominum et Officiis Nobillim Super Ludo Scacchorum* (ca. 1280, first printed 1474).

the well-known game of chess in the *Thomas Crown Affair*—the one with Steve McQueen and Faye Dunaway (1967), a film which is virtually contemporary with *2001*. Vicki Anderson (Dunaway) is an insurance investigator; she is investigating Crown (McQueen), a bank executive who she suspects has robbed his own bank. The scene which interests me begins when the two meet in Crown's posh and well-appointed library. Anderson notices a chess-board; Crown, cognac in one hand and cigar in the other, asks if she plays. The affective pacing of the scene which follows is shaped by the rhythm of the chess game they sit to play; it is in other words a scene conducted entirely through a game of chess, while being nevertheless about something completely different. After the first few moves, the camera begins to lose track of the pieces; the players likewise spend less time looking at the board than each other. Anderson traces the curve of her neckline; she touches Crown's fingers over the chessboard; she caresses the phallic head of one of her bishops in an invitation so obvious that even the thick-headed playboy Thomas Crown can't miss it. Everything about the staging of this scene indicates that the moves, themselves, are only the blind for some other struggle or contest. Crown, about to lose, instead makes a counter-offer: he invites her to "play something else," leaving silent the pun on the "mate" which was about to follow. When the game falls away what is left is the romantic attraction which is the real engine of the film, for the "affair" of *The Thomas Crown Affair* is in the end not about a bank robbery or insurance fraud. Such a chess game, like such an insurance investigation, structures the conduct of human commerce, providing the (however abbreviated and accelerated) rules of courtship. This courtship is not necessarily a low-stakes contest, as the amount of money in play itself suggests. Indeed, this contest of romantic attraction also mobilizes the banking establishment, global commerce (ivory chess-pieces, Persian rugs, Cuban cigars, French cognac, etc...), the insurance industry, and so on. But the clear point is that the

encounter over the chess-board is a blind for a clearer, and more common, generic device—the sexual plot of comic drama. Bank executive and insurance investigator have, in other words, been “playing something else” all along.

When HAL says “Mate,” he simply means that he is about to win a game of chess; when Crown leaves the same word unpronounced, he is not referring to the game at all. Alexander Pope’s game of ombre might therefore be read in two ways—as the precise formal equivalent of the game of chess in *2001: A Space Odyssey*, or as the formal equivalent of the game of chess in *The Thomas Crown Affair*. In the first instance, in the words of Geoffrey Rockwell, the game “formally isolate[s] a pocket of activities,” abstracting a “time and place from the real world”<sup>12</sup>; it stands as its own isolated object with its own sufficient rules and procedures. In the second instance, the game falls away to reveal something else, the psychological drives (romantic attraction) and global forces which exist outside it but nevertheless structure its play. In the first case, the game has its own (sometimes opaque) aesthetics and ethics, and is therefore often simply excerpted and made to stand as an object of its own. In the second case, the game is the object of a wide range of critical approaches, but has, itself, no essential ethical or aesthetic content. It is understood to be an integral part of the longer work and larger world in which it appears. Finally, and slightly paradoxically, in the former, the characters are themselves the objects of critical inquiry, since they speak, think, and express themselves in the language of the game which they play. In the latter, the characters are less important than the social forces at work. Put differently, in the first case, the game is a hermeneutic object, sufficient to itself, sealed up in a spaceship, as it were, and hurtled off to Saturn. In the second case, the game is

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<sup>12</sup> Geoffrey Rockwell, “Serious Play at Hand,” *TEXT Technology* 12.2 (2003): 94.

part of a network, played in a library, rich with allusions to the global and literary world of which it is a part. As the trend of my remarks should, I hope, make clear, Baker's piece treats the game in *The Rape of the Lock* as an artifact of the first form. It takes up a specific game of ombre but consistently, perhaps even counter-intuitively, declines to consider the game's parabolic valences—taking up a critical position against the trend of recent, influential readings, which emphasize the embeddedness of the game's politics.<sup>13</sup> Its reading offers an extended consideration of the game in its own language, including variations which the game might have taken, but did not, and, in this sense, is the partner piece to Campbell's "An Enjoyable Game."

As Baker puts it, "[other] scholars can engage in ... literary analysis of the characters, motives, and social context of Pope's poem"; his task is instead to take up the burden of what he calls "the evidence of close reading." He intends to determine "how skillfully, or unskillfully, the players enacted the first mock-battle at Hampton Court" (226,211); he intends likewise to evaluate "the individual players' *Ombre* skills," ranking them from "skillful Nymph" to "novice or nincompoop" (223, 222). As he notes, his is the latest installment in a history of reconstructions of this particular game.<sup>14</sup> These treatments, taken together, form part of a special category of what Herbert De Ley calls a game-theoretical approach to criticism; it is a special category because they represent game-theoretical approaches to the literary representation of a

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<sup>13</sup> Nicholson, Brown, and Clehan, but also Aubrey Williams, "The 'Fall' of China and *The Rape of the Lock*," in *Essential Articles*, 284-300; Louis A. Landa, "Pope's Belinda, the General Emporie of the World, and the Wondrous Worm," in *Essays in Eighteenth-Century English Literature* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1980), 178-98.

<sup>14</sup> Baker, "Enigmas": 211-12.

game. This would seem to provide what Baker calls an “unbiased,” satisfyingly closed treatment of a hermetically sealed episode: a game read by game theory (211).

Baker’s approach is nevertheless anything but tautological. It is moreover different than simply laying the groundwork for later critical approaches, as though revisiting the rules of the game were simply to determine the theoretical substructure of the struggle between Belinda and the Baron. A game-theoretical approach, on the contrary, draws on a wealth of assumptions, not least being the anatomy of human motivation. As De Ley notes, “rather than studying things that happen *to* the players (except as they may change the conditions of the game), game theory focuses on the players’ rational decisions.”<sup>15</sup> Game theory, that is, is a focused way of thinking about human activity as a sum of isolatable, anatomizable elections—of “logical choices.”<sup>16</sup> In order for it to have explanatory force, it must assume that people, as Prashant Parikh puts it, make rational decisions about “positive benefits and negative costs” based on the analysis of “partial information” (919). This is most obvious when Baker claims, for instance, that “only when Pope’s audience have reconstructed the two defenders’ hands” can they know whether they “should have drawn new cards” (215). The assumption is that when our information of the

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<sup>15</sup> Herbert De Ley, “The Name of the Game: Applying Game Theory in Literature,” *Substance* 17.1 (1988): 44.

<sup>16</sup> Take, for instance, the remarks of Martin J. Osborne and Ariel Rubinstein in their *Course in Game Theory*: “The models we study assume that each decision-maker is ‘rational’ in the sense that he is aware of his alternatives, forms expectations about any unknowns, has clear preferences, and chooses his action deliberately after some process of optimization.” (Boston: MIT Press, 1994): 4.

hands becomes unlimited, we can have perfect access to what a perfectly skillful player would or would not do, thereby, transparently, associating motivation in a straightforward way with the strategy of the game.

The promise of codifying motivations is of course both the great strength and the singular limitation of the game-theoretical approach—which has, in the twentieth century, expanded from the treatment of games to explain broader patterns of social behavior.<sup>17</sup> Games are, historically speaking, part of the development of a polite culture of publicness elaborated by theorists and historians after J.H. Plumb, Norbert Elias, and Jürgen Habermas. From combat to card-playing, the development of games is an integral part of what Elias and Eric Dunning describe as the “civilizing process”; warfare gives way to poker.<sup>18</sup> But the applications of game theory, in general, tend to recapture what Elias and Dunning argue are the atavistic roots of polite games of leisure; they reapply lessons learned in the analysis of card and board games to seemingly

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<sup>17</sup> This line of argument has been taken up by Peter Swirski and Paul Lanham, who between them discuss the promise of game theory as a literary-heuristic tool. See Lanham, “Games, Play, Seriousness,” in *Tristram Shandy and the Games of Pleasure* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1973), 37-51; and Swirski, “The Role of Game Theory in Literary Studies” in *Empirical Approaches to Literature* (1995): 37-43. See also Joseph Heath’s extensive discussion of this question: “Is Language a Game?” *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* 26.1 (1996): 1-28.

<sup>18</sup> I am indebted to Jonathan Freedman’s remarks in “What Maggie Knew: Game Theory, *The Golden Bowl*, and the Possibilities of Aesthetic Knowledge,” *The Cambridge Quarterly* 37.1 (2008): 98-113. Freedman refers to Norbert Elias and Eric Dunning, *The Quest for Excitement: Sport and Leisure in the Civilizing Process* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986).

radically different fields of human endeavor—most importantly, economic theory and military strategy. The *Theory of Games and Economic Behavior* (1944), by Manhattan-project mathematician John von Neumann and Oskar Morgenstern, is the most significant study in this tradition. Such books as John McDonald’s *Strategy in Poker, Business and War* (1950) borrow and popularize von Neumann and Morgenstern’s insights; they likewise make explicit the links which underlie such an approach: undergirding the critical application of game theory is the assumption that human decisions in larger-order social situations are ultimately as rational, or as rationalizable, as decisions made over the card-table.<sup>19</sup> Largely due to the influence of such books, two-person, zero-sum game theory became the dominant narrative of the cold war era. Such a narrative, in Steven Belletto’s words, worked by “conceptualizing the cold war as a game, and by playing this game according to specific rational strategies.”<sup>20</sup> This theoretical sleight-of-hand may have worked, at least inasmuch as it helped demonstrate the winlessness of thermonuclear war, but it also has precisely the sort of corollary effects we would expect in a game-theoretical treatment of a cultural problem. American game-theoretical military strategy,

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<sup>19</sup> See early discussions of this issue in von Neumann and Morgenstern, 8-9; J.D. Williams, *The Compleat Strategyst: Being a Primer on the Theory of Games of Strategy* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1954), 6-17.

<sup>20</sup> Steven Belletto, “The Game Theory Narrative and the Myth of the National Security State,” *American Quarterly* 61.2 (2009), 333. See also Philip Mirowski, “When Games Grow Deadly Serious: The Military Influence on the Evolution of Game Theory,” in *Economics and National Security: A History of their Interaction*, ed. Craufurd D. W. Goodwin (Durham: Duke University Press, 1991).

for instance, abstracted the war from the rest of global politics; as Belletto notes, under the game theory narrative “the particularities of various third-world countries” became “less visible than their status as stakes,” as, in other words, the payoffs of a two-person, zero-sum game played between rational, non-culturally-embedded actors.<sup>21</sup> What is lost in applications of game theory to real-world situations is precisely the “social” or “allegorical” dimensions of games themselves.<sup>22</sup>

The explanatory appeal of game theory is therefore evidently closely knit to its historical applications; the assumption is that an understanding of the rules of a game captures human behavior—from local, individual decisions to broad political trends, from struggles between business partners to clashes between NATO and the Eastern Bloc. The alternative to game-theoretical approaches, again, as De Ley understands them, is what he calls the “narrative

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 335.

<sup>22</sup> Consider, as a parallel example critical of this very tradition, *The Manchurian Candidate* (1962), that Cold-War film in which hero Raymond Shaw finds himself to be the unlikely lynchpin of a series of plots: a romantic narrative, a psychological struggle, the dysfunction of a political family, and a vast Communist conspiracy. The film might also be thought to hinge on the meaning of card-play during the Cold War—on the not-at-all simple psychological pressure layered into the play of solitaire, and, indeed, into the meanings of the Queen of Diamonds. Such a film asks us to think of games as themselves caught up in culture and politics, rather than inviting us to interpret human behavior as “game-like,” that is, transparently interpretable.



semiotic” approach—understood in the widest possible sense of the term.<sup>23</sup> Such an approach imagines a hero “buffeted by fortune, a figure in the grip of forces greater than himself.” Such a hero (or, Pope would add, heroine) would be governed by “some possibly subconscious, possibly mystical, or Jungian, or Lévi-Straussian psychological itinerary.”<sup>24</sup> We might also think of Alexander Pope’s invention of what he slyly calls a “Rosicrucian” system of sylphs, demons, and gnomes.<sup>25</sup> The invisible world of *The Rape of the Lock* might be read, somewhat simply, as therefore merely figuring or shadowing forth some essential set of subconscious motivations, drives, or desires<sup>26</sup>: take, for example, the moment when Ariel, appalled, sees “an earthly lover” lurking at Belinda’s heart. Indeed, the entire catalogue of Belinda’s dreams, with its moving toyshop of sword-knots, coaches, and other gewgaws might be thought allegorically to structure precisely this set of psychological or proto-psychological drives, just as the Cave of Spleen in the

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<sup>23</sup> Narrative semiotics, in the narrow sense of “Greimasian analysis” (De Ley points to “About Games,” *SubStance* 8.4 (1979): 31-35), historically stems from readings of epic, romance, and folk tales. This approach would seem apt for *The Rape of the Lock*, given the poem’s mock-epic pretensions.

<sup>24</sup> Herbert De Ley, “The Name of the Game: Applying Game Theory in Literature,” *SubStance* 17.1 (1933): 44.

<sup>25</sup> The most thorough treatment of Pope’s “Rosicrucian” system is Bonnie Latimer, “A History of the Sylphs in *The Rape of the Lock*,” *The Review of English Studies* 57 (2006): 684-700.

<sup>26</sup> See David Fairer, *Pope’s Imagination* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984), 53.

fourth canto might be thought to figure, in a more laborious way, a mystical, eerily Jungian subconscious.<sup>27</sup>

This reading is nevertheless itself certainly too narrow; as Alex Hernandez notes, the Cave of Spleen is at once a gallery of Belinda's motives, and, through a sort of series of Ovidian metamorphoses, a confused clearinghouse of the spoils of British Mercantilism.<sup>28</sup> The sylphs might indeed also, in an extended sense, be read throughout as allegorical reflections of the social and political world which places Belinda at its center, for they pick out and guard particular items of Belinda's object-world: Zephyretta the "flutt'ring fan," Brillante the diamond "Drops," and so on. Their very names imply their allegorical roles, hovering, as they do, over the objects of Belinda's dressing-table: gemstones, perfumes, ivory, tortoiseshell, etc... Pope likewise barely implies that the invisible creatures of the Rosicrucian system are meant to stand in as the engines of empire, for it is their locomotive power—the breeze from their wings—which moves Belinda's pleasure-barge, and perhaps the trading-ships of commerce, as well.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> See, for instance, Ralph Goodman, "A Jungian Feminist Approach to Alexander Pope's *The Rape of the Lock*," *Unisa English Studies: Journal of the Department of English* 33.1 (1995): 26-30.

<sup>28</sup> Alex Eric Hernandez "Commodity and Religion in Pope's *The Rape of the Lock*," *SEL* 48.3 (2008): 571.

<sup>29</sup> Ariel himself claims that "'th' Aerial Kind" "guide the Course of wandring Orbs on high," "brew fierce Tempests on the wintry Main," and generally "o'er human Race preside,/ Watch all their Ways, and all their Actions guide" (2.76-88). For the argument that "things, not people, are the heroes" of Pope's poem, see Crehan, 45-68, esp. 46.

The Baron would seem to localize, in a sort of microcosm, trading routes with such places as the Ottoman Empire. Writes Pope, it is “*Coffee*” which “Sent up in Vapours to the *Baron’s* Brain/ New Stratagems, the radiant Lock to gain.” It is not the Baron, but the coffee, which produces the “stratagem.” When they sit down to cards, then, these players seem generally to be, in De Ley’s words, at the mercy of “forces greater than [themselves]”—forces as large as the reach of the British mercantile system.<sup>30</sup> From the forces of Empire arranged on Belinda’s dressing-table to the Baron’s caffeine high, *The Rape of the Lock* has therefore very little to say about people as “rational actors.”

There are nevertheless compelling reasons to think that a game theoretical approach would suit *The Rape of the Lock*, not least because it describes a world squarely in the middle of—or, more precisely, on the margins of—the historical ground zero of the development of the English public sphere. Pope himself describes the card-game itself as a “combat,” hearing the atavistic revenants of mortal struggle sublimated into polite play. There is in fact a yet more compelling reason than this: namely that game theory itself originated in precisely the time and cultural context of Pope’s poem, with a letter penned in 1712—the same year as the first edition of *The Rape of the Lock*—by an Englishman named Waldegrave. Waldegrave’s letter proposes what would come to be called a mixed strategy solution to a puzzle in the card game *Le Her*—a puzzle which, anticipating Cold War strategy, Waldegrave solves by assuming that it is two-

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<sup>30</sup> The already-classic essay on the work of chemicals in *The Rape of the Lock* is Richard Kroll’s “Pope and Drugs: The Pharmacology of *The Rape of the Lock*, *ELH* 67 (2000): 99-141.

player, zero-sum.<sup>31</sup> Like all myths of origins, the rest of the story is somewhat less certain, beginning with which Waldegrave, precisely, penned the letter.<sup>32</sup> Various candidates have been proposed. It is however certain that the game-theorist Waldegrave lived first in London, and later, as a Jacobite in exile, in Paris. It is also known that he was, like Pope, a British Catholic, when Catholics were restricted from living in England's urban centers. This means that Waldegrave was almost certainly in England, as part of the extended Catholic coterie culture centered in Twickenham, at precisely the time that Pope wrote *The Rape of the Lock*. Indeed, a 1714 letter from Pope to John Caryl—the addressee of the 1714 edition of the poem—mentions “Lord Waldegrave,” who is possibly the game theorist himself—though more probably the theorist's uncle.<sup>33</sup> We can at any rate be certain that the Twickenham world described in so much detail by Alexander Pope was the very proving-ground of game theory in the first place.

As the trend of my argument so far should indicate, however, a close look at *The Rape of the Lock* tends less to provide apt material for a game-theoretical approach than it does a way of returning to game theory's fundamental assumptions—especially the very assumption that human decisions, even decisions in a relatively local context like that of a game, can

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<sup>31</sup> A detailed discussion of Waldegrave's problem and its history appears in Anders Hald, *History of Probability and Statistics* (199), 314-322, 378-392.

<sup>32</sup> The best candidate is Charles Waldegrave, though others have been proposed. David Bellhouse, “The Problem of Waldegrave,” *Electronic Journal for History of Probability and Statistics* 3.2 (2007): 6-8.

<sup>33</sup> Alexander Pope, *The Works of Alexander Pope*, ed. John Wilson Croker (London, Bradbury and Evans, 1871), 6.222.

meaningfully be isolated as a series of rational decisions made according to clear payoffs and utilities. Pope's Catholic circle included John Caryl (the addressee of the poem), the Waldegraves, the originals for the Baron (Lord Petre), Belinda (Arabella Fermor), and indeed the whole cast of characters in *The Rape of the Lock*. The key thing, as recent work has demonstrated, is that this circle constituted a persecuted religious minority, a group vividly conscious of itself as living under social and cultural penalty in a "militantly Protestant" England.<sup>34</sup> There is a wealth of criticism exploring the centrality of social marginalism to Pope's poetry, including a recent essay arguing for the ultimately Catholic origins of the "Rosicrucian" machinery in *The Rape of the Lock*; Pope has, according to this line of thought, smuggled a basically Catholic understanding of the world into a poem about the British *beau monde*.<sup>35</sup> What

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<sup>34</sup> Patricia Brückmann, "Virgins Visited by Angel Powers: *The Rape of the Lock*, Platonick Love, Sylphs and Some Mystics," in *The Enduring Legacy: Alexander Pope Tercentenary Essays*, G S. Rousseau and Pat Rogers, eds (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1988): 14; Alison Shell, *Catholicism, Controversy and the English Literary Imagination, 1558-1660*; and Paul Gabriner, "The Papist's House, The Papist's Horse: Alexander Pope and the Removal from Binfield," in *Centennial Hauntings*, C. C. Barfoot and Theo d'Haen, eds. (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1999), 13-63.

<sup>35</sup> The argument for Pope as a marginalized poet is developed at length in Maynard Mack's *The Garden and the City: Retirement and Politics in the Later Poetry of Pope, 1731-1743* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1969); and Helen Deutsch's *Resemblance and Disgrace: Alexander Pope and the Deformation of Culture* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996), esp. 40-82 and 83-135. The argument for *The Rape of the Lock* as a specifically Catholic poem is developed in Howard Erskine-Hill, "Alexander Pope: The Political Poet in His Time,"

I would like to observe is that this world—the world of the mathematician Waldegrave—was also the world for which the mock-epic was most suited. This is because the severe restrictions on property ownership, the carrying of weapons, the holding of public office, and so forth, enforced a scaled-down existence, the chief thematic resource of which was, according to Peter Davidson, “bathos.”<sup>36</sup> Denied the right to carry weapons, for instance, the characters of *The Rape of the Lock* fight with hatpins, clouded canes, and snuff-boxes. The very origin of Belinda’s “deadly bodkin”—once the seal rings of her great-great-grandsire—suggests the sort of sublimation at work, just as the oft-noted comparison of her petticoats to Achilles’s shield extend it. In this world, it is less that the pretensions of high society are satirized by comparing them to trivial worlds than it is, I suspect, that trivial things have been all along invested with concerns much larger than them. Denied the right to hold office, the people of Pope’s world play cards. Denied the ability to engineer government, Waldegrave theorizes two-player, zero-sum games. It is therefore only more obvious in this world than elsewhere that a card-game is never just a card-game. It is instead the sublimated clash of civilizations—the marshalling of troops

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*Eighteenth-Century Studies*, 15 (1981), 130-31; Murray G. H. Pittock, *Poetry and Jacobite Politics in Eighteenth-Century Britain and Ireland* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 107-19; and Ronald Paulson, “*The Rape of the Lock*: A Jacobite Aesthetics,” in *Acts of Narrative*, Carol Jacobs and Henry Sussman, eds. (Stanford, Stanford University Press, 2003), 130-145.

<sup>36</sup> Davidson, “Pope’s Recusancy,” *Studies in the Literary Imagination* 38.1 (2005): 69.

and world resources—which the Catholic English could not directly organize.<sup>37</sup> We might therefore reverse the assumption that game theory develops out of an unbiased look at games; quite the contrary, it is instead that game theory develops directly from a culture in which cards always already adumbrate the high-stakes gambles of political gamesmanship.

I would like to conclude by offering a few remarks about Pope’s game of ombre, read as a Catholic or coterie game. Baker suggests, in an endnote, that it is possible that “the Baron is a very skilful player” who “decides to ‘let’ [Belinda] win” the game, though he dismisses this as “inconsistent with his subsequent behavior, and inconsistent with the rest of Pope’s satire about *le beau monde*” (236n23). I would like to suggest a different possibility, outside the limits of the game-theoretical model, which does not assume that the Baron is trying rationally to “win” or to “lose” the game, or that Pope’s poem is, strictly speaking, a “satire.” To be quite clear, Baker does not read the poem as though it were simply a game. He reads the game of ombre as though it were simply a game, with clear stakes and motivations.<sup>38</sup> Seen this way, the Baron’s side of

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<sup>37</sup> See Howard D. Weinbrot’s remarks on the eighteenth-century sense of the savageness of Homeric combat: “*The Rape of the Lock* and the Contexts of Warfare,” in *The Enduring Legacy: Alexander Pope Tercentenary Essays*, ed. G. S. Rousseau and Pat Rogers (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1988), 21-48, esp. 30.

<sup>38</sup> In a real-world setting, such stakes might be determined—as Von Neumann and Morganstern suggest—by asking actants how much they would prefer certain payoffs to others. Actants might claim for instance that they prefer winning roughly—or perhaps precisely—three times as much as they would dislike losing. In the absence of such information (*The Rape of the Lock* does not even suggest the presence of money to govern the stakes) game theoretical approaches

the game of ombre begins this way: he surveys his cards, calculates that the serious risk of bidding and losing outweighs the slim probability of bidding and winning, and therefore prefers

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instead generally revert to “ordinal utilities,” that is, the ranking of preferences. This is the simplest form of this approach pioneered by Brams (*Biblical Games: Game Theory and the Hebrew Bible* (Boston: MIT, 1980, rpt. 2002)), but taken up subsequently by a number of theorists, in part because it has, in De Ley’s words, “the advantage” of being “relatively simple and easy to apply” (45). The game of ombre in *The Rape of the Lock*, if it were charted out as a Bramsian matrix of ordinal payoffs strictly in relation to the Baron’s hand, might look in its most rudimentary form like this:

	The Baron makes an <i>Ombre</i> Bid	The Baron does not make an <i>Ombre</i> bid
Win <i>la vole</i>	8 (successful bid)	3 (failed defense)
Win (without vole)	7 (successful bid)	4 (failed defense)
<i>Remise</i>	2 (failed bid)	5 (successful defense)
<i>Codille</i>	1 (failed bid)	6 (successful defense)

Figure 2: Matrix of the Baron’s Ordinal Payoffs

Charted out in this way, the Baron’s most desirable outcome would be to bid and then to win *la vole* (8); the least desirable would be to bid and to suffer *codille* (1).



not to bid, hoping successfully to defend against the bidder, but risking only the minor defeat of an unsuccessful defense. He then organizes his card-play best to thwart Belinda's bid, not so much positioning himself to win, as fighting not to lose. This is of course over-simplified, since, as Baker notes, one of the "counter-intuitive features" of ombre is that it is often "more [financially] 'rewarding' to successfully defend against an *ombre* bid, than it is to successfully make that bid" (227). But the logic is true to the game-theoretical approach, which in general prefers assigning preferences to describing motivations.

I am not at all convinced however that such a scheme—even if it were complicated to address the Baron's true perceived utilities—quite captures the form of the Baron's logic, or, for that matter, Belinda's. If for instance we look specifically for the language of "winning" in *The Rape of the Lock*, it turns up in two places. The second occurrence is in the last two tricks of the only *tour* in the game. The Baron has been on a winning streak. There are two tricks to go, and he needs them both to impose *codille*. He leads the jack of diamonds; Belinda's sloughs her queen of hearts. Here is how Pope describes it:

The Knave of Diamonds tries his wily arts,  
And wins (oh shameful chance!) the Queen of Hearts.  
At this, the blood the virgin's cheek forsook,  
A livid paleness spreads o'er all her look;  
She sees, and trembles at th' approaching ill,  
Just in the jaws of ruin, and Codille. (3.87-92)

More than one critic has noticed that Belinda's response is out of proportion with the winning (or losing) of a trick. One way of thinking through this problem is in the complex of meanings layered in the rhetoric of "winning"—of what it means to "win" the Queen of Hearts. In the simplest sense, it simply means that the Knave of Diamonds, because Diamonds were led, "wins" Belinda's slough card, the Queen of Hearts. This is simply a matter of the rules of ombre—of Belinda's possibly misplayed hand. And, of course, winning in this context means, by extension, that the Baron is "beating" Belinda. But there is clearly, here, an allegorical scene being staged, which is recognized by both Belinda and the Baron, in which the Knave of Diamonds—a sort of eidolon or avatar for the Baron—plays and wins Belinda's most proper icon, the Queen of Hearts. It is a question of which way we are to read that "of": Belinda's card is not just a face-card belonging to the suit of hearts; it is also the image of a ruler who has power over the hearts of men. Belinda is, like Esther Summerson to William Guppy, the image imprinted on the hearts of the men of the coterie world of *The Rape of the Lock*.<sup>39</sup> The Baron's "win" therefore signifies in two ways. Belinda is, according to the rules of the game, possibly about to suffer "Codille." But the "win" is also yoked zeugmatically to the "ruin" of social and romantic conquest. (Likewise, the "Knave of Diamonds" clearly stands in for the Baron. It is however similarly uncertain whether we are meant to identify the Baron with the riches that diamonds imply, or whether we are meant to think that he is merely the dupe of an industry—i.e.

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<sup>39</sup> Belinda is the queen of others' hearts—a pun which would be leveraged more than once in cold-war era poetry, perhaps most famously in Juice Newton's "The Sweetest Thing (I've Ever Known)," *The Silver Spur* (RCA Victor, 1975): the Baron is "playing with the queen of hearts."

the international trade in gemstones—which depends upon the romantic plot to survive.) These are the stakes which begin to explain Belinda’s response.

The question then is how it is that a game, with all its rules and procedures, may be articulated to a sexual plot, may in fact be *determined*, in all its steps and stages, by a sexual plot. That is, if before I was suggesting that a game could provide the inhabitable form for a plot of romantic attraction, I am now proposing that it may in fact be more useful to think of games as *themselves* already determined by the social or allegorical modes they only ostensibly structure. Pope’s *The Rape of the Lock* can again provide a way forward. The other place that the language of “winning” turns up in the poem is not in the context of the card game at all:

Th’ adventurous baron the bright locks admired;  
He saw, he wish’d, and to the prize aspired.  
Resolved to win, he meditates the way,  
By force to ravish, or by fraud betray;  
For when success a lover’s toils attends,  
Few ask, if fraud or force attain’d his ends. (2.28-34)

Seen this way, the game of ombre is just one of the “ways” the Baron “meditates” as a means to “winning”—that is, achieving or gaining—the lock. This looks, at first, like the straightforward payoffs of the game itself have simply been sublimated into a series of fetishes; the real object of desire is Belinda, who has been displaced into a lock of hair, or a playing card. A new matrix of perceived ordinal utilities could be proposed, plotting fraud and force against winning or not winning the lock. The mistake however would be to think that the Baron’s decisions could ever

be subsequently broken down into rational motivations and “payoffs,” that with enough qualifications and complications, the rhetoric of winning and losing would ultimately always be governed by rational thought, for the poem provides very little evidence for rational behavior at all. This passage, for instance, appears in the context of a sort of devotional sacrifice; the Baron rises before dawn to burn a hecatomb of offerings—tokens of former loves, mash notes, French romances, and so on. He falls “prostrate to the floor” in a prayer “soon to obtain, and long possess the prize” (2.43-44). It is not at all clear to me that these strategies—prostration, devotional sacrifice, prayer—can be meaningfully wedded to a game-theoretical approach to *The Rape of the Lock*, for they seem to evade the economic logic of costs, risks, and gains altogether. It is perhaps best then to think less of the game as a romantic contest writ small, then, than as the articulation of desires which precede and evade the logic of perceived utilities altogether. Driving the Baron’s behavior seems instead to be a desperate logic of sacrifice, motivated by, but not articulated to, a sublimated desire for Belinda, or Belinda figured as her lock of hair. Read this way, we are not in the spaceship of *2001*, in which a game can be read simply as a game; the game, that is, is not its own compact object with its own rules and aesthetics. Rather, we are in the library of the Baron—the mock-epic world of Alexander Pope—with the cultural contextual burden which that implies.

Here, then, is how a reading of context, beginning with motivation rather than preference, can help explain the human play of cards. Approaching the game as the displaced articulation of a sexual plot helps explain the last trick in the *tour*, when the Baron plays the Ace of Hearts which he has been holding back until the end. This is a moment which arrives, as closely as possible, to revealing the Baron’s drives, when the allegory, such as it is, collapses into what seems to be a direct offer of marriage. The Baron has already “pour[ed]” his diamonds out

before Belinda; he has entered into what seems to be a recognizable ritual of courtship, which depends upon international circuits of exchange, including the global circulation of diamonds. He then plays a card which is merely a white field framing a red heart, thereby neatly paralleling, in reverse, the “livid paleness” which “o’erspreads” Belinda’s “looks.” Put differently, he is laying his panting heart on the table, having organized a card game into a complex offer of marriage. (The Baron’s “prostrate Ace” may further be meant to remind us of the other moment of “prostration” in the poem—when the Baron falls into uncertain but desperate prayer before his immolated pile of billet-doux.) And this means that Belinda’s final play—plunging the King of Hearts on the Baron’s single heart—is best read as an assertion of masculine dominance in a romantic exchange, answering and replacing, as it were, the Queen of Hearts with the King of Hearts as her most proper emblem. Pope’s poem insists that Belinda’s King of Hearts is until this moment “unseen”; Baker interprets this to mean that Belinda has accidentally slipped it behind another of her cards, perhaps the Queen of Hearts. He marks this as a sign of her unskillful play. But another possible reading—indeed, it seems to me, the more likely one—is that the King is unseen to everyone *except* Belinda. She, for her part, has held it back in a questionable move of card-playing strategy precisely to enable this scenario in a romantic contest. I am therefore convinced by Baker’s argument that Belinda is not particularly adept at ombre; she seems, however, to be at least the Baron’s match in balancing multiple valences of social discourse. Put differently, it is only the Knight—the forgotten third man—who thinks ombre is about the cards on the table; the Baron and Belinda have been playing something else all along.

This still does not answer the complex riddle of causes which opens the poem. It is only, instead, to suggest that a card-game is what allows Belinda and the Baron to articulate those

causes; it is to argue that the game of *El'Ombre*—the Spanish game called “The Man”—is for Belinda and the Baron both a complex struggle of gender politics, and the distillation of global patterns of commerce, articulated through the language of a card game. There is a long tradition of thinking of game theory in connection with economics—beginning perhaps with Cournot’s *Researches into the Mathematical Principles of the Theory of Wealth*, but cemented, certainly, by von Newmann and Morgenstern. So it may be best to think of the game of ombre in *The Rape of the Lock* through Georg Simmel’s insight about the nature of money: that it only seems to be an objective system—is only experienced as an objective system—because it represents the concretized form of other people’s subjective desires. Money is the fantasy of objective value which enables all sorts of exchanges.<sup>40</sup> We might say the same thing about ombre—which is only barely more complex than the 18<sup>th</sup>-century British monetary system. Ombre facilitates a complex range of exchanges because it appears to stand outside those exchanges, when, in fact, it is the exchanges themselves—the contest of desires—which produces the system’s seeming objective and concrete reality. It is because of this that neither Belinda nor the Baron seems to be playing a simple game of ombre, for the game of ombre is for them hardly a simple game at all. As the coterie context of *The Rape of the Lock* makes evident—but only more evident than other contexts—the card table is most fully understood as the contested terrain between subjective desire and the strange world of its objects.

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<sup>40</sup> See in particular Simmel’s “Analysis of the nature of money with reference to its value stability, its development and its objectivity,” in *The Philosophy of Money*, ed. David Frisby (London: Routledge, 1978), 122-128.