

Cheating, Gender Roles, and the Nineteenth-Century Croquet Craze

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Croquet is usually stereotyped as a genteel game, less a sport than a social function, and more suited to genial conversation and unfettered flirtation than strident competition. Nineteenth-century American periodicals and croquet manuals emphasized the sport's placidity, as opposed to male working-class sports such as football, baseball, and rowing, which often seemed infected with the time-discipline or rationality of the workaday world. The Newport (Rhode Island) Croquet Club's 1865 handbook proclaimed that the game owed its popularity to "the delights of out-of-doors exercise and social enjoyment, fresh air and friendship—two things which are of all others most effective for promoting happiness." Croquet was portrayed as a morally improving and rational recreation; the New York *Galaxy* declared that "amiability and unselfishness are the first requisites of a good player." Because croquet was not a particularly athletic game, it was considered ideal for children, older people, and mixed gender groupings. Thus, one recent historian of the sport decisively concluded, "In the 1860s, in a family and female sport like croquet, the etiquette of playing the game with grace and good manners took precedence over winning, sociable play triumphed over unprincipled competition."

Yet was this, in fact, how the game was played on the croquet lawns of the nineteenth century? While authors of croquet manuals and magazines propounded trite encomiums to honesty, rationality, and fellowship, a perusal of visual and literary evidence reveals that a great deal of competitive spirit existed in the typical croquet match, that the use of deception to win was common, and that women were particularly guilty transgressors. Modern reliance on croquet manuals and a handful of periodical articles recalls the limitations of other nineteenth-century hortatory literature such as etiquette and advice manuals; that is, the ethos was

only a code, not an accurate depiction of reality. Female grace and good manners may have been the ideal for the rule- and taste-makers, but on the croquet ground, a peculiar sort of gender reversal enabled women to temporarily jettison their passive role and dominate, if not humiliate, men. Women played the game seriously, enjoyed matching skills with men, and often emerged victorious. The fact that this image runs contrary to “Victorian” gender stereotypes suggests that a more nuanced approach is needed, rather than to declare some sports to be “male” and other sports “female” with all the formulaic and oversimplified preconceptions these adjectives imply?

The origins of croquet are obscure, but some version apparently migrated from Ireland to England in the 1850s, where it proved a favorite amusement at fashionable lawn parties. An ivory turner named John Jaques, whose firm had been in the games business since 1795, may have introduced the sport at the Great Exhibition of 1851. It spread rapidly enough that in 1864, Jaques declared that croquet had “won a popularity which has almost revolutionized our outdoor social life.” By 1867, he had published sixty-five thousand copies of his rule book, with a female croquet-player adorning the cover of most editions. The game reached its English apogee in 1871, when spectators crowded five deep to witness Walter Jones Whitmore’s unforgettable croquet tournament/extravaganza, complete with ten thousand troops parading around the courts, a full dress ball, and brilliant aristocratic company.³

Americans imported croquet from Victorian England some time during the Civil War. In 1864, the *American Boy’s Book of Sports and Games* reported croquet “has been only recently introduced into this country.” By April 1865, *Godey’s Lady’s Book* felt obligated to publish some rules of croquet because the game was “now becoming very fashionable.” The following April, Milton Bradley patented



Family sport. *Harper's Weekly* 10 (September 10, 1866): 658.

his version of croquet socket bridges and indexical balls and then obtained court injunctions against competitors who infringed his rights. *The Nation* concluded in 1866 that “of all the epidemics that have swept over our land, the swiftest and most infectious is croquet.” Manufacturers even produced sets with candle-sockets attached to the wickets to facilitate night games.⁴

The game made inroads far beyond the young and single set. Supporters suggested that the sport enjoyed wide American success because it matched the spirit of the aggressive, achievement-minded nation, “and nowhere else is the family circle so certain to appreciate its purity, and give it full patronage.” Ulysses Grant was supposedly playing croquet when informed of the gold crisis instigated by Jim Fisk and Jay Gould; Rutherford Hayes later allocated six dollars from the government treasury to buy “good quality” croquet balls, a profligacy vigorously condemned by Democrats in Congress. Croquet players overran Martha’s Vineyard campgrounds, and the game was also popular with the Shakers. At the utopian Oneida Community, John Noyes theorized that croquet served as “a field



Shaker girls playing croquet, Mt. Lebanon, N.Y. Courtesy of the Shaker Museum and Library, Old Chatham, New York.

for the development and manifestation of character and individual power and destiny, and competition, instead of being a mere exhibition of antagonism, becomes a harmonic cooperation with God.”⁵

The majority of croquet players were female; “they are its disciples,” declared the *Galaxy*, “and from them it claims great homage.” Official explanations for the affinity of women for croquet emphasized the facts that the game required delicate skill rather than strength, flattered bodily appearance, and was played in places suitable for courtship. The *New Orleans Picayune* commented, “There are few prettier sights than a number of young ladies and gentlemen upon some level greensward pursuing a painted croquet ball, and entering fully into the spirit of the game.” Women players dominated the plethora of croquet images produced

from 1860 to 1900, whether lithographs or sheet music, stereograph views or plaster figurines; Winslow Homer's five oil paintings (1865-69) featuring croquet depicted seventeen players of which fourteen are female. Women's magazines such as *Godey's*, *Demorest's*, and *Peterson's* highlighted croquet rules and fashions, while croquet manuals returned the favor by conspicuously advertising women's and children's magazines, home amusements, and piano music. By 1869, *Appleton's* could report, "there is no doubt that croquet has, during the last few years, done more than anything else to promote with young ladies a liking for open-air games..." One newspaper asserted, "never in the history of outdoor sports in this country has any game achieved so suddenly a popularity with both sexes, but especially with the Ladies, as Croquet has." In Charlotte Yonge's novel *The Trial* (1864), some young women "seemed at a loss what life had to offer" when they found no croquet mallets in the garden. One of these women declared, "I used to garden once, but we have no flower-beds now, they spoilt the lawn for croquet."⁶

The croquet craze also had its opponents. Although an early guidebook claimed croquet was "too refined, too intellectual, ever to become a gambler's game," Julia Ward Howe's daughter complained that wagering on the outcome was exceedingly common. Others supported the abolition of croquet on the grounds that its enticements were addictive. The sport was momentarily banned in Boston, and the authorities at both the Oneida Community and Martha's Vineyard took the drastic step of restricting the game or forbidding it altogether.⁷

It was the infatuation of women with croquet, however, that caused the most cultural dissonance in a nation only a generation removed from Lydia Child's caution that activities such as skating and sliding should not take place in mixed company. Although croquet seemed to be a simple and innocent family game—Mark Twain called it "ineffably insipid"—the novel idea that men and women could play together, whether at archery, roller skating, mixed bathing, or croquet, raised the specter of extreme sexual danger for women unregulated by "traditional" social norms. In Charlotte Yonge's *The Clever Woman of the Family* (1865), croquet was enthusiastically received by the younger set and especially the girls, but several of the adults fretted over its wickedness "as an engine for flirtation." At a croquet party in 1869, female competitors altered their dresses "that they might form no impediment to the progress of the game," and the *New Orleans Picayune* confirmed that women actually cut short their dresses while playing "to allow perfect freedom of action." Another magazine condemned the mendacious game in purple prose, claiming croquet was a "source of slumbering depravity, a veritable Frankenstein monster of recreation" and suggesting that "it would be well if the enthusiasm of the clergy and laity were enlisted for suppressing the immoral practice of croquet."⁸

For a putatively sociable and noncompetitive pastime, even croquet's popularizers agreed that the game engendered a great deal of controversy. That all did not go smoothly at matches was implied by Milton Bradley's first "suggestion to beginners" in capital and bold letters: "KEEP YOUR TEMPER, and remember when your turn comes." Walter Whitmore Jones listed eight principles of play, of which the fifth was "whatever you do, never lose your temper." A turn-of-the-century etiquette book included only two sentences on croquet, of

which one reminded social aspirants, “Never dispute, or show any temper over the outcome of any game.” Almost every Gilded Age resort hotel had a croquet lawn, according to William Dix’s reminiscences, where “people wrangled and bickered and—let it be whispered—sometimes cheated over that effete game.” *The Nation* lamented that croquet transformed respectable adults into “dogs, barking and biting,” and a sketch in the *Philadelphia Evening Bulletin* called it the “destroyer of life-long friendships and a ruiner of happy homes.” The latter accusation was confirmed in a separation hearing reported in the *International Herald Tribune*. The wife testified that when playing croquet, her husband became so annoyed when she raised a question as to whether his ball had gone through a hoop that he did not speak to her for days. Commented the judge, “I do not think there is any game which is so liable to put one out of humour as croquet.”⁹

The croquet-ground-as-battlefield was a common motif in croquet descriptions. Mayne Reid, author of one of the most widely read croquet guides and a former captain in the British military, specifically denoted the opposing sides as “enemies” whose duty was to “marshall” the opposing sides and “strike for first play,” and this militaristic metaphor received widespread acceptance. Matches could end in complete chaos, as parodied on the “curious croquet-ground” in Wonderland where Alice met the Queen of Hearts. Lewis Carroll was a connoisseur of the game, and he had published his own complex croquet variant anonymously in 1863. The runaway popularity of *Alice in Wonderland* [1865] implied not only that every reader could be expected to know something of the rules of croquet, but also that they would recognize Alice’s reproach that, “The players all played at once, without waiting for turns, quarreling all the while.” Was it a croquet ground in Wonderland or a summer resort where Alice described players who don’t “play at all fairly...and they quarrel so dreadfully one can’t hear oneself speak—and they don’t seem to have any rules in particular: at least, if there are, nobody attends to them...”¹⁰

The issue of cheating was greatly complicated by the widespread diversity of methods of playing the game. At one time, more than ten different croquet manuals offered competing sets of rules, to the dismay of many men in that order-obsessed age. Milton Bradley’s manual insisted, “in order to have peace and harmony on any Croquet ground, some authority must be adopted...”; and when *Scribner’s* published its own clarifications in 1876, the writer felt compelled to declare, “It’s a mistaken idea that complication of rules makes it ‘more interesting.’” In Anthony Trollope’s *The Small House at Allington* [1862], competition between the heroine Lily Dale and Mr. Crosbie inevitably led to a squabble over the proper rules. But even when rules were mutually agreed upon, arguments frequently ensued over whether balls had been pushed rather than struck, or whether they had been moved at all. A frustrated writer for the *Galaxy* especially decried those who played out of turn, claiming that croquet attracted “individuals who are by nature mysteriously gifted with stupidity in a larger and more provoking degree” than nonplayers.¹¹

This anarchic period opened the door for a variant known as ‘tight croquet’ to become all the rage. In this version of croquet, players were permitted in certain

situations to place their ball next to their opponent's, plant their foot firmly on their own ball, and use the mallet to smash it with all their might. The shock transmitted by this action to the opponent's ball would send it spinning away



Thomas E. Hill, American, 1829-1908, *Palo Alto Spring*, 1878, 86-5/8 x 138-1/4 in, oil on canvas, Stanford University Museum of Art.

into the lake or the rhododendrons. Although not permitted in the modern game, the dramatic tight croquet stroke became the instantly recognizable iconic image of croquet between 1860 and 1900, enshrined in numerous illustrations and descriptions. In many of these pictures, visually dominant and athletic women outnumbered subservient or passive men, completely reversing the doctrine of separate spheres that assigned noncompetitive roles to women. For example, Thomas Hill's *Palo Alto Spring* [1878] depicted the Stanford family and their friends at croquet. In the painting, young Leland Jr., the family's powerful heir apparent, was relegated to a garden chair while his female companions actively engaged in the game.¹²

When performed by female players, the tight croquet stroke could be interpreted as an act of symbolic castration. Men were 'forced' to look on helplessly as their female opponent lined up the two balls, lifted her skirt, placed her dainty foot on her own ball, and with a resounding thwack, hammered the other ball to parts unknown. Winslow Homer's first treatment of croquet seized upon the game's most salient moment, and he returned to it numerous times in his croquet series. The inherent titillation of this action was personified in an illustration in *Harper's Weekly* in which the revelation of a minuscule portion of a woman's ankle and leg tantalized and transfused her fellow male players. John Leech's much reproduced cartoon for *Punch* the next year, entitled "A Nice Game for Two," reprised the same theme. Beneath a similar picture, subsequently reproduced ad

infitum, the caption read: “—Fixing her eyes on his, and placing her pretty little foot on the ball, she said, ‘Now, then, I am going to croquet you!’ and croquet’d he was completely.” Even worse, the man often had to set the balls in place for the croquet shot as an act of courtesy. In theory, a bending woman clad in stiff hoops and petticoats violated the game’s emphasis on graceful attitudes, but the act also underscored male obeisance.¹³

The gesture of raising one’s skirt to reveal one’s leg carried vast psychosexual meaning in the nineteenth century, for within the strict moral codes of the period, the socially acceptable feet often displaced the genitals as a focus of eroticism. In



Winslow Homer, American, 1836-1910, Croquet Scene, oil on canvas, 1866, 15 7/8 x 26 1/16 in, Friends of American Art Collection, 1942.35, Photograph © 1997, The Art Institute of Chicago. All rights reserved.

George Du Maurier’s *Trilby*, the heroine’s animal innocence, beauty, and sexuality were all symbolized by the exquisite shape of her naked feet, which were the focus of whatever sexuality the novel’s three Englishmen express. The book was an international best-seller, selling nearly 300,000 copies its first year of publication. Du Maurier’s biographer noted of the resulting *Trilby*-mania, “The scene in the novel that was most thoroughly exploited for commercial purposes was the one in which Little Billee sketched Trilby’s perfect foot on the wall of his apartment.” The feet of croquet players received the same sort of attention; in the poem “The Croquet Queen,” Mayne Reid described the heroine’s attractions:

Her figure was faultless—nor tall, nor petite—
Her skirt barely touched the top lace of her boot;
I’ve seen in my time some remarkable feet,

But never one equalling that little foot.
 Its tournure was perfect, from ankle to toe—
 Praxitiles ne'er had such a model for art—
 No arrow so sharp ever shot Cupid's bow;
 When poised on the ball it seemed pressing your heart!
 It crushed more than one, as I sadly remember—

Sigmund Freud directly linked this type of fetishism-when the normal sexual object is replaced by another that bears some relation to it but is entirely unsuited to serve the normal sexual aim-to castration anxiety. The combination of these two suppressed symbolic images meant that croquet could be a very unsettling game for male players.¹⁴

The definitive moment of the croquet stroke often took on great significance in the literature. In Daisy Ventnor's story "Pet Leighton's Game of Croquet," the willful heroine flirtatiously declared that she would give Major St. John an answer to his marriage proposal only if he could defeat her in croquet. The Major conceded he was "a very poor player," but he played so well that "Miss Pet saw it behooved her to be careful. Privately, she would not have missed winning the game for worlds..." At the game's end, only Pet and the Major's ball remained, of course, and Pet must croquet the Major or "she would inevitably lose the game." Her teammate (another suitor) egged her on to do the deed: "send him to the other end of the field, Miss Pet, and the game is your own." At the climax of the story,

Pet placed her foot on the ball, and lifted her mallet to strike, when she glanced up at the Major, the first time she had looked him fairly in the eyes that afternoon. She blushed violently, and to cover her confusion, struck in haste. His ball went flying off, but alas! poor Pet! As she turned, her foot slipped from her own ball to the ground; an agonizing pain shot through her whole frame, and she quietly fainted away.

Pet's failure to complete the ritually castrating stroke with sufficient panache or gleeful malice clearly symbolized the end of her independent and flirtatious ways. In the brief denouement, she was ultimately described as "a meek and submissive victim," a "dear little penitent" who had surrendered to the Major.¹⁵

The linkage between flirtation and croquet underlined the fact that both were 'sports' which reversed 'traditional' gender roles by allowing women to play against and defeat men. Many nineteenth-century men had interpreted physical differences to imply the superiority of men and inferiority of women in leisure activity, but on both the hotel lawn and the championship course, women players proved themselves equal to or better than their male counterparts. Croquet even encouraged competition between the sexes, since the game could "be played with equal facility by ladies and gentlemen, skill and ingenuity being of much more importance to success than mere physical strength." The sport challenged the superiority of males and undermined the concept of separate spheres propounded as late as 1906 by noted psychologist and educator G. Stanley Hall: "The presence of the fair sex gives tonicity to youth's muscles...[a teenage girl] performs her best service in the true role of sympathetic spectator rather than as fellow player." In the late nineteenth century, Americans envisioned themselves playing, as popular

poet John Saxe entitled one of his poems, “the game of life.” The sporting metaphor, which often replaced the concept of life as a battle or journey, raised ‘the game’ to quasi-religious importance. In this highly charged rhetorical atmosphere, many men believed women brought confusion to sport. Competition, toughness, and winning at all costs were presumed to be not only culturally valued aspects of masculinity, but inherently masculine traits. Yet in *Lothair* [1870], Benjamin Disraeli described a situation probably typical on both sides of the Atlantic:

Lord Montairy was passionately devoted to croquet. He flattered himself that he was the most accomplished male performer existing. He would have thought absolutely the most accomplished, were it not for the unrivalled feats of Lady Montairy. She was the queen of croquet.¹⁶

Exasperated male commentators complained incessantly about the propensity of women to cheat at croquet. In *Sylvie and Bruno Concluded* [1893], Lewis Carroll declared, “Look at the way Croquet is demoralising Society. Ladies are beginning to cheat at it, terribly: and, if they’re found out, they only laugh and call it fun.” Women were held to have various tricks up their sleeve, and magazines frequently alluded to the effectiveness of feminine wiles in winning the game. The ‘push shot’ was a particularly feared trick employed by women, and double-tapping acquired the slang appellation of “spooning,” linking croquet to the verb’s sexual implications of amorous fondling. English champion Lily Gower, who regularly played with and defeated the top men in the game, was officially accused of spooning in 1901. The ensuing controversy centered not on whether she was guilty of the widely practiced offense, but whether it was ungentlemanly of her opponent to protest. The *New York Times* explained away the shortage of male croquet players by reporting that women constantly cheated, and therefore men would not play with them. The “last words” of an 1865 croquet manual reminded players:

Another important piece of advice is, don’t cheat. We are aware that young ladies are proverbially fond of cheating at this game; but as they only do it because ‘it is such fun,’ and also because they think that men like it...The practice spoils the game so much, that, if it is allowed, the rules may as well be done way with at once.”

The distinctive clothing of women was also suspect in their ability to play croquet. An early historian of the game complained in 1872 of “the disgraceful practice of certain ladies to stand over a ball and conceal it with their clothes, while they scuffle it along with their feet to where they wish it to lie.” An American periodical called this subterfuge “a very common practice and a very effective one.” Some croquet manuals charitably assumed this to be an inadvertent tactic: “The ladies will very much oblige all their associates in croquet by avoiding long dresses, which are continually dragging the balls about over the ground to the annoyance of the players and the disturbance of the game.” The charge was so widely disseminated that another writer despairingly pleaded:

Ladies, be honorable, and reform this trick altogether, for in most cases you do not need these little helps: you are generally better players than men; you play more frequently than they do; besides your nerves are steadier, and croquet is more the business of life with you than with them...Surely these are advantages enough; why, then, take any unfair ones.¹⁸

Within a decade of the sport's arrival in America, cheating in croquet had become a literary commonplace. For example, in 1868, *Harper's Bazar* offered tongue-in-cheek hints on croquet gamesmanship, "drawn up in accordance with several successful players of our acquaintance." In considerable detail, the author mocked the conventional advice manuals by advocating the use of "tricks and delicate stratagems," "clever sleights of hand," disputation of the rules, hinting "to a lady partner to trail her dress" over the croquet balls, and even outright lying and cheating. The satirist suggested:

if you have the ill luck to be found out, not to apologize or say that it was done unintentionally, or for a joke, or to plead ignorance of the rules. Put a bold front upon it, and, if your opponent says positively that you did so or so, answer him that you did not; tell him that he is strangely mistaken; pledge your honor to what you say; tell him any thing you will but **go on**. People generally give way rather than have a disturbance.

The article concluded, "while others are merely amusing themselves, be you wide awake to your own interests...the single object of the croquet player being to win the game." Although intended in jest, this comic caricature reinforces anecdotal evidence from other sources, and implies considerable grounding in reality.¹⁹

Similarly, in an article titled "The Immorality of Croquet," another writer fulminated against widespread cheating in the sport. The jeremiad described the actions of the participants in a mixed doubles match:

One pushes his ball to a more convenient spot when nobody is looking that way; another declares that hers touched somebody else's in passing well knowing that she is the only person in a position to have seen daylight between them; the third is busy knocking in the second hoop, so that her ball may pass through more easily; number four is lying low, awaiting a convenient opportunity to deceive the rest. Stage the first, everybody has degenerated into a cheat.

The author described a game in which "such words as liar, cheat, brute, scoundrel or viper have passed into currency, Rules are improvised as the game proceeds, and the basest subterfuges resorted to in order to gain a point." Even allowing for hyperbole and/or satire, cheating by women in croquet seems to have been taken for granted.²⁰

As early as 1860, the British novel *Sylvan Holt's Daughter* caught the essence of a typical mixed-gender croquet match. In a chapter-long description, the female author described players who "talked, one against the other, from first to last, contradicting, wrangling, and arguing vociferously." The imperious older daughter, victorious in the first match, ran from one to another of the onlookers, shouting

out with exuberant glee, "We have won! We have won!...I told you we should: we will play you again, and beat you again too." Although the two main participants engaged in some flirtation, when he mis-hit a ball, she "ventured on a rebuke, telling him that her ball was first, and that, if he did his best, perhaps they should win the game." Her male partner responded, "Would you like to win?...well, then I won't risk our chance again." When they did win, their female opponent "flung down her mallet and said she would play no more that day, everybody was so stupid!"²¹

The croquet party depicted in Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women* represents a slightly different example of competition in croquet. The opposing four-person teams obviously were playing to win; "The English played well, but the Americans played better and contested every inch of ground...Jo and Fred had several skirmishes and once narrowly escaped high words." Inevitably, the issue of cheating arises. Fred gave his ball "a sly nudge with his toe, which put it just an inch on the right side." When Jo accused him of cheating, he brazenly denied it just as suggested by *Harper's Bazaar*, declaring, "Upon my word, I didn't move it; it rolled a bit, perhaps, but that is allowed; so stand off, please, and let me have a go at the stake." Despite Fred's manipulations, Jo's team emerged victorious through her superior play, and far from chastising Jo, Laurie tossed up his hat in exultation, while Meg praised her actions. Although in this case the perpetrator was male, in *Little Women*, another female novelist clearly represents a competitive situation in which a young woman wants to win, and succeeds.²²

The question of how 'seriously' women took croquet, or whether or not they actually beguiled their opponents, evades an easy answer. Despite the longstanding belief that women were "first in transgression" dating back to Eve's accusation against the serpent, the tradition that women possessed a special affinity for lying was not a nineteenth-century commonplace. Scientists occasionally promulgated the belief that females were less mentally and morally developed than males, and that a savage and childlike nature in women was a hallmark of civilization.²³ On the other hand, the more widely accepted 'cult of true womanhood' propounded women's moral superiority as a counterbalance to the ruthless and competitive economic world of men. At least in theory, women's nurturing spirit and intuitive morality sanctified the domestic sphere and made them, if anything, less likely to lie than men. Women were incessantly called upon to be passive and submissive (morally positive traits for them) in the face of life's vicissitudes. Although issues of hypocrisy and sincerity transfixed nineteenth-century America, there was no particular emphasis on an innate female propensity to lie, nor were there widespread accusations against women's truthfulness in other endeavors except flirtation-significantly, another venue in which women held a modicum of power.²⁴

In reality, antebellum American women occupied the slipstream between the poles of ethereal and earthy, angel of light and painted lady. If they all did not seethe with indignation over the prescribed ideals of ladyhood, neither did they totally acquiesce or become 'nervous' invalids. The doctrine of separate spheres enabled women to hold the reins of influence inside the family, the church, and

the social world, and dominate child-rearing, religious morality, and fashion. From there, it was just a short step to membership in the reform movements that took women out of the home into the public world, where they sought to correct problems invariably created by men. In the meantime, the denial of direct political representation and equal economic opportunity forced women to exercise what degree of power they could in cultural choices such as reading, shopping, making social calls, or creating crafts. The tension created by nineteenth-century changes in gender roles, masked or repressed in more restrictive institutions, was revealed in cultural forms—everyday acts, rhetorical devices, and unconscious patterns of behavior?

The numerous accusations or descriptions of female deception at croquet by both male and female writers, and the lack of reciprocally passionate denials and pleas of innocence, seems to imply that women did in fact cheat. Yet this flies in the face of common knowledge about gender-related variations in ‘truth-telling.’ Women, as the social and emotional specialists in American culture, are supposedly more expressive, approachable, and people-oriented than men. Where men’s fabrications are often self-centered, women apparently use lies to focus on the feelings of others or put a positive gloss on events. When women were accused of cheating at croquet in the nineteenth century, however, the denunciation implied not that women were falsely derogating their abilities in order to prop up fragile male egos, but that they hoodwinked opponents in order to win. Maud Howe Elliot conceded, “There was cheating in croquet. It is hardly human to resist the temptation of pushing the ball into a position where one stroke will carry it through a wicket, when the other player is busy at the far end.” Her rationalization for using ‘immoral’ means to gain victory at any cost fits none of the stereotypes of demure, insecure women lowering their self-esteem to become better adjusted to occupying a subordinate status.²⁶

Nor does the accusation that women cheated “because they think that men like it” appear reasonable. Men emphatically did not like it; they complained about women cheating all the time. I know of no case where a man implied that a woman was cute, more desirable, or would make a better marriage prospect because she was a devious croquet player. On the contrary, this rare justification appears to be an explicitly narcissistic male view of female actions; when men could not understand a woman’s motivations, men automatically assumed it must be done on some level to please them. Since the authors of most if not all croquet guides were male, their admonitions to “amiability and unselfishness” are better interpreted as another example of men directing objectified women how to act, rather than an actual depiction of the way the game was played. And cheating could exasperate women as well as men. Katherine Rice, who enjoyed playing croquet while attending Albany [NY] Female Seminary, complained in her diary in 1873 that in an unspecified game, “Mattie cheated! cheated! cheated! cheated! cheated!!!! But no one seems to think that very unusual in her.” [exclamations in text!]²⁷

A better approach to this croquet conundrum centers on the ethical ambiguity of American attitudes toward deception in the nineteenth century. The confidence

man represented the threat of social disorder and moral vacuity, yet comic and satiric literature presented a society in which shrewd, roguish operators delighted in swindles and living by their wits. On the frontier, backwoodsmen like hunter Davy Crockett or Mississippi boatman Mike Fink bragged of their deceptions while telling self-aggrandizing tall tales. In the east, the Yankee peddler was a peripatetic trickster figure, supposedly achieving his goals through constant theatricality. Southern humorist Johnson Hooper created the popular Simon Suggs, whose “whole ethical system lies snugly in his favorite aphorism—“IT IS GOOD TO BE SHIFTY IN A NEW COUNTRY.” In 1849, the *Spirit of the Times* reported, not without admiration, of one Mississippi turfman who had “acquired some celebrity for making and unmaking rules as they would happen best to suit him at the times.” After 1865, Horatio Alger personified this tradition by encouraging readers to cultivate the art of the confidence man in order to seize the main chance. The trickster became a covert cultural hero, and although the role was usually filled by males, women too could play the ‘confidence’ game. Thus, Americans did not universally condemn deception at all times in all places.²⁸

In particular, dishonesty in sports was/is not always viewed as a morally reprehensible act, even if it undermines the moral argument for character development. Games theoretically have binding rules; historian Johann Huizinga implied, “as soon as the rules are transgressed the whole play-world collapses.” But these rules are paper commandments only. Cheating may stem from a variety of motivations and serve many purposes, but morally charged actions are situationally specific, and different domains of social life exhibit different expectations of truthfulness. No matter the size of the rulebook, all ambiguity cannot possibly be eliminated from a sport, and players learn or are even taught to ‘bend’ the rules; games teach children (and adults) to distinguish between the fairness of some forms of deception and the unfairness of others. Cheating may callously further the cheater’s self-interest, but at a safe distance, many cultures enjoy the wit and audacity of successful liars and glorify the cheater (or trickster) who outwits others through outright fraud. As Samuel Butler noted several centuries earlier:

“Doubtless, The pleasure is as great Of being cheated as to cheat.”²⁹

The concept of liminality helps explain the curious anomaly of theoretically pedestal-bound paragons of public virtue cheating to win at croquet. According to anthropologists Victor and Edith Turner, individuals longing for a deeper and less restrictive range of experience and meaning participate in ‘liminoid rituals’ whose symbols are in some way antithetical to the existing rules, hierarchies, and duties that typically govern social life. Certain intervals and actions acquire special meaning and become demarcated from the mundane, and specific sites become associated with unusual experiences. This passage through a *limen* (Latin for ‘threshold’) situates the participant in a period of transition and potentiality. In the twilight-zone world of liminality, the ritualist sheds normal responses and behaves speculatively without anxiety.³⁰

In the early days of the American croquet craze, the croquet field served as such a liminal site, providing a venue where women could tentatively challenge, in a semi-ritual setting, the so-called 'cult of domesticity.' Nowhere is this better expressed than in Alice Brown's story "Dooryards" [1899], set "in the days when croquet first inundated the land." A shy and lonely housewife, married to a farmer "who never learned to smile...duller than the ox," fell in love with croquet after defeating the minister at a Fourth of July picnic. Without the money to buy a croquet set, Della created her own grassless court between the barn and the pump, with wickets cut from willows, potatoes or apples for balls, and a clothes-prop for a mallet. She imperiously warned her husband when he returned from the fields, "Don't you drive over them wickets!," at which point, "Eben looked at her and then at his path to the barn, and he turned his horse aside." Thereafter, she daily played her solitary game with faithful joy after her chores were completed, a deliberate "leaping [of] the bounds of domestic custom."³¹

A comparable liminality existed in nineteenth-century fiction, where female novelists could express covert and aberrant sentiments such as hostility toward men, religious faith, traditional authority, marriage, and the class-order, which were unacceptable in conventional society. But the croquet lawn possessed tangible form, and the sport presented a rare field of endeavor in which women could not only compete on absolutely equal terms with men but tweak their noses as well. In croquet, sublimated aggression between the sexes took the form of knocking the other player's balls around the field and transgressing the rules in order to win. "What is the reason women tell such outrageous fibs?" asks Major St. John in "Pet Leighton's Game of Croquet." "They don't," replied Pet promptly. "Or," she added, "they wouldn't if you men didn't provoke them into it." Perhaps Jean Jacques Rousseau was correct when he speculated that it was "the law of obedience which produces the necessity of lying, because since obedience is irksome, it is secretly dispensed with as much as possible." For both genders, the croquet lawn was a liminal site where previous orderings of thought and behavior (such as morally superior, athletically inferior, or noncompetitive women) could be criticized or revised, and unprecedented modes of ordering relations between people became possible and/or desirable. "All thoughts of business or other cares must be thrown off," claimed *The Round Table*, "before putting foot upon this magical [croquet] lawn."³²

The setting also lent itself to rule-breaking, for although croquet could be played in suburban backyards, it was the summer resort game nonpareil. At Saratoga and Newport, women emerged from an idealized role as dependents and noncompetitors to explicitly organize and perpetuate the amusements. At cities of play, women resided in public domiciles with minimal domestic duties and assumed a freedom of movement and activity often suppressed in private parlors and proscribed in etiquette books. The resort experience broke down established canons of female propriety, and women took advantage of the partial escape from mundane rules and expectations to play at croquet, archery, badminton, and bowl, swim, roller skate, and even gamble. Joanna Anthon, for example, meticulously recorded in her diary from 1867 to 1883 her activities

(including croquet) at a variety of summer watering places, including few other details except the deaths of acquaintances. For Anthon, the watering place not only offered an idealized vision of the possibilities of life, it was life itself. And like the grand summer hotel, the croquet ground served as a legitimate meeting ground for flirtatious encounters, an opportunity, according to British Consul George Towle, for “whispered asides, blithe merry-making at blunders, [and] eager espousals of the partner’s cause.” Summer resorts were often female bastions and centers of flirtation, and it would not be surprising if women were sexually forward and/or extremely competitive under these atypical circumstances, so far and so different from everyday life.³³

Of course, the croquet lawn was not a complete anomaly as a site of social change and contradictions in gender roles. The sport first appeared in the United States, perhaps not coincidentally, during the Civil War, an upheaval which brought gender issues into bold relief. In the 1850s, feminist sympathy with the abolitionist movement led to a sexualized debate over secession and slavery, and Northerners and Southerners frequently berated each other for violating natural and immutable patterns of male and female behavior. The Civil War itself, by making different demands on men and women, initiated new attitudes toward gender roles, and especially opened up the question as to what it meant ‘to be a man.’ Women played vital roles in the economic and social mobilization for both sides and gained a certain independence and sense of assertiveness amidst the wartime crisis. Soldiers depended on them to manage their households, outfit them in the field, or nurse them when wounded. Historian Ann Douglas commented on

the strongly aggressive, not to say belligerent gestures, conspicuous in the careers of not a few of the most famous nurses during the war [which] seem to unmask the element of competitive attack in their volunteer crusade. They said they wanted to take care of men: but did not they also want to take them over? Onlookers may have wondered.³⁴

Economic and social changes in the second half of the nineteenth century continued to batter the “separate spheres” ideology and create other liminal spaces for women. Rapid industrialization radically transformed men’s relationship to their work, making an endangered species out of the independent artisan, the autonomous farmer, and the small shopkeeper. The proliferation of women’s colleges, a delayed age of marriage, and upward social mobility gave rise to the articulation of new claims and demands by women for expanded opportunities. This in turn prompted a reevaluation of gender roles by both sexes and an obsession with ‘manliness’ at the turn of the century. Nineteenth-century leisure entrepreneurs actively sought to cultivate the vast potential female audience and targeted American women who craved “to be actively amused, if not blissfully excited.” Vaudeville managers (and later movie exhibitors) provided social spaces where women could impinge on ‘traditionally’ male public space and blurred the gender categories so carefully constructed earlier in the century. The ‘New Woman’—vigorous, economically autonomous, and desirous of personal pleasure

and self-expression—could be seen as early as the 1880s wearing bloomer outfits and playing tennis aggressively at the Newport Casino, where once croquet courts had flourished.³⁵

This educated and self-assured 'New Woman' could play **with** men, but to defeat them was another matter. It is significant that when lawn tennis began to supplant croquet in the late 1870s, accusations against women were not simply transplanted to the new sport. In an 1893 article entitled "Will Croquet Come Again?," *Harper's Weekly* declared that "as a direct cause of... 'foul play,' croquet overshadows lawn tennis as a mountain overshadows a valley." Croquet was a sport where your opponent will openly charge fraud, and "criminations and recriminations will fly about." In defense of their claim, *Harper's* related the story of a disputed croquet match between two Iowa farmers. One participant accused the other of cheating, a fight ensued, and the wronged party struck his accuser on the head with a mallet. The victim staggered home, where he collapsed and died. Things like this did not seem to occur in tennis matches.³⁶

The fact that men and women did not compete equally at the more 'athletic' tennis meant the same sense of cultural dissonance and individual anxiety was not present among players. George Powell said as much in a 1901 article in *Temple Bar* in which he railed against superior female croquet players. On the croquet ground, Powell complained, there was nothing that men could do that women could not do better. No wonder he supported the new vogue for tennis, where women could "scarcely play with the athletic violence of the first-class male, and [women] remain what we should like them to be." Walter Wingfield, an astute tennis promoter, appealed to just this instinct in men in 1874: "Croquet, which of late years has monopolized the attention of the public, lacks the healthy and manly excitement of Lawn Tennis [emphasis added]." Disquietude with equality in mixed-gender competition helps explain the collapse of the croquet craze. If women played croquet better than men, women may have even accepted the accusation of cheating as a way to cover the embarrassment of that superiority that defied so many American preconceptions.³⁷

For whatever reason, croquet did not sustain its initial popular momentum. By the time an American National Croquet Association was finally formed in 1882 to standardize the rules, the enthusiasm had already peaked, and croquet lawns in America and Europe were being madly converted into tennis courts as depicted in Leo Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina* [1877]. The sport's decline opened the door for the game of 'roque,' a bastard offspring of croquet that was marketed specifically to men by appealing to their superior physical prowess and familiarity with billiard-like strategy. Despite an Olympic appearance in 1904, roque hardly lived up to its appellation as the "game of the century," although like croquet, it continues to be played beyond the fringes of mass appeal.³⁸

As a contest of skill, however, croquet retained a feminine aura as well as a reputation for the prevalence of dishonesty and fraud. The eponymous hero of H.G. Wells' *The Croquet Player* noted that many people found him "a trifle effeminate and ridiculous because I make croquet my game...soft hands and an ineffective will." In Vladimir Nabokov's *Prin*, the Russian professor held "his

mallet very low and daintily swinging it between his parted spindly legs.” When Pnin “croqueted, or rather rocketed, an adversary’s ball,” an argument broke out; “Susan said it was completely against the rules, but Madame Shpolyanski insisted it was perfectly acceptable.” A Spalding Manual from 1916 still issued a two-page warning against cheating, reminding beginners, “Let every movement be one of fairness and honor. Let your adherence to the rules be observed in all cases of even the greatest interest.” Modern guides continue to contain similar admonitions; Gill’s *Croquet* (1988) advises, “The one thing you really do have to be is honest.”³⁹

The nineteenth century was undeniably composed of heavily gendered space, a realm of sporting men and double standards, parlors and taverns. But this paradigm is not the entire story, and all evidence is not consistent with this stereotype. Authors of croquet manuals and magazine articles may have believed that limits needed to be set to marketplace values in their sport, but on the actual croquet lawn, coquetry did not always eclipse competition, nor did etiquette necessarily take precedence over winning. The evidence does not substantiate the typical judgment of croquet as a sport that had “little competitive edge, and was primarily recreative, offering relief and release from stress in the quiet and sheltered confines of the private suburban yard.” On the contrary, the croquet lawn was a site where middle-class gender roles and upper-class gentility were ambiguous and contested.⁴⁰

Of course, a microcosmic activity such as croquet could not alone dismantle the idea of separate spheres so prevalent in the nineteenth century. For all the emphasis on rupture and breach, the concept of liminality is essentially functionalist, concluding in the re-incorporation of the participants. Women may have cheated at croquet, but ultimately the game ended, and everyone returned to the strictures and boredom of everyday life. But for a moment, with the grass closely cut and the turf smoothly rolled, with mallet in hand and dress cut short, with steady eye and practiced stroke, women occupied the same moral plane as men, for better and for worse.

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