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Reviewed work(s):

Source: *New Literary History*, Vol. 4, No. 2, On Interpretation: II (Winter, 1973), pp. 357-374

Published by: [The Johns Hopkins University Press](http://www.jhu.edu/)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/468481>

Accessed: 23/11/2012 17:57

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Belinda Ludens: Strife and Play in *The Rape of the Lock*

W. K. Wimsatt

I

THE TWO stones of the Roman Neoplatonist Plotinus (*Enneads* V.viii and I.vi), one beautiful in virtue of a special form carved upon it by an artist, the other endowed with being, and hence in Plotinian terms with beauty, in virtue simply of its being one thing, may be considered archetypal for a sort of metaphysical explanation which explains too much—that is to say, which expands its focus upon a special idea until that idea coincides with the whole horizon of the knowable universe. The Plotinian system has had its modern inverted counterparts in forms of expressionist idealism, notably the Crocean. I think it has another sort of parallel in the view of art, or of the whole of cultivated life, as a form of play, which develops, from the aesthetic of Kant, 1790, to a kind of climax in the masterpiece of Johann Huizinga, 1938. *Homo Ludens* asserts that “play can be very serious indeed.” “Ritual,” for example, “is seriousness at its highest and holiest. Can it nevertheless be play?”¹ The trend of the argument is to say that play is the generator and the formula of all culture. It was not carrying things much further when Jacques Ehrmann, the editor of a volume in *Yale French Studies* entitled *Games, Play and Literature*, 1968, protested that Huizinga and some others were in fact taking reality too seriously. “Play is not played against a background of a fixed, stable, reality. . . . All reality is caught up in the play of the concepts which designate it.”² This Berkeleyan moment in the philosophy of play idealism had been in part prepared by the work of a cosmic visionary, Kostas Axelos, whose preliminaries to “planetary thinking” (*Vers la Pensée planétaire*) of 1964 led to the simple announce-

1 *Homo Ludens* (Boston, 1955), pp. 5, 18.

2 “*Homo Ludens* Revisited,” *Yale French Studies*, Issue 41, p. 56.

ment of his title page in 1969 *Le Jeu du monde*. Man as player and as toy; the universe as a game played and as itself an agent playing.

But the universe, of course, as Emerson once pointed out, is anything we wish to make it: "The world is a Dancer; it is a Rosary; it is a Torrent; it is a Boat; a Mist, a Spider's Snare; it is what you will. . . ."³ I myself must confess to a double inclination: to take the concept of play very broadly, yet to stop short of making it a transcendental. It seems a more useful and a more interesting concept if it has some kind of bounds and makes some kind of antithesis to something else. Surely we can think of some things, some moments of action or experience, that are not play—jumping out of the path of an ondriving truck just in time to save your life, for instance, or making out an income tax return. The more spontaneous the action, I suppose, the more certainly we can distinguish play from what is not play. Thus a sudden skip and gambol on the green is not like the leap amid the traffic. But a person filling out a tax form may conceivably, either to relieve tension or to express resentment, evolve some half-conscious overlay of irony or ritual. Allow us a moment to feel safe, and the same is true on the street. I have witnessed a very distinguished academic person—a university president—confront the rush of automobile fenders at a busy corner in New Haven by turning sidewise, like a toreador, and flaunting the skirt of his topcoat.

We have the double sense that play is both clearly different from certain other things, and that it is a chameleon—or, as Wittgenstein would put it, only a collection of family resemblances.⁴ We know that in our everyday usage *play* has not a single opposite, but a medley—what is real, serious, or necessary, what is work, war, or woe.

Perhaps we can usefully conceive the area approximately circumscribed by the term "play" as a polyhedron, in which our divisions according to genus and species will be determined by which side we think of the figure as resting on. Immanuel Kant initiated the modern discussion with a slant toward fine art when he conceived the pleasure of art as a "feeling" of freedom in the play of our cognitive faculties."⁵ Such a *play* of faculties may be analogized very widely—to the play of water in a fountain, the play of firelight on a shadowy wall, the play of muscles in an athlete's body, the play of Aristotle's taws "upon the bottom of a king of kings." The English term "play" has that loose sort

3 *Journals* (Boston, 1909-14), VI, 18.

4 *Philosophical Investigations*, tr. G. E. M. Anscombe (New York, 1970), p. 32e, §67.

5 *Critique of Judgment*, tr. J. C. Meredith (Oxford, 1911), §45.

of connotation. And so have the German *Spiel* and *spielen*. But the Kantian tradition of art as free play of faculties need not be frittered away in such directions. As developed by Schiller and later by Groos and Lange, it gives us a notion of manifold and ordered freedom that makes an appropriate fit for the established fine arts and at the same time may extend to such plausible analogies as childish or savage forms of mimesis, game, and ritual, and to numerous forms of civilized gratification which Kant himself snubbed as merely sensate and pleasurable or amusing.⁶

The aesthetic or artistic emphasis on the concept of play invites us to conceive different kinds of play as realizing, with different degrees of prominence, three insistent aesthetic features: that is, expression, mimesis, and design (or pattern)—corresponding broadly to the three Kantian divisions (and features) of art: the speaking, the shaping, and the art of the beautiful play of sensation. The Kantian general aesthetic requirements of disinterest and of purposiveness without purpose reappear today in clauses concerning convention, unreality, isolation, autotelism, and freedom which make the definitions of play according to Huizinga and his successors.

“Play,” however, is only one of two terms which commonly appear side by side, as if all but synonymous in recent literature of play theory. The other term is “game.” The two terms are used almost interchangeably—as the French *jeu* is translated either *play* or *game*. It is my notion that the terms are not in fact synonymous, and that “play” does not always entail “game”—that “game” in fact is only one very special kind of play. Sometimes we play games; at other times, as when we gambol, or romp, or swim, or walk in the woods, or yodel, or doodle, we are just playing. At this juncture another of the inheritors of Kant and Huizinga, Roger Caillois, editor of the journal *Diogenes*, comes to our aid with his articles on “play” and “games” published in 1955 and 1957.⁷ Whatever else we may say in general about play and game, however many classes or qualities of either we distinguish, two common principles seem to Caillois certain: one a child-like, spontaneous principle of improvisation and insouciant self-expression (*paidia*), the other a sort of perverse complementary principle of self-imposed obstacle or deliberate convention of hindrance (*ludus*). It is never enough, for very long, to skip and gambol. We play leapfrog

6 *Ibid.*, §45, §46.

7 Expanded into a book, *Les Jeux et les hommes* (1958, 1967) [*Man, Play, and Games*, tr. Meyer Barash (New York, 1961)].

or hopscotch. "The unfettered leap of joy," says Schiller, "becomes a dance; the aimless gesture, a graceful and articulate miming speech."⁸

With convention, and only with convention, can the element of game enter into play. The idea of convention might carry us also very quickly in the direction of language, and into language games (that is to say, into the logical problem of shifting frames of reference). But a different idea from that is more relevant to my present purpose. And that is the idea of game as competition. Convention in games is the opportunity for and invitation to an orderly and limited competition.

The game of pure competitive skill (or *agōn*) and the game of chance (*alea*) are two forms of play which Caillois is specially interested in, which he would insistently distinguish, but which nevertheless he sees as very closely related. It is my own notion, though I think I need not argue it here at length, that chance has such a close affinity for competition that it is just as often an element intrinsic to some kind of competitive game (dice, poker, bridge) as it is a pure form (lottery, Russian roulette), where, as Caillois instructs us, it may be conceived as inviting only the passive surrender of the player to the decree of fate.

The relation of competitive game-play to forms of conspicuously aesthetic play may be very interesting and very difficult to state. The concept of *mimesis*⁹ may be the hinge on which a comparison most instructively turns. A tragic drama is a *mimesis* of a combat (involving often murder and war), but no combat actually occurs in this drama, at least none corresponding to that which is mimed. A game of chess or a game of bridge may be conceived as a mimic warfare (*Ludimus effigiem belli*). But that is to say that such a game proceeds according to a set of conventions which are the conditions for a very strictly limited but nevertheless *actual* combat—one which bears a relation of *analogy* to larger combats and is in that sense a *mimesis* of them. (Let nobody be in any doubt about the actuality of the combat in chess or bridge or poker.)

At least two special sorts of connection can obtain between these two sorts of play, the aesthetic and the competitive. (1) The element of combat in the sheer game can be stylized and arrested in the shape of puzzle or problem, and in this case it is altered in the direction of aesthetic design. This happens notably in the kind of compositions

8 *On the Aesthetic Education of Man*, Letter 27.

9 Caillois' alignment of *agōn*, *alea*, *mimicry*, and yet another thing, *ilinx* (the vertigo of the roller coaster or ferris wheel), as four ways of escape from reality, and hence as four species of play, is a tidy unification which stands a little to one side of my own purpose.

known as chess “problems.” (2) A second kind of rapprochement is of more direct literary significance: it happens that the competitive game can appear internally to the art play, as part of the story. And here the game may be treated with either more or less precise regard for its technical details, and in either case it may manifest either more or less formal and aesthetic interest as it seems to function either more or less as an interior duplication or symbol of the gamesome or ludic nature which, in some sense, we may discover as a character of the work as a whole.¹⁰

II

Before I plunge more directly into the proposed topic of this paper—the game of cards in Pope’s *The Rape of the Lock*—let me attempt one further classical perspective, this time invoking not Plotinus but Plato himself, in an analytic mood which is pretty much the opposite of anything Neoplatonic. I have in mind that dialogue in which a rhapsode, that is, a professional declaimer of Homeric poetry and a professor of poetry, is given a destructive Socratic quizzing. The question insistently, if engagingly, pursued is this: whether a professor of poetry, or for that matter his model and inspiration the poet, knows anything at all, or has anything to teach, in his own right. It appears that he does not. If he knows anything about medicine, for instance, or about steering a ship, or spinning wool, it will be in virtue of exactly the same kind of knowledge as the practitioner of those arts would have. The mind of a poet—Homer, for instance—who talks about nearly everything, is just a grab bag of various kinds of knowledge which are the proper business of various other kinds of experts. The application is made even to the knowledge of epic games:

“. . . does not Homer speak a good deal about arts, in a good many places? For instance, about chariot-driving. . . . Tell me what Nestor says to his son Antilochus. . . .” “Bend thyself in the polished car slightly to the left of them; and call to the right-hand horse and goad him on, while your hand slackens his reins” [*Iliad* XXIII. 355 ff.]. . . . “Now, Ion, will a doctor or a charioteer be the better judge whether Homer speaks correctly or not in these lines?” “A charioteer, of course.” “Because he has this art, or for some other reason?” “No, because it is his art” (*Ion*, 537-A).

10 In another essay in *Yale French Studies*, 1968, a member of the French Department at the University of Chicago, Bruce Morrissette, examines games as the centers of structures in the game-like fictions of Robbe-Grillet.

Almost any modern reader, I suppose, is likely to believe that this question raised by Socrates is unimportant for the study of poetry. Forgetting perhaps that the Greeks of Plato's time did actually look on Homer as a chief authority about chariot racing, warfare, generalship, and related topics, and that in a sense he was such an authority, the modern reader will think of poetry about games, either outdoor or indoor games, most likely in the light of some such passage as the following near the end of the first book of Wordsworth's *Prelude*, where he recalls some of his childhood pastimes:

Eager and never weary we pursued
 Our home amusements by the warm peat-fire
 At evening . . .
 round the naked table, snow-white deal,
 Cherry or maple, sate in close array,
 And to the combat, Lu or Whist, led on
 A thick-ribbed Army; not as in the world
 Neglected and ungratefully thrown by
 Even for the very service they had wrought,
 But husbanded through many a long campaign.
 Uncouth assemblage was it, where no few
 Had changed their functions, some, plebeian cards,
 Which Fate beyond the promise of their birth
 Had glorified, and call'd to represent
 The persons of departed Potentates.
 Oh! with what echoes on the Board they fell!
 Ironic Diamonds, Clubs, Hearts, Diamonds, Spades,
 A congregation piteously akin.
 Cheap matter did they give to boyish wit,
 Those sooty knaves, precipitated down
 With scoffs and taunts, like Vulcan out of Heaven,
 The paramount Ace, a moon in her eclipse,
 Queens, gleaming through their splendor's last decay,
 And Monarchs, surly at the wrongs sustain'd
 By royal visages. (I. 534-36, 541-62)

The main thing we learn about that card game is that the cards were dog-eared, very badly beaten up—a medley of survivals from several different packs, some of them having been doctored or altered to raise their value. A poet, we will of course say, looks on a given technical routine, like playing cards, in just the light needed for whatever he is trying to say in his poem; and we will most likely imply that the precise rules and play of the game—certainly its niceties and finesses—are not likely to be a part of the poet's concern. Maybe a writer of stories

about baseball—a Ring Lardner, a Bernard Malamud—will have to know what he is talking about in order to convey the appearance and feel of the thing. A very good story about chess, Vladimir Nabokov's *The Defence*, manages to create a vivid impression of a boy's experience of learning to play and of becoming a master. In Stefan Zweig's celebrated *Schachnovelle* (*The Royal Game*), the psychology of obsessive, schizoid game play seems to me less finely informed with any authentic chess experience.¹¹ A story involving a card game or a chess game is likely enough to tell us something very indistinct about the game itself, or else something utterly absurd. In one story about chess that I remember, an old man is able to cheat another old man, his inveterate rival, by allowing his beard to curl about a rook at one corner of the board, thus lulling his opponent into a sense that the rook is not there. Short stories have been written indeed around the actual score of chess games—but these are just that, chess stories, and they appear for the most part in chess magazines. In one of Samuel Beckett's zero-degree novels, *Murphy*, there is the actual score of a chess game, played in a kind of madhouse, but the point of the game is its utter absurdity. Neither player (neither male nurse nor mental patient) is able to *find* the other—they play simultaneous games of solitaire. Faulkner's short story "Was" (*Go Down, Moses* [1942]) manages two hands of poker, one "Draw" and one "Stud," with an artistic economy made possible in part by the concealment and bluffing which are intrinsic to this game that gives a name to the studiously inexpressive countenance.

Wordsworth, we are told by his friend Coleridge, was a specialist in "spreading the tone." Generalization, even vagueness, in imagery, idea, and mood, was his forte. It is difficult to imagine a poem by Wordsworth in which a precise and technically correct narration of a hand at cards would have been relevant to his purpose. Is the same true for Alexander Pope? I have an idea that most of us, if only from our general habit of reading poetry, would read into Pope for the first time with no more expectation of finding an exactly described card game than in Wordsworth. I remember that when about twenty-five years ago I first studied *The Rape of the Lock* closely enough to realize fully the presence of the card game, I was very much surprised. I had a special sort of delight in the discovery—because I myself have always been moderately addicted to table games, and so it gave me

11 George Steiner, *Extraterritorial: Papers on Literature and the Language Revolution* (New York, 1971), produces some ringing evocations from Nabokov, Zweig, and other chess sources (pp. 47-57).

pleasure to work the puzzle out—but also because the precision of the details seemed to me in a special way an achievement appropriate to Pope's art as a couplet poet and also a specially precise and exquisite miniature of this whole poem. For the modern eye or ear, this game may often pass in a somewhat sunken or muted way beneath the very colorful and rhythmic surface symbols in which the action is carried. It seems difficult to say to what degree it was hidden for Pope's readers, many of whom presumably were better up on the game of ombre than we are. For us, I think, part of the pleasure can come from the fact that the game is not awkwardly obtrusive or obviously technical, but is woven so subtly into the poetic fabric. It seems to me a merit of the passage that one may well read it without full awareness of what is going on.

III

There is now no way for me to avoid a degree of technicality in my exposition. The game of ombre as Pope narrates it is an impressive blend of visual technique and gamesmanship or technique according to Hoyle—the Hoyle of that day, a French book on ombre and piquet, translated into English in a volume entitled *The Court Gamester*, published at London only a few years after Pope's poem, 1719.¹² Beginning with a writer in *MacMillan's Magazine* in 1874 and a certain Lord Aldenham, who somewhat frivolously devoted a large book to *The Game of Ombre* (3rd ed., 1902), a succession of modern writers have commented on Pope's game. Geoffrey Tillotson's exposition in an appendix to his Twickenham edition of *The Rape of the Lock* in 1940 triggered a contentious correspondence in the columns of the *TLS*.¹³ A short essay of my own, published in 1950, was an effort to tidy up the tradition and improve on it. Take a deck of cards and remove the 8s, 9s, and 10s of each suit (12 cards in all), leaving forty. Seat three players at a table, Belinda and two male courtiers. The man to Belinda's left, probably her chief antagonist, the Baron, deals nine cards to each player (27 in all); he puts the remaining 13 cards down in a stock or kitty. Belinda bids first, gets the bid, and declares spades trumps. The players then discard weak cards and draw an equal number of replacements from the kitty. The order of strength in the cards is not as in modern contract bridge. It differs from hand to hand, depending on

¹² *Le Royal Jeu de l'Homme et du Piquet* (Paris, 1685). The English version includes a substantial quotation from Pope.

¹³ See especially F. W. Bateson, 1 March 1941, p. 108.

	BELINDA		THE BARON		SIR ANONYM
I. BELINDA	Spadillio Ace ♠		♠		♠
II. BELINDA	Manillio Two ♠		♠		♠
III. BELINDA	Basto Ace ♣		♠		Plebeian Card ×
IV. BELINDA	King ♠		Knave ♠		Pam Knave ♠
V. BARON	King ♣		Queen ♠		×
VI. BARON	×		King ◇		×
VII. BARON	×		Queen ◇		×
VIII. BARON	Queen ♥		Knave ◇		×
IX. BELINDA	King ♥		Ace ♥		×

which suit is trumps. For the present hand, the top card is the Ace of spades, Spadillio; next the 2 of spades, Manillio; next the Ace of clubs, Basto; then the spades in order, King down to three. The red Aces are lower than the face cards in their suits. In order to win the hand Belinda has to take more tricks than her stronger opponent—5 against 4, or 4 against 3 and 2. Four tricks unroll smoothly for Belinda as she leads in succession Spadillio, Manillio, Basto, and the King of spades—pulling smaller spades from her opponents—except that on the third and fourth tricks the third player, the anonymous one, fails to come through. So the Baron may well have the last trump, the Queen. Belinda has two winning cards left in her hand, the King of hearts and the King of clubs. As the hand turns out, we can see that it doesn't matter which King she plays. She gets her fifth trick sooner or later. But what of the possibilities at that apparently crucial moment as she leads on the fifth trick? Which King shall she play?—if she is to live up to the epithet “skilful” bestowed on her by the poet at the commencement of the scene. (“The skilful Nymph reviews her Force with Care.”) We are not told every card in each player's hand. The *xs* in my chart indicate the degree of indeterminacy in Pope's specifications. But the probabilities may be considered. In the event, for instance, that the Baron has the Queen of spades and four diamonds, then no matter how the diamond tricks are divided between the Baron and the third player, producing either a win with five tricks for the Baron, or a 4-3-2 win for Belinda, or a 4-4-1 Remise or drawn game, the outcome will not *depend* upon Belinda's lead. Certain more complicated suppositions about the Baron's holding one or two low hearts or one or two low clubs (but *not* both hearts and clubs) can be made, and I have made them, I believe exhaustively.¹⁴ I will not recite them here. The upshot of my analysis is that only if the third player captured a diamond lead on the sixth trick and then went on to produce the 4-4-1 Remise by taking three more diamond tricks himself (the Baron throwing down low hearts or clubs—but *not* both), could Belinda suffer an *unfavorable* outcome which *depended* on her leading the wrong suit at the fifth trick. But on this supposition, that the third player held four diamonds, or perhaps on any supposition at all, Belinda at the fifth trick could suppose very little

14 On the supposition that the Baron had the Queen of spades, two or three diamonds, and one or two low hearts or one or two low clubs (but *not* both hearts and clubs), and that his diamonds would take one or two tricks and then lead into the third player's hand, so that the Baron would throw his low heart or hearts or low club or clubs on a last trick or tricks won by the third player with a diamond or diamonds—on this supposition, the score would be 4-3-2, again a win for Belinda—different only in a nonessential way from her 5-4 win if she led her King of hearts (or King of clubs) on the fifth trick.

about the number of either hearts or clubs in the Baron's hand and hence would have little reason to prefer either a club or a heart lead. A test by the calculus of foreseeable possibilities would be the correct test of Belinda's skill (of whether her play of the hand is, in the terms of Roger Caillois, a true *agōn* or is largely an instance of *alea*), but such a test will not quite pan out. We fall back on a more superficial, human, and plausible test by appearances. The discard of the Knave of clubs (Pam, who "mow'd down Armies in the Fights of Lu") by the third player on the fourth trick does look like a discard from weakness. Possibly his only club? In that case, the Baron may be thought somewhat more likely to have clubs than hearts. Dramatically, if not technically and mathematically, the Knave of clubs, so conspicuously heralded as a discard, advertises a certain plausibility in her next lead of the King of clubs. Belinda is a society belle and not a Charles H. Goren. It is by the standards of the polite card table (not necessarily profound) that we shall measure her skill. She is no doubt skillful in her own esteem. She leads her King of clubs, loses it to the Queen of spades. The Baron pours his diamonds apace for three tricks, his Knave on the eighth trick drawing even her Queen of hearts. Then the Baron's Ace of hearts (lower than the face cards) is forced out on the last trick, to fall a victim to the King lurking in her hand. "The Nymph exulting fills with Shouts the Sky, / The Walls, the Woods, and long Canals reply."

The pictorial features of a deck of cards, the royal faces, the plain plebeian spots, are well calculated for the symbolism of an epic battle (the "routed Army . . . / Of *Asia's* Troops, and *Africk's* Sable Sons"); for that of palace revolutions ("The hoary Majesty of *Spades*. . . . The Rebel-Knave"); and for that of the most important business of court life, the battle of the sexes (the warlike Amazonian Queen of spades, the wily Knave of diamonds, the "captive" Queen of hearts). Belinda's hubristic first sweep of four tricks, the sudden blow from fate, or the peripeteia, of the fifth trick, her narrow escape from the jaws of ruin and codille, her last-trick triumph and exultation—all these develop her portrait as the mock-heroine of a melodramatized tragic-epic action.

IV

An episode of epic games was one of the dozen or so ingredients prescribed for the epic poem by René le Bossu in his *Treatise* of 1675. But what is the significance of such contests in the epic structure? The answer, broadly, must be that epic games are a miniature emblem of the contest which is the heroic panorama of the whole poem. Heroic fighters and leaders relax and indulge themselves, not in games of tiddlywinks,

or even ombre, but in huge, manly, spectacular, circus-like feats: chariot races, footraces, boxing, discus-throwing, spear-throwing, archery. The games have a kind of ready-made or prefabricated relevance in the epic context—as in post-Homeric Greece the epic spirit is annually recapitulated in the festival games.

That general kind of significance, however, is not all. The epic poets in the Western succession each seems to have treated the episode of the heroic games in his poem in such a way as to confer on it some much more special slant. Happily for my purpose, I am not the first to have thought of this. My colleague Professor George Lord, for instance, has written an excellent essay¹⁵ pointing out how the funeral games in honor of Patroclus in *Iliad* XXIII (which, we have seen, the rhapsode Ion knew so well by heart) are not simply a résumé of the anger, division, and discourtesy among the Greek leaders with which the poem opens, but a kind of image in reverse, where courtesy and reconciliation—i.e., good sportsmanship—have their day as a countertheme to the “wrath” of which the poet has been singing from the opening word of the first book. Paris had long ago *stolen* Helen from Menelaus, thus starting the war. In the first book of the poem, Agamemnon at first angrily refuses to give up a captive girl (“Her I will not let go”), then does so with bad grace and snatches another, the property of Achilles. (Hence all that gigantic sulking; hence the reverses of the Greeks on the plains before Troy and the death of Patroclus.) In the chariot race of the funeral games, where the second prize is a fine mare, Antilochus at first beats out Menelaus for that prize by some dirty driving, but then he turns around, concedes the point, and gives the mare to Menelaus, who in turn gives her back to Antilochus. Sports, after all, are the appropriate arena for good sportsmanship—which is a ludic image of such virtues as courtesy, chivalry, and gallantry. *Iliad* XXIII, says Professor Lord, is a comic recapitulation or self-mockery of the tragic heroism of the whole.

The games which are narrated, by perhaps an elderly Homer or by perhaps a second Homer, in Book VIII of the *Odyssey* at the court of King Alcinoüs in the charmed kingdom of the Phaeacians, have about them both something of the healthy athletic mood of a college track meet, and the reveries which today characterize the secret life of Walter Mitty. In the *Iliad*, battle-scarred warriors lay aside armament for a moment of major league game-playing. In the *Odyssey*, the shipwrecked stranger, handsome and tall, but eldery, worn, and sorrowful, watches as the younger men among the oar-loving Phaeacians compete in footracing, wrestling, jumping, discus-throwing, and boxing. After a

15 “Epic Mockery,” *Touchstone*, 2 (1965), 23-28.

while somebody throws a few taunts at the stranger: "You old scrubby-looking sea captain, you wouldn't be so good at games of skill and strength like these, would you?" And then the transformation—the sudden heartwarming assertion. "I don't know about that," says the unrecognized hero of the Trojan-horse exploit. And he picks up a big stone discus, bigger than any the others have been handling; he gives it a skillful whirl, and it flies out a long way beyond what anybody else has done. Then this old stranger utters a boast, telling them what he can do if they wish to challenge him in boxing, wrestling, or footracing. Or, for that matter, in archery. He says he is very good at handling the polished bow, sending an arrow into a throng of foes. We all know, of course, what that bodes for certain insolent suitors who are at that very moment living high in the halls of a house at Ithaca.

It was a commonplace of Renaissance criticism, from the Italians of the sixteenth century, to Samuel Johnson, that Homer was the more profoundly original epic poet, but that Virgil achieved a greater degree of polished perfection. Virgil had no doubt a problem in how to give some original twist to the funeral games held in Book V of the *Aeneid*. The ideas of age and youth, paternity, filial piety, reverence, and a corresponding bright hope for the future are the keys to what he did. The whole poem is a prophecy and a preview of the history of Rome; and the more poetically successful first six books are prognostic of the more propagandistic second six. So in Book V, the boartrace, footrace, boxing, riding exhibition, and shooting matches, are a genealogical celebration, and both a rehearsal for war (like rugby at Eton) and a prefiguration of events to occur in the second half of the poem on the plains of Latium. Virgil, it has been said, was probably the first great writer to turn play into work.¹⁶

This survey of epic games might go on for a long time. But I compress it now by coming down to Pope's immediate predecessor and a major model and sounding board for allusions in *The Rape of the Lock*—Milton, of course, in the games resorted to by the devils in the second book of *Paradise Lost*. *Paradise Lost* is remarkable for the spiritualization and subtle internalization which are pervasive throughout the grand murky and spiraling baroque cosmological structure. We read the war in Heaven or the allegory of Satan, Sin, and Death at the gates to chaos in our own hearts if we read them vividly at all. "Which way I fly is Hell; myself am Hell" (IV. 75). So it is only just, and the description is full of genius, when Satan's legions, left to their own amusement, express the consuming restlessness of their new state by setting

16 George Lord, in a letter.

out on long exploring expeditions through the dismal semichaotic realm of fire and ice which they have recently colonized. Even more acutely and poetically, Milton has some of them, more philosophic souls, sit down to animated disputes on the theological issues of freedom and necessity which touch them so closely. At these infernal games, there are wing, foot, and chariot races too, there is demonic harping and song. There is no card game. Cards, gambling, and drinking are possible demonic associations in some anti-saloon-league context, but such would be too low for the heroic damned of Milton's scene. The parlor game which *we* have in view would be obviously too dainty.

V

The contrasting wider context of the big epic tradition does much of Pope's work for him. The work is invited in a very special way by the other main part of the context, the immediate social one. It is perhaps easiest to invest literature with the colors of a game when the life represented is courtly, artificial, ritualistic, playful. Such a life, lived with a high degree of intensity and burnish, *is* a game—or a jest, as Pope and his closest friends might have said. It can also be a special sort of warfare. Pope's letter to Mrs. Arabella Fermor, prefixed to his second edition, in which the game of ombre first appears, may be read as a language game of teasing and flattery. It is not my idea that the poem itself can be said, in any useful sense, to be a game played by Pope either with himself or with his reader. The poem, however, is in a very notable way a poem about a gamesome way of life. The background life of the poem, the powders, patches, furbelows, flounces, and brocades, the smiles and curls, the china, the silver, the billet-doux, the lapdogs, and the fopperies and flirtations, are built-in elements of the higher social gamesmanship. The poem absorbs and represents this situation in a very immediate and vivid image, and thus in a very thorough sense it is a game poem.

Here we may as well recall some relevant insights of the late Dr. Eric Berne, whose best-selling book entitled *Games People Play* (1964) was developed from his less racy *Transactional Analysis in Psychotherapy* (1961). "Games" in the somewhat extrapolated but persuasive sense of certain slantwise and fictive stratagems employed in a variety of neurotic types of aggression. Instead of facing each other on the level, as adults, the role-players of Dr. Berne's analyses suffered either from assumptions of parental hauteur and inquisition or from childlike poses, sulks, and tantrums. They played, among many others, certain "Party" and "Sexual" games, to which he gave such names as "Kiss Off," "Ain't It

Awful," "Rapo," "Indignation," "Let's You and Him Fight," and "Uproar." "Favors to none, to all she smiles extends."—"At every word a reputation dies."—"The Peer now spread the glittering Forfex wide."—"Then flashed the living lightning from her eyes."—"To arms, to arms! the fierce Virago cries."—"And bass and treble voices strike the skies." Let us think here also of the stubbornly contested betrothal gambits played between Congreve's Millamant and Mirabell. Think of the somberly mythologized combat between mentor and pupil, the dark luster, of Swift's *Cadenus and Vanessa*. In *The Rape of the Lock*, we witness the gladiatorial aspect of sex and courtship. Belinda "Burns to encounter two adventrous Knights,/ At *Ombre* singly to decide their Doom."

The other epic games we have noticed are all highly episodic, off-center developments in the vast poems where they occur. The game of ombre occurs in a central or focal position which could be appropriate only in a poem of rococo dimensions. The game of ombre is the least deadly and most conventionalized combat in Pope's poem, and yet it is a real combat (game combats I have said and will repeat are real) and it is the most precisely delineated and most complete combat of the whole poem, appearing in the center as a kind of reducing or concentrating mirror of the larger, more important, but less decisive, kinds of strife and hints of strife that both precede and follow it.

Here perhaps we can invoke, with only a slight and forgivable degree of exaggeration, a pattern developed by Professor Cedric Whitman for ordering the complicated and lavishly repetitious procession of quarrels, councils, speeches, feasts, libations, sacrifices, battles, triumphs, defeats, and burials which make up the *Iliad* of Homer. There is a kind of center for the *Iliad* in two anomalously conjunct nighttime episodes, the embassy to Achilles of Book IX and the (perhaps genetically intrusive) reconnaissance by the scout Dolon and his violent end in Book X. Coming up to these and moving away from them are two sequences of events and of days that unfold in mirror (or butterfly) patterns of partly antithetic, partly similar images, "ring patterns." And this is in the manner of those Grecian pottery vases or urns that have friezes of figures on them converging on some central figure in a reflecting pattern (the huge vases of Dipylon ware, for instance, manufactured at about the time when Homer most likely was writing, 750 to 700 B.C.). (Or think of that "leaf-fringed legend" or "brede of marble men and maidens," priest and sacrificial heifer, that move, no doubt symmetrically from two sides, toward the "green altar" in Keats's "Ode on a Grecian Urn.")

The card game at the center of Pope's poem is not only the most

precise and least earnest combat of the poem. It is at the same time, though animated, the least animate, the most completely a work of art, in that the actors described so lovingly, with such detail and color, are neither supernatural nor human agents. They are in fact only cardboard—though the ambitious animus of Belinda and the Baron are just behind them, and even the sylphs “Descend, and sit on each important Card.” Move back from this artful center toward the beginning of the poem, into the second canto, and we find the human epic element of a journey or expedition (as prescribed by Bossu), Belinda’s boat ride on the Thames, which is convoyed by swarms of supernatural agents, the sylphs, in attitudes of keen vigilance and readiness for combat. Look then next in the opposite direction. The game of ombre ends in Belinda’s moment of greatest triumph. And this is followed almost immediately by the Baron’s counterattack and victory as he snips off the lock. This is *his* moment of greatest triumph. (If he loses the hand at ombre, he wins the canto.) Immediately thereafter, in the fourth canto, we return to the motif of a journey, this time a descent into a grotesque allegorical region of the underworld (much as at the end of the first canto of *The Faerie Queene* of Spenser). The element of the supernatural, or preternatural, is prominent again now, both in the destination and in the traveler, who is an agent of earth, a gnome, descending to the Cave of Spleen on no benevolent mission. Now move back to the very beginning of the poem, the first canto. After the opening epic invocation, we first get our bearings in a scene of the human and comic everyday, with Belinda and her dog, rousing at noon to an afternoon of adventure. In the first canto, too, appear the epic elements of extended discourse and encyclopedic knowledge, and of supernatural agency, as the doctrine concerning the elemental spirits is expounded by the guardian sylph, with premonitions of impending disaster. At the end of the canto, Belinda with the assistance of Betty arms herself like an epic hero for battle and at the same time practices her ritual of self-worship at the toilet table. At the level of such motifs, perhaps we must admit that a degree of sinuosity complicates our pursuit of an overall symmetry. The chief later moments of ritual, for instance, occur in the second canto with the Baron’s piled up French romances, the gloves and garters sacrificed to the power of Love, and in the ombre canto with the ceremony of the coffee mill and “altars of Japan.” We have what may perhaps be called only a complementary pattern of different emphasis, when we observe that the extended anaphoristic sequences of hyperbole and bathos (“While Fish in Streams, or Birds delight in Air, / Or in a Coach and Six the *British Fair*.”), both in the author’s own voice and in the voices of Belinda, the Baron, Thalestris, and Clarissa, are a con-

spicuous feature of the second half of the poem, beginning at the end of the third canto and recurring through the fourth and at the start of the fifth. But with these sustained speeches, especially with the inflammatory speech of Thalestris to Belinda near the end of the fourth canto and the ensuing episode of the vacuous Sir Plume's confrontation with the Baron, we are on lowly human and comic ground again, in a position roughly the counterpart of the opening of the poem in our geometric scheme. (The speeches as such may be set against the long initial discourse of the sylph.) The comic vein is conspicuously continued in the fifth and last canto with the lecture on good humour delivered by Clarissa and rejected by Belinda, and in the closing furious pitched battle between the belles and beaus.

The fury of this combat has no counterpart in the first half of the poem. We may say that the airy hints of danger and the vigilance in the first two cantos have been stepped up by the gamesome duel of the third canto, to a degree of violence where the Baron's rude aggression and the ensuing turmoil are poetically plausible. And now Pope finds himself in a special dilemma, and with also a special opportunity for brilliance, in this noisy combat. The more physically it is realized, the less it can be satisfactorily resolved. And so, as shouts "To Arms," clapping fans, rustling silks, and cracking whalebones shade into death at the eyes of fair ones, a show of Homeric gods in epic simile, and an allusion to Jove's "golden Scales in Air," weighing the "Men's Wits against the Lady's Hair," the strife shifts into the mode of metaphor and symbol, or of myth—like so many irresolvable combats we have known in story and on stage. Belinda resorts to throwing a physical pinch of snuff at the Baron and even threatens him with a deadly bodkin. But the only injury inflicted is a huge sneeze, which reechoes to the high dome. Apparently on the waves of sound or air generated by this sneeze, or by Belinda's cry of "*Restore the Lock*," which too rebounds from the vaulted roofs, the Lock itself mounts and disappears. "But trust the Muse—she saw it upward rise, / Tho' mark'd by none but quick Poetic Eyes." Like a "sudden Star," or a comet, it "shot thro' liquid Air, / And drew behind a radiant *Trail of Hair*." Vanished, it assumes the mythic proportions of the founder of Rome, Romulus, who withdrew to the heavens during a thunderstorm, or the constellated locks of the Egyptian queen Berenice (virtuously sacrificed for the safety of her husband), or the planet Venus worshiped by lovers at the Lake in St. James's Park.

Variation in kinds of combat is one of the main structural modes, or principles of progression, in this poem. The minutely delineated cardboard combat of the central canto is the concave mirror in which, as Samuel Johnson might have put it, the ultimately sidereal reaches of

the rest of the poem (the sun of the first three cantos, the stars of the last) are focused—and clarified. Or, to shift my metaphor, and to bring in the concluding words of the short essay which I wrote on the poem twenty years ago: “The game of Ombre expands and reverberates delicately in the whole poem. The episode is a microcosm of the whole poem, a brilliant epitome of the combat between the sexes which is the theme of the whole.”

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