

The perils of play: Eighteenth-century ideas about gambling

Justine Crump

A pamphlet published in 1784, *Hints for a reform, particularly in the gambling clubs*, declared that a national propensity to gamble placed Britain in grave peril. The pamphlet, ostensibly written by a Member of Parliament, exhorted its readers

to lay the ax to the root of GAMBLING! To this dreadful vice must the loss of America be ascribed! To this dreadful vice must every misfortune which has lately fallen on this country be attributed!¹

To a modern reader this statement looks bizarre. We might suppose the author meant to be ironic but if so he kept a remarkably straight face through a twenty-four-page pamphlet which discussed divorce rates and the education of young men. I am inclined to think the statement is meant seriously – which makes it even more strange. How, and why, might gambling be construed to present this level of threat to Britain in the eighteenth century?

It is tempting to dismiss this particular writer as a little unhinged but he was by no means the only eighteenth-century commentator to express a deep distrust of gambling and to ascribe to play a variety of calamitous effects. This essay examines some of the ideas associated with gambling in eighteenth-century Britain. Specifically, it considers the way in which contemporary writings characterized the perils of play.

The terms 'gambling' and 'play' carry a complex load of meaning. In this paper I use them to signify the behaviours that annex monetary exchange to the outcome of uncertain events. Gambling thus includes betting on pure games of chance like dice, as well as games that admit degrees of skill like whist or billiards. It also encompasses the betting and wagering surrounding sporting fixtures like boxing and horse racing. It can be stretched to include the 'frivolous' wagers often deplored in the contemporary press, in the form of bets made on public and private events such as the death of public figures, as well as speculation in the official state lottery. These kinds of gambles resembled the emerging trade in life and commercial insurance, a subject which I do not attempt to address here.²

¹ *Hints for a reform, particularly in the gambling clubs*. By a Member of Parliament (London: R. Baldwin, 1784), p. 10. The copy of the pamphlet in the Bodleian Library contains a hand-written attribution of the work to James Duff, 2nd Earl of Fife, MP for Banff and later for Elgin.

² For an account of the emergence of insurance in Britain and contemporary responses to it,

In considering eighteenth-century moral responses to gambling, I draw upon a body of printed texts as source materials, including sermons, tracts, political pamphlets, academic dissertations, and periodical essays.

see Geoffrey Clark, *Betting on lives: The culture of life insurance in England, 1695-1775* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1999) and Barry Supple, *The Royal Exchange: A history of British insurance, 1720-1900* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985).

These moral writings about play do not tell the whole story about eighteenth-century gambling, for there were at least as many texts instructing readers how to play games – and how to gamble profitably – as there were moralizations about the evils of gambling. If edition numbers can be taken as an indication of a text's consumer appeal by far the most popular eighteenth-century work about gambling was Edmund Hoyle's guide to whist (frequently revised and supplemented with instructions for other games), which was first published in 1742 and reached its ninth edition in 1748. A further eleven editions followed up to 1807 and versions of the work remain in print even to this day. By comparison most of the sermons, political pamphlets and academic treatises that criticized gambling were published in a single edition. Other kinds of texts also competed with the moral pronouncements against play. Scholarly mathematical treatises on probability theory frequently contained instructions on how to apply these theories to popular games.³ One such work, Abraham De Moivre's *The Doctrine of Chances*, was first printed in 1718 and reprinted in 1738 and 1756. In 1793, it suffered the indignity of being extracted into a popular book of game instruction, *Faro and Rouge et Noir*. Gambling also received lighthearted treatment in collections of comic anecdotes about games and gamblers, such as Theophilus Lucas's *Lives of the Gamesters* (1714), which was published three times in thirty years, and Charles Cotton's *Compleat Gamester* (1674), which was issued in a sixth edition in 1726 and extracted into Richard Seymour's *The Court Gamester* (1719), which was itself issued in five editions up to 1732.

I have chosen to concentrate upon those texts which criticize gambling though these represent only a portion of what was published on the subject and, in all likelihood, had less immediate relevance to eighteenth-century practices of gambling than the cheap and prolific editions of game rules and funny stories which flourished alongside the moral condemnations of play. The moral texts can tell us little about forms of gambling in the eighteenth century and I do not aim here to give a comprehensive history of eighteenth-century gambling. I must leave it to historians to analyse a much wider variety of data on the subject – legal records, parliamentary reports, and records of taxation would be worth

³ For example, see Christiaan Huygen's treatise *De ratiociniis in ludo aleae* (1657), translated by Dr. John Arbuthnot as *Of the Laws of Chance* (1692), and revised in a second edition as *The Value of all Chances in games of Fortune* (1714).

investigation.⁴ Even if we were to make the dubious assumption that written texts can provide an unbiased record of social practice, eighteenth-century moral writings about gambling almost never condescend to describe the hum-drum reality of play as it must have happened in households, clubs, coffee houses or taverns. The texts provide little information about who gambled – high or low, male or female – and hardly ever specify the stakes, if any, for which these gamesters might have played. The texts seldom mention which games were being played – although other works dedicated to instruction in card and table games indicate that players had a wide variety of choice, and evidently had some desire to teach themselves unfamiliar games. Despite these limitations in the moral writings about gambling, modern scholars have for the most part been willing to accept their assertion that Britain in the eighteenth century was threatened by a destructive epidemic of gambling, responsible for a catalogue of calamities extending, apparently, to the loss of America. We need to be more cautious in believing these claims until some independent evidence, perhaps in legal records, has been evaluated. From a study of the writings on the subject it is not possible to say whether there was a real increase in gambling in the eighteenth century or even, with any degree of certainty, whether there was an increase in *writing* about gambling since every kind of publication increased in the period with the expansion of the book trade. However, we can say with assurance that in the eighteenth century people began to write about gambling in new ways and in connection with new topics.

*

Prior to the Stuart Restoration, published writings on gambling approached the subject from an almost exclusively theological point of view. One of the earliest printed arguments against gambling in Britain was made by John Northbrooke, a non-conformist minister from Gloucestershire. Around 1577, he published an undated work, *A treatise*

⁴ No comprehensive work on the subject of gambling in eighteenth-century Britain has yet been produced. The best available accounts of the subject can be found in Gerda Reith's *The age of chance: Gambling in Western culture* (London: Routledge, 1999), and in Roger Munting's *An economic and social history of gambling in Britain and the USA* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1996). Nineteenth-century accounts of the subject including John Ashton's *The History of Gambling in England* (London: Duckworth, 1898), and Andrew Steinmetz's *The Gaming Table: Its Votaries and Victims* (2 vols, London: Tinsley, 1870), are still helpful.

*wherein dicing, dauncing, vaine playes or enterluds &c. commonly used on the Sabbath day, are reprov'd by the authoritie of the word of God and auncient writers.*⁵

Northbrooke derived the immorality of play from its profane misuse of lots. In games of chance such as those played with dice, gamblers made a vain petition for manifestations of the determining presence of God. This contravened the divine purpose of the lot which had been ordained for the resolution of serious controversies. As Northbrooke warned, any game that admitted the operation of chance thus implied the invocation of God in a luscious lot, “as though we would make God servant to our Pastimes and Sportes, and trye what care hee hadde of them.” (107-108)

Northbrooke’s arguments were repeated by other theologians including the Puritan James Balmford in his treatise from 1593, *A short and plain dialogve concerning the vnlawfulness of playing at cards or tables*. In 1619, however, another Puritan divine, Thomas Gataker, published a sermon entitled *Of the nature and use of lots*, in which he asserted that lots were not subject to direct divine intervention but were rather fortuitous events which should only be used to resolve frivolous matters. His arguments sparked a furious debate with other Puritans which was preserved for posterity in an exchange of pamphlets with Balmford. Gataker’s acceptance that a form of randomness operated in lots implied a new and controversial concept of causation in which divine will was enacted at a global rather than a particular level. The idea that chance thus operated at the level of a second cause was subsequently adopted by Latitudinarian Christianity and by secular determinist philosophy. Latitudinarian doctrine attributed the ultimate direction of apparently random events to an intelligent though inscrutable providence. Determinists attributed the operations of chance to current human ignorance of comprehensible physical laws governing the universe. In either formulation, chance was therefore apparent rather than real: a product of human ignorance rather than an ontological state.

Having accepted that within the limits of human knowledge a species of randomness might govern the outcome of a game, some seventeenth-century writers seemed prepared to extend the influence of chance to other areas of life and to investigate this phenomenon

⁵ *A treatise wherein dicing, dauncing, vaine playes or enterluds &c. commonly used on the Sabbath day, are reprov'd by the authoritie of the word of God and auncient writers,*

by comparisons with gambling and wagering. Gambling provided a vocabulary and a set of concepts for understanding and talking about that which was uncertain or unpredictable. This is evident in the surprising willingness shown by some seventeenth-century writers to invoke gambling to characterize faith. Pascal's famous wager figured belief as a risky yet potentially profitable gamble. In 1664, the Latitudinarian theologian John Tillotson repeated Pascal's argument in his sermon *The Wisdom of being Religious* which was probably the first expression of the idea in English. Tillotson explained

The Atheist doth, *as it were*, lay a *Wager* against the Religious man that there is no God; but upon strange inequality and odds; for *he* ventures his Eternal Interest; whereas the *other* ventures onely the loss of his Lusts ... if the Arguments *for* and *against* a God were equal ... yet the hazard and danger is so infinitely unequal, that in point of prudence and interest every man were obliged to incline to the Affirmative ... For, he that acts wisely, and is a thoroughly prudent man, will be provided *in omnem eventum*, will take care to secure the *main chance* ...⁶

Tillotson's appeal to his audience to think about their spiritual choices as "ventures" to be made after considering the "odds" suggests that the experience of gambling had naturalized a new kind of cognition, based upon the probabilistic evaluation of possible outcomes. Tillotson followed the example of contemporary mathematical theorists of probability in directing his punters' attention to the expected gain of their venture – heaven or nothing – and discouraging them from evaluating the likelihood of "the Arguments *for* and *against* a God".⁷ Like the probabilists who evolved their theories by calculating the chances and outcomes of play, some theologians seem to have found in gambling a way of conceptualising a new approach to belief.

In writing about gambling in the seventeenth century, moralists thus addressed the problem of random events and in some cases used ideas derived from gambling to evolve what amounted to a new kind of epistemology based on probability. In the eighteenth

London: George Byshop.

⁶ *The Wisdom of being religious. A sermon preached at St. Pauls* (London: Sa. Gellibrand, 1664), pp. 31-32.

⁷ This, Ian Hacking maintains, was a major flaw in seventeenth-century probability theory whether applied to gambling or to faith, since a reliance upon expectation as the fundamental concept of probability, rather than the odds of an expected event, distorts predictions of the outcome of a single event. *The emergence of probability: A philosophical study of early ideas about probability, induction and statistical inference* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975), pp. 94-95.

century, however, the admission of the operation of chance and uncertainty seems to have become more problematic. Gambling, which had been used by Pascal and Tillotson to demystify uncertainty and to negotiate its impact upon belief, was now reproved by some moral texts in an explicit critique of the admission of randomness to daily life. Some eighteenth-century English commentators like the dissenting minister Thomas Shepherd resurrected the theological objection to gambling as a blasphemous misuse of lots. Shepherd's *Discourse on lots*, published in 1720, attempted to recover biblical grounds upon which to condemn chance-directed ventures, by reasserting the determining power of providence in human affairs.⁸ Shepherd advised his readers to be “Quiet under all the Events of Providence, seeing nothing comes upon thee by Chance; but the Great Sovereign of the World, *works all Things after the Counsel of his own Will*”.⁹ Shepherd's arguments, however, read less like a dissuasive from the idle invocation of God's will in play than a recommendation to social quietism. In the giddy year of the South Sea bubble, when speculative mania gripped the nation, Shepherd may have wished to address the perilous implications of discounting the determining role of providence in worldly events.

Though Pascal and Tillotson had aligned religion and gambling as parallel speculations, eighteenth-century commentators seem more often to have deplored gambling as a Deistical plot to eliminate God from the world entirely, as He had been excluded from the lusory lot. A number of texts characterized the gamester as an atheist who denied God's providence in everything, resorting instead to a sacrilegious faith in the all-determining power of chance. The gambler's immersion in the rituals of play was figured as an alternate religion, an Epicurean faith that threatened the hegemony of the Church.¹⁰ In 1745 – another fraught year – a number of Eliza Haywood's periodical

⁸ Thomas Shepherd, *A discourse on lots, shewing that all use of lots, in a sportive way, is utterly unlawful* (London: John Clark, 1720). Shepherd held a living in the established Church but in 1700 he left it to become a Dissenting Minister. Much of the moral commentary about gambling from the seventeenth and early part of the eighteenth century emerges from the Puritan and non-conformist communities. The Anglican clergy exhibited more interest in the subject in the second half of the eighteenth century.

⁹ Shepherd, *Discourse*, p. 20.

¹⁰ The contagion of epicureanism in gambling was thoughtfully explored by Fielding in the character of Booth in his *Amelia* (1751). My article "*Il faut parier*": Pascal's wager and Fielding's *Amelia*" (*Modern Language Review* 95.2 (2000): 311-23) contains further

paper, *The Female Spectator*, made a satiric attack upon gambling in these terms. *The Female Spectator* described a visit to “Topsy-Turvy Island” where the whole community assembled in a gambling hall

to pay their Adoration to the Goddess *Fortune*, whose Image is placed at the upper End under a magnificent Canopy. – All Ages, all Degrees, all Sects, unite in this universal Worship: – all Reserve, – all Pride of Birth, – all Difference in Opinion is here intirely laid aside:–¹¹

In these texts, Chance or *Fortuna* constituted an alternate faith; a non-Christian paradigm which perceived the world as entirely random and meaningless. The gamester – the disciple of chance – embodied both the philosophy and the consequent political and social hazards. Jeremy Collier, a clergyman and pamphleteer best known for his *Short View of the Immorality and Profaneness of the English Stage*, published *An Essay on Gaming* in 1713 which was reissued in the critical year 1720. Collier’s text made a sophisticated elaboration of the potential for social and political catastrophe in the epicurean beliefs of the gambler. He described a professional gambler, Dolomedes, an adherent of “*Epicurus’s* Philosophy” who defended his reliance upon chance and gambling by arguing that “Wealth and Condition depend mostly upon Chance” while birth itself was “a great Contingency”. The other character in Collier’s essay, Callimachus, provided a mouthpiece for orthodoxy in their dialogue. He addressed the implications of the gambler’s adherence to chance remarking, “I perceive you are not uninstructed in the *Levelling Doctrine: Jack Straw and Watt Tyler* would have argued at this rate.”¹²

*

In the eighteenth century, the perceived threat of gambling thus expanded from the spiritual realm into questions about its influence upon property and upon the social order. These innovations were also influenced by changes in gambling legislation and by the reintroduction of the state lottery.

Gambling had been prohibited during the Interregnum, but with the Stuart restoration play again became visible in society. Charles II restored the office of the Groom Porter

discussion of this point.

¹¹ *The Female Spectator*, 4 vols (London: T. Gardner, 1745), IV, Bk 19, p. 14.

¹² Jeremy Collier, *An essay upon gaming, in a dialogue between Callimachus and Dolomedes* (London: J Morphey, 1713), bound in *Essays upon several Moral Subjects*, Part III (London: George Strahan, 1720), pp. 12, 10, 31.

which since the reign of Henry VIII had provided a public gambling forum for gentlemen attached to the court.¹³ However, legislation enacted in 1664 for the first time addressed the conduct of the genteel gambler.¹⁴ Existing laws against gambling, framed in 1541, had aimed to control the play of the lower ranks with prohibitions against servants and labourers playing games such as tennis, football, and dice, instead of employing their bows and arrows on Sundays and Holy days.¹⁵ The Act of 1664 introduced new provisions in the form of a £100 limit as the maximum allowable loss in a single session of play, together with regulations upon the exchange of securities in gambling.¹⁶ This legislation was designed to protect the genteel gambler from excessive (and socially disruptive) losses, which Henry Fielding sarcastically characterized as “the Exchange of

¹³ According to Samuel Pepys, writing at Christmas in 1668, play at the Groom Porter's was largely genteel and usually fair. (*The diary of Samuel Pepys*, Robert Latham and William Matthews, eds. (11 vols, London: G. Bell, 1976), IX: 3-4.) Nevertheless, the Office of the Groom Porter was abolished in 1772, during the reign of George III.

¹⁴ No comprehensive modern account of gambling legislation prior to and in the eighteenth century has yet been produced; the best sources on the subject are Howard A. Street's *The Law of Gaming* (London: Sweet & Maxwell, 1937), Frederick Brandt's *Games, Gaming and Gamesters' Law* (London: Henry Sweet; Melbourne: C.F. Maxwell, 1871), and C. L'Estrange Ewen's *Lotteries and Sweepstakes* (London: Heath Cranton, 1932).

¹⁵ L'Estrange Ewen, *Lotteries*, p. 66. The 1541 Act (33 Hen. VIII, c.9), also specified that servants might play in their master's house, provided their master was either a nobleman or in possession of at least £100 per annum. In 1764, a commentator referred to this Act to explain the exemption from gambling laws then extended to Royal Palaces, suggesting that it may have set a precedent for a rank-based division of legality in gambling which persisted in the public mind throughout the eighteenth century. (See Anon., *The Laws of Gaming* [...] (London: W. Owen, 1764), pp. ix-x.)

¹⁶ The Act formed a model for subsequent gambling legislation throughout the eighteenth century, and acts from 1710, 1739 and 1745 repeated and expanded its prohibitions. In 1806, a commentator noted the preoccupation with gambling legislation in the 1740s, when four acts dealing with gambling, lotteries and horseracing were passed within five years (John Disney, *The laws of gaming*, London: J. Butterworth, 1806, p. 55). The volume of legislation did not necessarily reflect the number of prosecutions. Gambling law was notoriously ineffectual, hampered by the absence of an organized police force and by corruption within the judicial administration. Official raids on gambling houses, such as that led by Henry Fielding in the Strand in February 1751 in which 45 people were arrested and rigged gambling tables to the value of £60 broken up, were reported in the *Gentleman's Magazine* precisely because they were remarkable instances of magisterial zeal – and, probably, because the persons prosecuted were of the middling and lower ranks. (See *Gentleman's Magazine* 20 (1750): 522; 21 (1751): 87.)

Property from the Hands of a Fool into those of a Sharper”.¹⁷ In reality, these laws were seldom enacted, which Jeremy Collier attributed to gamblers’ “whimsical notions of Honour”¹⁸ – and, probably, to the knowledge that to do so would preclude them from ever playing again.

Though the Crown took steps to protect the property of genteel gamblers it was by no means averse to plundering the same source on its own account. An English state lottery had been introduced in 1566 and used intermittently for public works and colonial ventures during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. In 1694, the state lottery was resurrected. It was promptly suppressed again in 1698, following concerns about corruption, but reinstated as an almost annual event from 1710 to 1826, providing a valuable source of revenue and an indirect form of taxation for governments across the long eighteenth century.¹⁹ Moralists, however, frequently criticized the lottery. In 1699, the satirist Edward Ward made scathing attacks in his newspaper, *The London Spy*, upon the popular mania for speculation whose origins he located in this state-sanctioned form of gambling. Ward asserted that the dubious ventures of the lottery had misdirected commercial aspirations away from responsible trade into fantastic speculation. He described the stagnation of the City during a lottery draw:

The *Gazett* and *Post-Papers* lay by Neglected; and nothing was purr'd over in the *Coffee-Houses* but the *Ticket-Catalogues*: No talking of the *Jubilee*, the want of a current Trade with *France*, or the *Scotch Settlement at Darien*; nothing buzz'd about by the Purblind Trumpeters of State-News, but *Blank* and *Benefit*.²⁰

¹⁷ Henry Fielding, “A Charge Delivered to the Grand Jury, at the Sessions of the Peace held for the City and Liberty of *Westminster*, &c. On Thursday the 29th of June, 1749” in *An Enquiry into the Causes of the Late Increase of Robbers and Related Writings*, ed. by Malvin R. Zirker, The Wesleyan Edition of the Works of Henry Fielding (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988), pp. 25-26.

¹⁸ Collier, *Essay on Gaming*, p. 30.

¹⁹ For an account of British state lotteries, see L'Estrange Ewen; *The Lottery display'd, or the Adventurer's Guide* (London: A. Caldwell, 1771); John Ashton, *A History of English Lotteries* (London: Leadenhall Press, 1893); Ashton, *The History of Gambling in England*; Edgar Roberts, “Fielding's Ballad Opera The Lottery (1732) and the English State Lottery of 1731”, *Huntington Library Quarterly* 27 (1963): 39-52; and James Raven, “The abolition of English state lotteries”, *The Historical Journal* 34.2 (1991): 371-89.

²⁰ [Edward Ward], *The London Spy* (2 vols., London, 1699-1700, 2nd edn), II: pt 2, Dec. 1699, p. 13.

By blurring the boundaries between commerce and gambling, the lottery made visible the disquietingly random processes that lay behind the new speculative financial practices associated with the development of the stock market. Lottery tickets were sold alongside stocks by brokers in Exchange Alley. Like stocks, their price varied; they might be sold above or below par.²¹ A national dependence on credit following a chronic shortage of coinage had flooded the eighteenth-century British marketplace with tokens whose value was fluctuating; negotiable but never absolute. Lottery tickets joined the assortment of currencies in circulation.

The anxieties engendered by trading these valueless yet (potentially) valuable ciphers frequently found expression in comparisons with gambling. All three activities – trade, lotteries, and gambling – involved the circulation of tokens, valueless in themselves, yet interchangeable (with varying degrees of confidence), for goods or services of real value. Credit, which J. G. A. Pocock characterized as Fortuna, goddess of gamblers, simultaneously sustained and imperilled the network of exchange.²²

For critics of the new commercial practices, their resemblance to gambling was testimony to their immorality – and a handy stick with which to beat them. These ideas found their fullest expression in the political journalism of Daniel Defoe. In 1719, Defoe wrote

Stock-jobbing is Play; a Box and Dice may be less dangerous, the Nature of them are alike, a Hazard, and if they venture at either what is not their own, the Knavery is the same.²³

In the first two decades of the eighteenth century, Defoe fired off a barrage of pamphlets articulating the Tories' distrust of stock-jobbers; those agents of the new commercial practices who, like unscrupulous gamblers, were capable of conjuring wealth out of nothing.

²¹ In July 1751, the *Gentleman's Magazine* advised lottery adventurers to wait before purchasing their tickets so that jobbers would be obliged to reduce their prices (21:328). Evidently, no one heeded this advice for in November of the same year the *Magazine* reported that the price of tickets had risen to sixteen guineas just before the start of the draw (21:52). The face value of the ticket was £10. In other years, though, lottery tickets sold at a discount. L'Estrange Ewen reports that in 1745, £10 tickets sold for £9 14s. (p. 248)

²² See *The Machiavellian Moment: Florentine Political Thought and the Atlantic Republican Tradition* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1975), pp. 423-61.

²³ [Daniel Defoe], *The anatomy of Exchange-Alley; or a system of stock-jobbing* (London: E. Smith, 1719, 2nd edn), pp. 43-44.

A particularly virulent attack upon stock-jobbing speculations in the elections of 1701 encapsulated his approach. Defoe conflated distrust of the new financial practices and their agents, gambling, and the fictive nature of credit itself in a trenchant description of stock-jobbing speculations as

the New invented ways of a few Needy Mercenaries [*sic*], who can turn all Trade into a Lottery, and make the *Exchange* a Gaming Table: A thing, which like the Imaginary Coins of Foreign Nations, have no reality in themselves; but are plac'd as things which stand to be Calculated, and Reduc'd into Value, a Trade made up of Sharp and Trick, and manag'd with Impudence and Banter.²⁴

“Sharp and Trick” – the ploys of the gambler – dominate Defoe’s speculative Exchange where nothing has “reality” but all is “imaginary”, to be “Reduc’d into Value” because devoid of intrinsic value. In gambling, Defoe found a set of terms and a moral contamination which served to condemn the contiguous perils of the speculative market. And yet, despite the rhetoric, the market survived; trade continued, necessarily, to be dependent upon credit; and the lottery flourished for the rest of the century; a much-needed source of revenue in times of trouble.²⁵ Ironically, though the lottery bore a strong resemblance to a game, as an investment it was probably safer than trading in stocks. In this the lottery may have helped to naturalize Britain’s growing dependence on credit instruments by introducing the nervous amateur to speculation in an official, tolerated, and – apparently – protected forum.

Eighteenth-century lotteries were, in the early years at least, organized as investments which were highly profitable to speculators and extremely costly to the government. For roughly half a century all lottery adventurers could expect a return on their outlay, in minimum prizes of either lump sums or annuities in addition to which the government would eventually reimburse the face-value of their ticket together with a percentage of interest. Not until 1769 did the government regularly run lotteries in which most ticket-holders received no return while the surplus was annexed as revenue rather than regarded as a loan from the public for which the government would eventually be accountable. This change in itself may indicate a growing confidence in speculation as a legitimate financial practice. The lottery found unexpected defenders, too, including the dissenting minister Thomas Shepherd. Though

²⁴ [Daniel Defoe], *The free-holders plea against stock-jobbing elections of parliament men* (London, 1701), p. 21.

²⁵ James Raven reports that the lottery provided £35 million during the Seven Years’ war and

Shepherd had maintained that God oversaw every throw of the gambler's dice he defended the state lottery, characterizing it as a "Necessary Support of the Government", which he considered, as "an ordinance" appointed by God, to have the right to dictate how its tribute should be raised.²⁶ The lottery's resemblance to stock-market speculation might redeem as much as condemn the new commercial practices. As an anonymous pamphleteer cheerfully remarked of lotteries in 1786, "They serve to awaken and support a spirit of enterprize, that is perfectly consonant with the genius of a trading nation."²⁷

Comparisons between gambling and the new commercial modes could therefore cut either way. If gambling had been a stick with which to beat stock-jobbers early in the century for their debasement of currency and problematization of designations of value, in later years it could also function as a whipping boy, standing in for the more disturbing aspects of speculative trade. Samuel Johnson defined the distinction between trade and gambling:

Gaming is a mode of transferring property without producing any intermediate good. Trade gives employment to numbers, and so produces intermediate good.²⁸

Coincidentally Johnson's defence of trade was made in 1772, a year marked by a crisis in the stock market following the collapse of the Ayr Bank. The definition of trade as the antithesis of gambling, whether justified or not, may have served to bolster both its moral credibility, and its perceived stability.

*

The transfer of personal property in gambling was another favourite subject for the moralists. In 1713, Jeremy Collier described gambling as "a galloping Consumption", in an image that combined ideas of illness and rapacity.²⁹ Eighteenth-century critics of play consistently characterized gambling as a disease that threatened to consume individual gamblers and society itself. At the end of the century, the moralist Charles Moore pulled out all the rhetorical stops to describe the pernicious influence of play, declaiming:

£70 million for the war in the American colonies ("Abolition", p. 371).

²⁶ Shepherd, *Discourse on Lots*, pp. 15-16.

²⁷ *Considerations on Lotteries, and Proposals for their better Regulation. Addressed to the Right Hon. William Pitt, Chancellor of the Exchequer* (London: G. Kearsley, 1786), p. 10.

²⁸ James Boswell, *Life of Johnson* (Oxford: OUP, 1980), 6 April 1772, p. 481.

²⁹ Collier, *Essay on Gaming*, p. 24.

the body of the community, both high and low, is miserably tainted. The putrid gangrene is seated deep and spread wide; the vitals are corrupted, and the die is cast by which our vigour, health, spirit, life, and virtuous manners are (it is to be feared) thrown away for ever.³⁰

But how, exactly, might a little dice play bring about the fall of civilization? Thomas Kavanagh, in his exploration of gambling cultures in eighteenth-century France, has suggested that prior to the revolution gambling had an important symbolic function for the French nobility, as a prestigious activity designed to assert their rank and independence from considerations of money, in contrast to the emerging bourgeoisie.³¹ Kavanagh's arguments have some relevance for gambling in Britain in the same period. At the Stuart court, gambling does seem to have been regarded as a prestigious activity and the Act of 1664 was designed to protect the aristocratic gambler from excessive losses rather than to suppress elite gambling altogether. Ironically, the prestige attached to play seems to have invited emulation among the lower ranks. In 1728, Richard Seymour published the suggestively titled *Court Gamester: Or, Full and Easy Instructions For Playing the Games now in Vogue after the best Method; as they are played at Court, and in the Assemblies*. In the preface to his work, Seymour urged his socially-aspiring readers to master the newest games:

Gameing [*sic*] is become so much the Fashion amongst the *Beau-Monde*, that he who, in Company, should appear ignorant of the Games in Vogue; would be reckoned low bred, and hardly fit for Conversation.³²

³⁰ Charles Moore, *A Full Inquiry into the subject of Suicide To which are added [...] Two Treatises on Duelling and Gaming [...]*, 2 vols (London: J. F. and C. Rivington and others, 1797), II: 389.

³¹ Kavanagh maintains that the French nobility who traditionally had derived their titles and status from their prowess in battle found their identity compromised by the emergence of a newly powerful group among the bourgeoisie who used money to purchase eminence. To distinguish themselves from this new power, Kavanagh argues, hereditary nobles evolved compensatory activities including duels, tournaments and high-stake gambling, which reproduced the danger and glory of battle and in which they could assert their aristocratic identity. See Thomas Kavanagh, *Enlightenment and the Shadows of Chance: The Novel and the Culture of Gambling in Eighteenth-Century France* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1993), p. 42.

³² Richard Seymour, *The Court Gamester: Or, Full and Easy Instructions For Playing the Games now in Vogue after the best Method; as they are played at Court, and in the Assemblies* [*sic*], viz. *Ombre, in all its Branches. Picquet. And, The Royal Game of Chess. Wherein The Frauds in Play are detected, and the Laws of each Game annexed to prevent Disputes*, 4th edn (London: E. Curll, 1728), p. iii.

Nevertheless, as the legislation made apparent, a gentleman displaying his personal prestige in gambling needed to be protected from the harsh realities of the new, commercial world. In a bygone age the chain extending from God to his lowest creation had seemed fixed and secure. Now God was abstracted from the world and His representative, the King, stood on shaky ground. Neither seemed sufficient to guarantee the social order. The ruling classes' vulnerability to loss and decline became a vexed question and in the early part of the eighteenth century writers dwelt anxiously on the prospect of the ruin of genteel families in gambling. As Jeremy Collier explained

A Box and Dice are terrible Artillery, a Battery of Cannon scarcely plays with more Execution. They make a Breach in a Castle, and command a Surrender in a little Time [...] A Fire, or an Inundation, can't undo a Man with more Expedition.³³

Moralists also began to dispute the assumption that gambling was itself prestigious. In the *Tatler* from 1709, Richard Steele deplored the figure of the gambling nobleman, whose propensity for play appeared to arise from aristocratic virtues. Steele explained:

He is Generous to a Prodigality, more Affable than is consistent with his Quality, and Couragious to a Rashness. Yet, after all this, the Source of his whole Conduct is (tho' he would hate himself if he knew it) meer Avarice. The Ready Cash laid before the Gamester's Counters make him venture, as you see, and lay Distinction against Infamy, Abundance against Want; in a Word, all that's desirable against all that's to be avoided.³⁴

In the new commercial world “Distinction” itself was a marketable commodity. If rank, influence, and power were to be bought, to fritter away the means for such elevation in gambling was a culpable error. As Collier's professional gambler put it, “*Play* is fighting for Money and Dominion [...] Empire is commonly extended in Proportion to the *Purse*; the more you have, the farther you may command”.³⁵ Money itself had become the most crucial signifier, interchangeable for “all that's desirable”.

If men were thus to be made of money, exchanges between members of the ruling classes and professional gamblers were specially to be deplored. Moralists writing in the early part of the century dwelt on the image of the noble gamester ravaged of fortune and – implicitly – of rank by the sharper – the professional gambler of dubious antecedents, who

³³ Collier, *Essay on Gaming*, pp. 22-23.

³⁴ *The Tatler*, ed. by Donald F. Bond, 3 vols (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987), no. xv, Thursday 12 May – Saturday 14 May, 1709, I:129.

made a living out of gambling, most probably by cheating. Men of rank were advised to gamble only with their own kind. In 1700, the satirist Tom Brown warned his readers that play

is a kind of a Republick very ill ordered, where all the World are Hail Fellow well met; no distinction of Ranks, no Subordination observed. The greatest Scoundrel of the Town with Money in his Pockets, shall take his Turn before the best Duke or Peer in the Land, if the Cards are on his side.³⁶

In its random and meaningless redistribution of wealth, gambling apparently threatened to subvert the ascendancy of the ruling classes which was now recognizably contingent upon their possession of wealth in the newly articulated equivalence of “Money and Dominion”.³⁷ In the early part of the eighteenth century, the moral writers had expressed their fears *for* aristocratic gamblers who risked their wealth, and, tacitly, their rank, in play. In the last quarter of the century, however, the moralists’ anxieties took another direction, focussing upon a fear *of* elite gamblers. In their writings, the threat of gambling was reformulated as an explicitly political menace to the state.

Across the eighteenth century, elite gamblers had protected themselves from the dangers Tom Brown described by establishing exclusive private clubs where they might play in splendid isolation. The suppression of the Groom Porter’s in 1772 might have meant that the court was no longer a venue for elite play but the former chocolate house, White’s, was appropriated for gambling and in 1764 twenty-seven noblemen and gentlemen founded

³⁵ Collier, *Essay on Gaming*, pp. 15-16.

³⁶ Tom Brown, *Amusements serious and comical, Calculated for the meridian of London* (London: John Nutt, 1700), p. 100.

³⁷ It is quite hard to find documented evidence of the rich and powerful absolutely ruined by gambling. Some of the losses *were* staggering – Charles James Fox lost £140,000 before he was 25 (Florence N. David, *Games, Gods, and Gambling: The Origins and History of Probability and Statistical Ideas from the Earliest Times to the Newtonian Era* (London: Charles Griffin, 1962), p. 88), and his career probably suffered as a consequence. Horace Walpole's letters mention of a number of individuals ruined by gambling. Some like John Damer, eldest son of Lord Milton with debts amounting to £60,000, closed their career in suicide, *The Yale Edition of Horace Walpole's Correspondence*, ed. W. S. Lewis, 42 vols (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1937-1980), Letter to Lady Ossory, 15 August 1776, XXXII: 314-15. In a letter to William Mason, Walpole related how the gaming debts of Lord Foley had amounted to so great a sum that he had spent an estate of £20,000 a year before he came into possession of it (12 May 1778, XXVIII: 392). I wonder whether it was not the comparative rarity of these events and the enormity of the sums involved that gave them their

Brooks's club, essentially for gambling. These clubs were openly distinguished by their political affiliation with White's attracting Tory members and Brooks's Whig. The elite gamblers were now safely playing among their own kind but what danger might they present to the rest of society? The author of *Hints for a reform*, at least, was alarmed, claiming in 1784 that the gambling clubs "will become *King, Lords, and Commons*. They will make laws, and decide by their *Magna Charta*."³⁸

In 1794, Thomas Rennell, a popular Anglican preacher, published a sermon entitled *The consequences of the vice of gaming* which encapsulated the political fears surrounding gambling during the Revolutionary years.³⁹ The inclusion of these concerns in a religious disquisition on play is particularly striking when compared with earlier texts. Thomas Shepherd, writing in 1720, chose to omit the political ramifications of gambling from his *Discourse on lots*. Shepherd identified an increasing abuse of lots in gambling as a "National sin" but he wrote, "I doubt not, but the Wisdom of our Senators will in a little Time take Notice of these Things: But I have wholly wav'd the Political Considerations which belong to those in another Orb."⁴⁰ Seventy-four years later, Rennell had no such reservations about including explicitly political commentary within his sermon.

Rennell took a programmatic approach to his subject, cataloguing the individual vices of the gambler before proceeding to derive their dangerous political effects, "very frequently subverting, the stability of civil order".⁴¹ The irreligion of the elite gambler translated in Rennell's view into the destruction of "SOCIAL AND NATIONAL RELIGION, which secures the

greatest power in contemporary minds.

³⁸ *Hints*, p. 16.

³⁹ Rennell (1745-1840) preached this sermon in the Cathedral of Winchester. He went on to become Master of the Temple and later Dean of Winchester, partly through the influence of Pitt. Rennell's sermon seems to have been unusually popular, published three times in 1794, 1795 and 1799, and commended by, and extracted into, *The Gentleman's Magazine* (64:2 [1794], 831). Other texts from the period which make similar estimations of the political consequences of gambling include Moore, the anonymous pamphlet *Hints for a reform* (1784), Thomas Erskine's *Reflections on gaming, annuities, and usurious contracts* (1776), and Richard Hey's *Dissertation on the Pernicious Effects of Gaming* (1783).

⁴⁰ *Discourse*, Preface.

⁴¹ Thomas Rennell, *The consequences of the vice of gaming, as they affect the welfare of individuals, and the stability of civil government, considered* (London: Rivingtons et al., 1794), p. 8.

subordination, the peace, and the welfare of Communities.”(8) From the high-ranking gambler's personal financial ruin, Rennell deduced a loss of political efficacy:

To the integrity and independence of men of rank and opulence, a free state looks for whatever is upright in conduct, sound in determination, safe in practice, and beneficial in consequence.(41)

Poverty was not necessarily debasing but in Rennell's formulation the gambler's “MENDICITY” encompassed a moral degradation that would transform penury into “the organ of faction, and the parent of universal prostitution and veniality.”(42)

In the gambler's selfish absorption in the rituals and profits of play, Rennell thus identified a potential for an explicitly political corruption. He followed Edmund Burke in attributing the instability of Europe in the closing years of the century precisely to the poor government of nations led by those debased by gambling (47). In the years of revolution it is hardly surprising that the qualifications and behaviour of the ruling classes had become the subject of anxious scrutiny. In an age when great men were, apparently, made of money, and when rank seemed to be in danger of collapsing altogether as a meaningful category, gambling by agents of the state was a betrayal not only of self but of one's class and one's political responsibility. Rennell's comments illustrate the mechanisms by which the perceived depredations of gambling might be stretched to encompass all political catastrophes, even up to the loss of America. His arguments are hardly plausible but they are nevertheless highly evocative.

*

The moralists did not confine themselves to criticizing the gambling of the ruling classes. As Richard Seymour's instructive text, *The Court Gamester*, suggests, the behaviour of the upper ranks was potentially a model for their inferiors, particularly the aspiring members of the middle orders. These aspirational gamblers formed a target for moral literature bent on criticizing the apparently new fashion for gambling in the polite social circles of the middling ranks.

In 1701, Tom Brown had advised his readers, for safety's sake, to gamble only with players of their own rank. As the century progressed, however, Brown's solution to the perils of play became unpalatable and moralists turned a more critical gaze upon sociable gambling. The perversion of social intercourse in play became a recurring topic in the moral writings against gambling, though the terms in which this danger was understood changed over time.

Moralists frequently invoked the convention of a Hobbesian gambler who exploited the fashion for sociable play to prey on his victims. The gambler, as an exemplum of Thomas Hobbes's selfish hypothesis, was an individual motivated solely by self-interest, abusing the license of hospitality and sociability to ruin his peers. The moralists dwelt on the paradox of danger and destruction in the domestic realm. In 1783 Richard Hey was awarded a prize by the University of Cambridge for his *Dissertation on the Pernicious Effects of Gaming* which explored this idea. Hey explained

In the circle of mutual Foes who surround the board, every thing is hostile; at least all that relates to the business of the Table, except an agreement upon certain rules which are their laws of war; and all considerations are taught to give way to Self-interest.⁴²

The periodical press often canvassed the same point. In 1785, the *Lounger* printed a letter from a country gentleman, complaining about the necessity for gambling at social gatherings: “[I] often suffer a good deal in gaining their guineas from people who I know well cannot afford to lose them.”⁴³ Gambling apparently threatened to turn social exchange into overt conflict, fueled by avarice.

Towards the end of the century, new ideas about the human psyche contributed to a reformulation of the arguments against social play. As well as endangering the well-being of his peers by despoiling them in play under the guise of sociability, the gambler inflicted a violence against his own nature. Though Hey had described a Hobbesian battle at the play-table, he evidently considered this self-interest “taught” rather than innate. Hey's dissertation went on to invoke Shaftesburian notions of the innate virtue and benevolence of human nature, and the tenets of sensibility, to interpret gambling as a perversion of the gambler's true nature, arguing that play should be avoided since “it is repugnant to our very Nature, that one human Being should gaze with Indifference on the misery suffered by another.”⁴⁴

Whether they rejoiced in the gambler as a Hobbesian exemplum of natural human

⁴² *A Dissertation of the pernicious effects of Gaming* (Cambridge: J. & J. Merrill, 1783), p. 56. Hey, a fellow of Magdalene College, was a mathematician and retired barrister who wrote a number of essays on social and political topics in the closing years of the century.

⁴³ *The Lounger*, ed. Henry MacKenzie (Edinburgh: William Creech, 1785-86), no. XLIII, Saturday 26 November 1785, p. 171.

⁴⁴ Hey, p. 57.

depravity, or deplored his abjuration of the natural ties of sensibility, the moralists agreed that the gambler contravened a natural principle of sociability; that he was fundamentally, as Johnson remarked, “an unsocial man.”⁴⁵ The moralists frequently canvassed this theme in their explorations of the spiritual, economic, political, and domestic depredations of the gambler. At times, their rhetoric reached strange heights, in condemnations of the gambler’s perceived withdrawal from his social and, especially towards the end of the century, emotional responsibilities. One is tempted to read an almost hysteric zeal in some of the anti-gambling polemic, such as the denunciations made in *Hints for a reform* against associations of the aristocracy for play in the exclusive London clubs. Other texts seem to edge even closer to hysteria in the Freudian sense, in repudiations of gambling that employ the language of sexual perversion to characterize male liaisons for vice in play. The anonymous author of *A Plain and Friendly Address* (1786) thus described a growing lust for gambling between a pair of schoolboys:

Lorenzo and Amintor had unhappily discovered and encouraged in each other a similar propensity of the most alarming nature: [...] the usual diversions of their schoolfellows no longer had a charm for them; and were either disregarded entirely, or pursued for other purposes than that of healthy recreation: some stake must be proposed, some wager must depend upon their issue [...] The hours which had hitherto been passed in innocent and wholesome exercise, or usefully employed in the private advancement of their studies, were now secretly devoted to the pernicious purposes of cards and dice.⁴⁶

The nuances of this text, aimed at an exclusively male audience, are implicitly sexual. This curious alignment of sexual perversion with gambling seems to suggest that play might disrupt the normative channels of social and economic exchange, as homosexuality disrupts the sexual exchanges of a society in which sociability and inheritance are governed by the rules of heterosexual exchange. Gambling, in this formulation, appeared to threaten a generalized social breakdown, in which all social, economic, and political relationships became perverted by the anti-social demands and pleasures of play. The perverse desires of Johnson’s “unsocial man” potentially disrupted the whole fabric of society.

⁴⁵ Boswell, 6 April 1772, p. 481.

⁴⁶ *A Plain and Friendly Address to the Under-Graduates of the University of Cambridge* [...] (London: J. Dodsley, 1786), pp. 26-27.

The domestic life of the gambler thus afforded much scope for moralizing. He was arraigned, variously, for his neglect of parents, wife, and children. One commentator ironically praised the gambler's stoicism: "He has a Wife and Children, Relations and Friends; but he has neither Fears for their Welfare, nor Tears for their Distress: He bears their Afflictions with the most Christian Patience, and kisses the Rod with which Providence hath chastized them"⁴⁷. Sexually, the gambler was moribund – the *Connoisseur* remarked in 1754 that the love of play "conquers even lust; and conquers it more effectually than age."⁴⁸ Particular indignation was reserved for gamblers who, in consuming their patrimony, effectively despoiled past and robbed future generations as well as impoverishing their immediate family, since the gambler's "arm of avarice [...] stretched out with impunity to the future, to rob to the farthest verge of life, and to prey upon unborn generations."⁴⁹ All this tends to a picture of the gambler as a peculiarly isolated individual, denying his synchronic and diachronic familial ties, as well as his social and economic responsibilities. Even his ability to form the most elementary social connection, a heterosexual union, was under question. The gambler, it seems, stood entirely alone – and in this perceived singularity, we may locate the root of the threat he presents. In an age when value, social rank, and even language achieved meaning only through relational networks, in circulation, the gambler's apparent isolation presented a perilous problem. What would happen to society, to wealth, to signification itself, if someone refuses to play the game? By withdrawing himself from "circulation" in a social or emotional sense, the gambler called into question a social system in which selfhood could only be inferred by its relation to money, rank, and family ties. The potential for chaos is apparent. The gambler, as conceived by the moralists, is a spectre: a deracinated, asexual, amoral – "unsocial" – individual.

Up to this point, I have described the gambler exclusively as male, contemplating the damage "he" may inflict upon society. In their critique of social gambling, however, the moralists expressed at least as much interest in female players. Their criticism of gambling frequently overlapped with broader attacks upon the excesses of luxury, a transgression

⁴⁷ [D. Graham], "A Modest Defence of Gaming" [1754], in *Fugitive Pieces, On Various Subjects*, 2 vols (London: R. & J. Dodsley, 1761), I: 190.

⁴⁸ *The Connoisseur. By Mr. Town, Critic and Censor-General*, 4 vols, 6th edn (Oxford: J. Rivington et al, 1774), no. XL, Thursday 31 October 1754, II: 36.

⁴⁹ [Thomas Erskine], *Reflections on Gaming, Annuities, and Usurious Contracts* (London: T.

which had particular associations with women. Gambling and luxury were both formulated as a misuse of time and money in ways particularly inappropriate in those members of the middle orders seeking to emulate the recreations of their betters. John Brown, a key figure in the mid-century campaign for moral reform, published a sermon against gambling in 1750 in which he expounded arguments against play as a form of avaricious luxury which were repeated in his more famous *Estimate of the manners and principles of the times* (1757). Brown perceived in gambling, as in luxury, a threat to organized religion and an incitement to a general moral laxity which he castigated most energetically in the character of the female gambler.⁵⁰

It is a curious trait of the moral writings on polite gambling, especially in the periodical press, that the subject of female gambling commanded so much attention – and spleen. Women from the highest and lowest ranks had probably always had access to various modes of gambling either at court or in the streets, but in the eighteenth century moralists identified an innovation in the introduction, among the middling ranks, of private parties collected together specifically for the purposes of play. Such parties may have offered women in polite social circles an opportunity to gamble but the extent to which such women participated and the sums of money for which they played have gone largely unrecorded.⁵¹

We can say, however, that the very *idea* of female gambling seemed to embody the moralists' worst nightmare. In 1735, the *Prompter*, a newspaper, denounced the practice:

Davies, J. Bew, T. Walter, 1776), p. 28.

⁵⁰ John Brown, *On the pursuit of false pleasure, and the mischiefs of immoderate gaming* [...] (Bath: James Leake, 1750), p. 10.

⁵¹ Jonathan Swift's satire, *The journal of a modern lady* (1729), contains a representation of female gambling which reproduces the tone and substance of many of the contemporary moral writings. Interesting and occasionally atypical depictions of female gambling can be found in the following novels: Frances Sheridan's *Memoirs of Miss Sidney Bidulph* (1761), Frances Brooke's *The excursion* (1777), *The sylph* (1779) attributed to the Duchess of Devonshire, Frances Burney's *Camilla* (1796), and the anonymous *The female gamester; or, the pupil of fashion* (1796). Towards the end of the century the gambling of some women of elevated rank did become the subject of public comment. See Phyllis Deutsch, "Moral trespass in Georgian London: Gaming, gender, and electoral politics in the age of George III", *The Historical Journal* 39.3 (1996): 637-56, and Gillian Russell, "'Faro's Daughters': Female Gamesters, Politics, and the Discourse of Finance in 1790s Britain", *Eighteenth-Century Studies*, 33.4 (2000): 481-504.

A *Carding* WOMAN is a fashionable MONSTER; too *Common* to be carried about for a *Shew*, and too *Ugly*, to bear *looking at*: Else, there is not, among all the *misshapen, grim, Animals*, which are *proclaim'd* UNNATURAL, by Sound of a Trumpet, Any thing, so detestably the *Reverse* of what she was intended for, as this *Rational Grimalkin!* this voracious, dry, *Harpy*, in *Masquerade!* this, *half-human*, TYGER, in *Petticoats!*⁵²

What could the female gambler possibly be doing to generate such criticism? One recurrent theme across the century was her vulnerability to seduction. As the *Guardian* ominously commented in 1713,

□ *The Prompter*, no. LXXV, Tuesday 29 July, 1735.

All Play-debts must be paid in Specie, or by an Equivalent. The Man that plays beyond his Income pawns his Estate; the Woman must find out something else to Mortgage when her Pin-mony [*sic*] is gone⁵³

I have never come across any documented cases of such misdemeanours – though that’s not to say these things might never have happened. However, some of the transgressions with which female gamblers were attributed pass the bounds of probability, like Addison’s tale of “a new-born Child that was *marked* with the five of Clubs”,⁵⁴ or a report in a number of *The Female Spectator* from 1745 that some women in high society paid their play-debts with counterfeit coinage.⁵⁵ These tales have the quality of an urban myth; stories people tell themselves that wrap all their fears into one neat, paranoid package. The most hardened female gambler is unlikely to have committed the capital crime of passing counterfeit currency but the stories’ suggestive combination of femininity, the sinful transactions of gambling, and the disfigurement of the child – or, equally, the falsification of the ultimate token of value, coins of the realm – all speak to fears of female sexual incontinence, and the subversion of the transmission of property through inheritance. It seems that the pleasures, the exchanges, and the risks of play conveniently stood in for a more commonplace female transgression. If I seem to read too much into these comments, compare them with Charles Moore’s blunt pronouncement at the end of the century to dissuade his female readers from play: “Reflect, that the regulations of the family, together with all its rational pleasures and delights, its honours and its heirs, essentially depend on your good conduct.”⁵⁶

*

Naturally, gambling among the lower orders also attracted the criticism of eighteenth-century moralists. Legislation stretching back to the sixteenth century had aimed at preventing the association of working people for the purpose of gambling, restricting where and at what they might play. In the eighteenth century, these concerns were more broadly articulated and as the century progressed came into sharper focus.

In the early part of the eighteenth century, the prospect of gentlemen playing with their inferiors agitated moral writers, for fear of what the elite players might suffer at the hands of

⁵³ *The Guardian*, ed. by John Calhoun Stephens (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1982), no. CXX, Wednesday 29 July 1713, p. 403.

⁵⁴ *Guardian*, no. CXX, p. 402.

⁵⁵ *The Female Spectator*, Book xii, II, 330.

⁵⁶ Moore, II, 370.

petty criminals. Later in the period, the moralists' anxieties seem to expand into considerations of the more far-reaching consequences of popular play. These concerns found expression in a growing critique of the state lottery.

Early in the eighteenth century, there seems to have been a degree of toleration for the extremely remote potential for the enrichment and social ascension of members of the lower orders through the lottery. The *Tatler*, which advertised the lottery of 1710, whimsically warned its readers to be polite to their servants in the time leading up to the draw, "lest the Superiority at that Time should be inverted."⁵⁷ Later in the century, commentators found such reversals of fortune to be no laughing matter. Towards the end of the century, a rash of alarmist tracts and moral tales, produced specifically for the newly literate among the lower orders, detailed the grisly fates awaiting humble lottery adventurers. A typical tract from 1795, *The Wonderful Advantages of Adventuring in the Lottery!!!*, described the progress of a labourer from betting on the lottery to murder and to the gallows, in a matter of pages.

At the same time the participation of the lower orders in the lottery became the subject of parliamentary concern. Lottery tickets usually cost around £10 and so were well beyond the means of working people but the poor could buy shares as small as 1/64th in a ticket.⁵⁸ They might also participate in the lottery by insuring a ticket-number; that is, betting on whether a number would be drawn on a particular day which was possible because the lottery draw took six weeks. A survey in 1800 cited in a Victorian text calculated that on average each servant in the Metropolitan area spent twenty-five shillings a year on lottery insurance.⁵⁹ In 1787, the *Gentleman's Magazine* reported a series of parliamentary debates over a bill proposed to regulate lottery insurance. One member of parliament argued that all insuring ought to be declared illegal, citing his own family as "a striking instance of the dreadful effects of a passion for insuring". He related the story of his female servant, who had been given £200 to pay the family's debts to tradesmen only to lose the entire sum insuring in the lottery after

⁵⁷ *The Tatler*, no. CXXIV, Tuesday 24 Jan. 1710, II: 232.

⁵⁸ Raven estimates that by the end of the eighteenth century the practice of dividing tickets into shares brought the lottery within the discretionary income of a quarter of the populace ("Abolition", p. 375).

⁵⁹ Ashton, *Lotteries*, p. 298. An Act of 1793 (33 Geo. III, c.62) banned all spectators except licensed ticket agents from lottery draws in an attempt to suppress the practice of insuring. The reduction of the drawing time from forty-two days to eight days in 1802 effectively put a stop to such speculations.

which she died broken-hearted and distracted.⁶⁰

Clearly, the prospect of a crime wave among numbers of the lower ranks impoverished by gambling touched a nerve in the perilous years at the close of the century. Paternalistic rhetoric notwithstanding, the threat to public order presented in the spectre of the losing plebeian gambler could not be ignored. In 1776, Thomas Erskine, barrister and later Lord Chancellor, expressed the definitive importance of money to British society:

Property is the cause of all power, and its changing hands by sudden strides is the cause of forcible convulsions, while the silent shifting of its channel is only the current of the blood, and the health of the political body. All sudden transitions, therefore, from poverty to riches, or from riches to poverty [...] as they are unnatural motions, and can never happen but by vicious practices inimical to commerce, are to be guarded against by every prudent legislature [...]⁶¹

Eventually, steps were taken to suppress the lotteries by 1826, ostensibly upon these moral grounds though James Raven has argued that in the nineteenth century the British government found direct taxation more profitable than running costly and inefficient lotteries.⁶²

*

These were some of the stories that eighteenth-century moralists told themselves about gambling. Their accounts changed over the century, moving from concerns about the role of chance in play and in life, to anxieties about the reliable designation of value in exchange and in possession, and, towards the close of the century, to fears about the resources and roles of groups within British society at a time when property, authority and power were themselves under threat.

It seems to me that the moralists frequently invoked gambling in their exhortations as a way of identifying, negotiating, and at times condemning aspects of contemporary life that shared traits with play. To the eighteenth-century beholder gambling was a hydra that threatened faith, trade, government and the home. Gambling may have contributed to or partaken of the destabilization in these categories that occurred across the century but the moralists' arguments seemed to dwell upon its symbolic reflection of contemporary fears and insecurities. Writing about gambling made visible a crisis in the basis of faith and

⁶⁰ *Gentleman's Magazine*, 57.1 (1787): 229 (misnumbered 245).

⁶¹ Erskine, pp. 15-16.

epistemology. Grumbling about play highlighted the critical instability of credit upon which trade, and, eventually, wealth and rank in eighteenth-century British society found itself obliged to depend. At the end of the century under the shadow of revolutionary redistributions of wealth and political power, diatribes against play allowed writers to identify potential culprits and to exhort moral reform.

At the risk of sounding Foucauldian, it may be argued that the contemporary writings which criticized gambling served as a discursive negotiation of these anxieties, and in turn made possible the acceptance and naturalization of new epistemological and economic ideas in society. The denial of providence and the admission of randomness in the luscious lot, though it might threaten the elimination of God from the world altogether, also allowed contemporaries to swallow the absence of a determining divine presence in the minutiae of daily life while still ascribing the macrocosm of the world to divine intention. As probability theory taught, in the law of large numbers the discrete speculation – the gamble – was still perilously unpredictable but in the bigger picture providential order would prevail.

Gambling also provided a language and a set of concepts through which contemporaries could understand unfamiliar commercial practices. At first, play supplied the terms by which credit and the stock-market could be understood and a vocabulary to criticize them. Later, when the perceived similarity between the two practices became detrimental to commercial stability, gambling served to distinguish between acceptable and unacceptable commercial practice. It provided a defining antithesis to legitimate speculation in the stock-market or the lottery.

Most essentially, gambling seemed to threaten signification. Was one rich, or poor? All might change on the turn of a card or an unfavourable report from the colonies. Were your fellow players noblemen or sharpers? A laced coat was no longer conclusive. Was God present or absent from the game – and the world? Gambling could hardly be said to *cause* this uncertainty. In the moral writings about play, however, it acted as a sign for the element of contingency which in the eighteenth century had pervaded faith, commerce, and the social order. When Edmund Burke complained that the revolutionary usurpers in France had turned “a great kingdom into one great play-table”, making “speculation as extensive as life”,⁶³ he

⁶² Raven, “Abolition”, p. 379.

⁶³ Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (London: Penguin, 1986), p. 310.

used gambling in this way, to characterize a new kind of society in which the value attached to property, rank and morality was contingent rather than absolute. Gambling in itself could not bring about the loss of America. But as a visible manifestation of the element of contingency that had pervaded eighteenth-century British society, it could be said to illustrate the economic and social conditions that had made revolution possible. In their repudiation of gambling, the moralists sought to contain and to banish the uncertainties – moral, economic, social and political – that appeared to threaten the social order across the eighteenth century.