

Activities of the People

Sports and Games as Popular Culture in Early Modern England

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Popular Activities as Popular Culture

“Ruff and Honours (*alias* Slamm) and Whist are Games so commonly known in *England* in all parts thereof, that every Child almost of Eight years old hath a competent knowledg in that recreation.”¹ Charles Cotton’s introduction to his chapter on the above card games in his book *The Compleat Gamester*, originally written in 1674, shows the popularity of card games at the end of the seventeenth century. Games and sports of all kinds were common recreations for the people of Tudor and Stuart England. But is this commonality and popularity enough to say that they were a part of the popular culture of early modern England?

Scholarship over the past several decades has cast doubt on whether or not it is correct to refer to a history of “popular culture”. This is in large part because of the implied binary definition of “popular” as something that is simply not official culture, or the culture of the educated or otherwise elite.² The problem with this definition is that there were far more than two different classes in the early modern period. Additionally, no individual class had a monolithic culture that could describe it as a whole.³ Yet, this does not mean that a history of popular culture is impossible. Instead, it merely means that some of the assumptions previously used to write about it are flawed.

For something to be truly popular, and thus a part of popular culture, it has to transcend all levels of wealth and class. The multifaceted and fragmented microcultures that make the binary definition of popular culture so problematic must all be familiar with

¹ Charles Cotton, *The Compleat Gamester* (London: 1674), 114.

² Tim Harris, ed., *Popular Culture in England, c. 1500-1850*, (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1995), 14.

³ Tim Harris, *Popular Culture*, 1-27. Martin Ingram, “Ridings, Rough Music and the 'Reform of Popular Culture' in Early Modern England,” *Past and Present*, no 105 (1984): 79-113. Bob Scribner, “Is a History of Popular Culture Possible?,” *History of European Ideas* 10, no 2 (1989): 175-191.

any popular activity at the very least, if not necessarily participants in them. Instead of being a counter to elite culture, in this definition popular activities are an important part of it. The commonality of recreation, particularly games and sports of all kinds, provide an excellent base to show the existence of a popular culture in early modern England. Cards, archery, and tennis all crossed class lines and were a part of the cultures of those who spent their week in work as well as those with enough money to devote more of their time to leisure.⁴ Their familiarity and popularity are readily apparent in contemporary accounts. By examining these accounts it is possible to show the existence and vibrancy of popular culture in the sports and games of Tudor and Stuart England.

This work will draw primarily upon two different sets of sources. The first is King James I of England's *The Kings Maiesties Declaration to His Subiects, Concerning lawfull Sports to be vsed*, which will hereafter be referred to as the *Declaration of Sports*.⁵ The *Declaration* was issued as a reaction to the growing power of the Puritan movement in England, which was founded in the 1560s with the expressed purpose of ridding the Church of any and all impurities. They considered the only godly activities those that could be found in the scriptures. Dancing about or shooting the bow on the sabbath was immoral as good Christians were supposed to honor God on his day. Games and sports, leaping and dancing, if not sins themselves, could easily lead to sinning.⁶ In

⁴ The use of the word leisure to describe something during the early modern period in England can also be problematic. I have personally covered this topic in great detail in a sister paper to this one titled "The Idea of Leisure: The Search for an Anachronism in Early Modern England" available as a first draft at <http://www.juxentente.com/2007/04/18/the-idea-of-leisure/>. As a short summary, I argue that while leisure may not have been accepted widely in official culture, and there was a struggle over who controlled a person's body, the concept of leisure was alive and well in England under the Tudors and Stuarts, whether the people used our word to describe it or not.

⁵ James I of England, *The Kings Maiesties Declaration to His Subiects, Concerning lawfull Sports to be vsed* (London: 1618), hereafter referenced as *Declaration of Sports*.

⁶ Peter Burke, "The Invention of Leisure in Early Modern Europe," *Past and Present*, no 146 (1995):143-

their quest to create a more godly society the Puritans legislated against and banned the “disorders of the poor” wherever they could. These prohibitions were particularly prevalent in Lancashire in the Northwest.⁷ The *Declaration* is James’ direct attempt to counter these prohibitions, and it makes note of several of the most popular recreations that were being campaigned against by the Puritans.⁸

The second set of primary sources examined in this work are the various guides to popular recreations published during the early modern period in England, namely *The Compleat Gamester* by Charles Cotton, *The School of Recreation: Or, The Gentleman’s Tutor* by Robert Howlett, and *Country Contentments: Or, The Husbandmans Recreations* by Gervase Markham. Books of this type appeared all over Europe during the time period. The majority covered topics other than recreation. Guidebooks were written that described the important aspects of politics, woodworking, and myriad other subjects.⁹ Other printed works on individual games will also be consulted, but only where they intersect with activities printed in these books.

Through this combination of sources it is possible to catch a glimpse of the individual cultures surrounding each type of recreational activity as well as come to some conclusions about their relative popularity across all the classes, and thus their place in popular culture. Despite the fact that the recreational guidebooks were written for an elite

144. Skiles Howard, “Rival Discourses of Dancing in Early Modern England,” *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900* 36, no 1 (1996): 31-56. Clayton Roberts, David Roberts, and Douglas R. Bisson, *A History of England, vol. 1, Prehistory to 1714*, (Upper Saddle River: Prentice Hall, 2002): 294-295.

⁷ Burke, 143-144. Tho Cestren and James Tait, “The Declaration of Sports for Lancashire (1617),” *English Historical Review* 32, no 128 (1917): 561-568. Neil Harris, “Review: Fun and Games,” *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 7, no 1 (1976): 75. Tim Harris, *Popular Culture* 21.

⁸ Cestren. *Declaration of Sports*.

⁹ Burke. Joan-Lluis Marfany, “Debate: The Invention of Leisure in Early Modern Europe,” *Past and Present*, no 156 (1997): 174-191.

audience, specifically those that had enough money to afford them, what they say or avoid saying reveals much about the cross-class commonality and status of the recreations they are referencing.

Sports, Games, and the Uncommon Nature of the Hunt

“Sports” and “games” can be problematic terms. For this study sports and games are defined as competitive activities that have either a clearly established or heavily implied set of rules. This definition does raise some issues with the sources chosen. Regardless of the title, the majority of the “sports” listed in the *Declaration of Sports* were recreations such as dancing, Whitsun-ales, and Morris-dances, which obviously do not fit the definition of sport above. The controversies over dancing were well established, Puritan and otherwise, and the debate over whether it was a moral activity was still active during this period.¹⁰ Morris-dancing was a specific type of dance, and was also known as Morisco dancing, an import from Spain. Morris dances factored heavily into the more festival-like Whitsun-ales and May games, both of which involved dancing and revelry in general. The Whitsun-ales featured a man and a woman who were chosen to be Lord and Lady of the ale, and around them a whole faux-court would form.¹¹ Important and popular as they were, as this paper is focused on sports and games as part of popular culture, these activities will not be discussed in detail.

Of course, the guidebooks also contain some recreations that were quite obviously not sports. For instance, the *School of Recreation* devotes a massive forty-five pages to a

¹⁰ Howard, 31-56.

¹¹ Thomas Hall, *Funebria Florae, the Downfall of May-Games* (London: 1660). G. A. Rowell, “Notes on Some Old – Fashioned English Customs: The Mummers; The Morris-Dancers; Whitsun-Ales; Lamb-Ales,” *Folk-Lore Journal* 4, no 2 (1886): 97-109.

discussion of “Ringing.” This was a type of musical performance involving the ringing of a multitude of heavy bells in time with the music.¹² Robert Howlett, the author, states that this activity had become popular “of late” because of the harmony it afforded the ear, the mathematics within that delighted the mind, and the health the violence of its exercise brought to the body.¹³

Limiting the games and recreations discussed to just those listed in the guidebooks and the *Declaration* also creates at least one glaringly obvious gap: nowhere is football mentioned. The history of football is well covered in the historiography of recreations. It is possible that the game goes as far back than even the thirteenth century.¹⁴ At the very least it was common and popular by the end of the Middle Ages.¹⁵ It was also a common activity at the wake festivals, along with tennis and bowling.¹⁶ And yet it is entirely absent from the guides, even the *Compleat Gamester*, the one most focused on common activities. As such, it will not be discussed in this paper, but this does not mean it was not important.

A final problem with using recreational guidebooks as the foundation for a search for popular culture is that they contain a large number of sports that were extremely popular but limited to the wealthier classes, the primary audience of the guides. For

¹² Robert Howlett, *The School of Recreation: Or, The Gentleman's Tutor* (London: 1684): 138-183.

¹³ Howlett, 138. J.S., *Profit and Pleasure United, or, the husbandman's magazene* (London: 1684). Gervase Markham, *The Compleat Husbandman and Gentleman's Recreation or, the Whole art of Husbandry* (London: 1695).

¹⁴ F. P. Magoun Jr., “Football in Medieval England and in Middle English Literature,” *American Historical Review* 35, no 1 (1929): 34-35.

¹⁵ Nicholas Orme, “The Culture of Children in Medieval England,” *Past and Present*, no 148 (1995): 62-65.

¹⁶ Richard Suggett, “Festivals and Social Structure in Early Modern Wales,” *Past and Present*, no 152 (1996): 90.

example, hunting was of such primary importance that it is the first recreation discussed in both the *Country Contentments* and the *School of Recreation*. The amount of space devoted to hunting is also remarkable, thirty-five pages in the former and twenty-six in the latter, more than almost any other activity.¹⁷ Gervase Markham describes hunting as “a curious search or conquest of one Beast over another,” an inclusive enough definition.¹⁸ That commoners killed deer and other animals during this time is not debated; in fact poaching was common. Restrictions on hunting had existed since the medieval period and became increasingly draconian after the Game Law of 1604.¹⁹ Here, however, a distinction can be made between hunting as a sport or game and hunting for practical purposes. There is no doubt that the common people hunted; there is also no doubt that they could not have participated in the ritualized sport of hunting as described by the manuals of sixteenth and seventeenth century England. The majority of the chapter that the *Country Contentments* devotes to the subject is a discussion of the best way to breed, raise, train, and pick your hounds, including the best way to setup and keep your kennel healthy.²⁰ Howlett treats the sport almost identically in the *School of Recreation*.²¹ Such considerations required a level of income obviously outside of the reach of the lower classes.

¹⁷ Gervase Markham, *Country Contentments: Or, The Husbandmans Recreations*, 4th Edition (London: 1631). Howlett.

¹⁸ Markham, *Country Contentments*, 4.

¹⁹ Chester Kirby and Ethyn Kirby, “The Stuart Game Preogative,” *English Historical Review* 46, no 182 (1931): 239-254. Elizabeth Lane Furdell, “Review: Hunters and Poachers,” *Sixteenth Century Journal* 25, no 3 (1994): 676-677. William Rednour, “Review: Hunters and Poachers,” *Renaissance Quarterly* 49, no 1 (1996): 145-146. Buchanan Sharp, “Review: Hunters and Poachers,” *American Historical Review* 100, no 4 (1995): 1242-1243. J.A. Sharpe, “Review: Hunters and Poachers,” *English Historical Review* 111, no 442 (1996): 705-706.

²⁰ Markham, *Country Contentments*, 1-35.

²¹ Howlett, 1-26.

Fishing as an activity occupied a position similar to hunting, in that there was no doubt that the poorer classes pulled fish out of rivers and lakes to eat, to the point where the prohibitions against such were increased throughout the early modern period.²² There was also the fact that fishing as a commercial venture was big business throughout the period, especially from the Elizabethan era forward.²³ As with hunting, however, these activities were very different from fishing as an organized sport, which is more properly referred to as angling. This is the term most commonly used by the recreational guidebooks, where, like hunting, massive amounts of page space is devoted to their discussion: forty-three pages in the *Country Contentments* and a similar number in the *School of Recreation*, running down the best types of bait, season, and water source for a wide variety of fish.²⁴ Angling was restricted to the aristocracy by law, by economics, and by the amount of time required. As with hunting, its position in the guidebooks and historiography place it as paramount sport among the aristocracy; it even reached the point where angling was used in erotic images.²⁵

Despite being priced out of the sporting aspects of these activities, the lower classes did affect their practice, as evidenced by the laws restricting their participation. But the cultures of hunting, poaching, fishing, and angling differed too much between the wealthy and the commons to be considered a part of a unified popular culture. This does not mean that recreations that were extremely popular amongst the upper classes were not

²² Furdell, 676. Arthur MacGregor, "Animals and the Early Stuarts: Hunting and Hawking at the Court of James I and Charles I," *Archives of Natural History* [Great Britain] 16, no 3 (1989): 305-318.

²³ Rosemary C. L. Sgroi, "Piscatorial Politics Revisited: The Language of Economic Debate and the Evolution of Fishing Policy in Elizabethan England," *Albion* 35, no 1 (2003): 1-24.

²⁴ Howlett, 86-120. Markham, *Country Contentments*, 59-102.

²⁵ Anne Elizabeth McIlhaney, "Renaissance Acts and Images of Angling: An Anatomy of the British Piscatory, 1496-1653," PhD diss., University of Virginia, 1998.

also practiced, identically, amongst the lower classes. Some flourished as a part of popular culture despite similar laws restricting their practice.

Bowling

In the *Declaration of Sports* bowling is singled out, along with bear and bull-baiting, as an activity that will remain prohibited. Unlike the baiting sports which were only restricted on Sundays, however, bowling was at all times prohibited “in the meaner sort of people.”²⁶ This restriction dated back to Henry VIII, who made the sport unlawful for common people at all times in 1511. The reason for the ban was the popularity of bowling, which was believed to be interfering with the practice of archery. The commonality of the game amongst the lower classes does not mean that it was not popular with the elites. Henry was an avid enough bowler himself that he built a bowling alley into Hampton Court.²⁷ There is also no indication that the laws against bowling at all affected its popularity.

Providing further support for the game being more common than it legally should have been, even the Secretary of State forgot that the game was banned amongst the public; in the first draft of the *Declaration* from 1617, at the time intended just for Lancashire, bowling was mentioned as being only banned on Sunday along with the baiting sports. By the time the *Declaration of Sports* was issued Henry VIII had been

²⁶ *Declaration of Sports*.

²⁷ Cestren, 564. Simon Thurley, “Henry VIII and the Building of Hampton Court: A Reconstruction of the Tudor Palace,” *Architectural History* 31 (1988): 29.

dead for almost a century. The ban on bowling among the lower orders was hardly new, yet the prohibition had to be reinforced in the *Declaration*.²⁸

More evidence for the popularity of the sport among the common classes is in the *Country Contentments*, first published in 1615 by Gervase Markham. The subtitle of the book is, in part, the *Husbandman's Recreations*, although this certainly does not refer to any common farmer, considering that the majority of the book is filled with the topics of hunting, hawking, and horse racing down to the finest detail. Bowling, while included since the first edition, is mentioned only in a three page chapter titled “Of Particular Recreations” and is grouped with archery and tennis, two other extremely popular sports of common origin that will be discussed shortly.²⁹

After devoting (depending on the edition) thirty-five pages to the intricacies of hunting and nineteen to hawking, including sections defining just what the above sports are, Markham considers the rules of bowling well enough understood that he limits himself to only two paragraphs. The second of these gives advice on how to gain advantage at the sport by picking your ground and using the correct bowle for it. Flat bowles were for close alleys, round-biased bowles for open ground, and round ball-like bowles for greens. The first paragraph merely recommends the game, in careful terms, as considered extremely wholesome even by physicians themselves, “howsoever unlawful in the abuse thereof.”³⁰

The character of bowling did not change as the end of the seventeenth century approached. In the *Compleat Gamester*, a book focused less on hunting than on games of

²⁸ Cestren, 564.

²⁹ Markham, *Country Contentments*, 57-58.

³⁰ Markham, *Country Contentments*, 57-58.

cards and dice, Charles Cotton also describes bowling in careful terms, stating that it is healthy for the body “if moderately used” but characterizes most of those who play the game as the “swarms of rooks which so pester Bowling-Greens.”³¹ Despite devoting more space to the sport than *Country Contentments*, the *Gamester* still implies that the reader already knows how to bowl. The author states that he cannot through writing explain how to better bowl, as “practice must be your best tutor.”³²

Robert Howlett wrote the *School of Recreation* in 1684, and as in *Country Contentments* the majority of the book is taken up discussing the particulars of types of hunting, hawking, and fishing. Bowling gets a larger mention here, warranting its own chapter, albeit of only four pages. Again the rules for the game are not explored in any detail; it is assumed that the reader is already familiar with them. Howlett first discusses what he believes to be history of the sport, beginning with the Lydians; I will not attempt to ascertain the veracity of his claims in this area. He then describes the character of the game, stating that while pious, learned, and sober persons often make up a company on a bowling green, the author must confess to playing in bowling alleys, “which too usually are pestered with Damming-Rooks, Cunning Betters, Crafty Matchers, and base Booty-Players.”³³ This is identical to the description Charles Cotton gives for the majority of the people who play the game. Beyond this Howlett wishes to not “detain you any longer in characterizing this excellent sport: (Excellent I mean if rightly used).”³⁴

³¹ Cotton, 47.

³² Cotton, 48.

³³ Howlett, 130.

³⁴ Howlett, 131.

There is no doubt that *The School of Recreation* is intended for gentlemen to read; the evidence is in the title. But it, too, lends credence to the idea of bowling being at the very least well-known amongst the lower classes of the period. While it is a game that was doubtless commonly played by the aristocracy and other elites, there is sufficient evidence to show that it was also popular with the less wealthy sort. This cross-class popularity and familiarity means that it can be easily classified as part of popular culture.

Archery

Depictions of archery sharply contrast those of bowling. In addition to being bracing exercise it was considered socially functional and its practice was encouraged; only the Puritans considered it idleness.³⁵ The general perception in the early modern period was that archery was a sport in decline, which had serious ramifications for England in general. The defense of the kingdom was debated and reformed constantly among both the Tudors and the early Stuarts, particularly under Charles I's "Perfect Militia" reforms.³⁶ Considered an integral contribution to national defense since the medieval period, girls and boys alike began training in the use of the bow as early as age five across all the social ranks.³⁷ The decline in participation in archery turned into legislation promoting and requiring the teaching of the sport by the early sixteenth century. The law of Henry VIII's that prohibited bowling in 1511 was passed in an effort

³⁵ Neil Harris, "Review: Fun and Games," *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 7, no 1 (1976): 75.

³⁶ Peter Clark, Alan G. Smith, and Nicholas Tyacke, eds, *The English Commonwealth, 1547-1663: Essays in Politics and Society* (New York: Barnes & Noble, 1979), 93-110. Henrik Langeluddecke, "The Chiefest Strength and Glory of this Kingdom: Arming and Training the 'Perfect Militia' in the 1630s," *English Historical Review* 479, no 118: 1264-1303.

³⁷ Orme, 62-63.

to encourage archery amongst the populace.³⁸ A royal statute followed in 1512 that ordered that young boys were to learn archery. In theory, any man with a male child between seven and seventeen was required by law to provide a bow and two arrows along with training in their use.³⁹

The *Declaration of Sports* also mentions the importance of leisure activities for the military preparedness of the nation, referring to the Puritan prohibitions that blocked physical activity as barring “the common and meaner sort of people from using such exercises as may make their bodies more able for war.”⁴⁰ Since it is unlikely that dancing was considered a necessary activity for making the body more prepared for the military, this comment can be taken to refer to archery, and again expresses the fear that this sport was in decline.

The focus on the martial value of archery as late as 1618 can be a little puzzling. Tracts were published debating the relative merits of the bow versus muskets by the end of the sixteenth century. A “gentleman, souldier, and captaine” named Humphrey Barwick wrote *A Breefe Discourse Concerning the Force and effect of all manuall weapons of fire, and the disability of the Long Bowe or Archery, in respect of others of greater force now in use* in 1594; his opinion on the matter is clear from the end of his lengthy title.⁴¹ An author with the initials R.S. wrote a *Briefe Treatise to proove the*

³⁸ Cestren, 564.

³⁹ Orme, 63.

⁴⁰ *Declaration of Sports*.

⁴¹ Humphrey Barwick, *A Breefe Discourse Concerning the force and effect of all manuall weapons of fire, and the disability of the Long-Bowe or Archery, in respect of others of greater force now in vse* (London: 1592).

necessitie and excellence of the use of Archerie two years later.⁴² It is clear from the publication of this and other treatises advocating its use that despite the appearance of superior technology, people were not yet ready to abandon archery as a defensive art in addition to whatever sporting character it might have had.

The guidebooks to the popular recreations also cast archery as a sport that is more required than entertaining. *Country Contentments*, as previously stated, lumps archery with bowling and tennis in a three page chapter on common recreations. Shooting the long bow is stated as “both healthful for the Body, and necessary for the Common wealth” by providing the shooter with the strength to “preserve and defend his Countrey.” The author then proceeds to describe the technique for using the bow. Interestingly it is implied that the physical exercise is not necessarily the “strength” that is imparted by the bow, as he offers up the crossbow as a valid replacement for those physically unable to use the long bow, stating that it will bring the same pleasure.⁴³ This minor contradiction can be taken two ways: either the primary purpose of archery is not the fun of recreation it imparts but rather the martial skill, or, that the pleasure of archery is not in the exercise, but in the display of skill at hitting the target.

By the end of the early modern period the idea of archery as requisite to the well being of the kingdom was generally recognized as part of the past, taking with it a large part of the sport’s popularity. The opening of the *Compleat Gamester’s* chapter on the subject refers to archery as “a recreation...still in some parts of the world very useful in military affairs, but now quite laid aside by English men for fighting, there being found...more speedy ways to kill and destroy each other.” It is then referred to primarily

⁴² R. S., *A Briefe Treatise To Prooue the Necessitie and Excellence of the vse of Archerie* (London: 1596).

⁴³ Markham, *Country Contentments*, 56-57.

as a pastime, one that is steeped in ancient custom and contests, and one that is still quite healthful for the body.⁴⁴

The books of the 1670s and 1680s all speak of archery as a sport that was no longer widely practiced. Charles Cotton's discourse on the sport in 1674 is cut short compared to the rest of the book because he saw it as so little practiced.⁴⁵ Two years later Robert Shottarel published an epic poem that reads like a eulogy, describing the long bow as the hero of the previous age of England.⁴⁶ Howlett seems to take the archery's loss of popularity harder than most in his *School of Recreation* in 1684; he also disagrees that the era of the bow being used for national defense is past. In his words,

The use of the Bow is of so great Antiquity, and of so important a Consequence for a defensive and offensive Armes, that I could not but a little consider, how needful the true knowledge of its Use was esteemed of Old, and how *little it is accounted* now.⁴⁷

Archery's nature as a sport was very different from that of bowling. In fact, they were polar opposites. While both were common amongst all classes, we can see through contemporary accounts that bowling is a game that is considered in many ways too popular, while archery can never be popular enough and must be legally protected. The value of archery as a pastime, then, was far less than one could assume by its commonality of practice. When all of the mandates for practice and the talk of shooting skill being required for national defense start to fade away, so does the popularity of the sport. However, this slow diminishing of popularity does not lessen its value as a shared experience, or as a part of popular culture, nor does the difference in its nature when

⁴⁴ Cotton, 203.

⁴⁵ Cotton, 203-204.

⁴⁶ Robert Shottarel, *The Bow-Mans Glory* (London: 1682).

⁴⁷ Howlett, 121.

compared with bowling. Both show that sports could transcend class lines better than any other activity, although there certainly were others.

Cards and Dice; Tables and Balls

The majority of the books on recreations leave cards suspiciously absent. Yet games involving playing cards were so popular that the cards were used for propaganda purposes by competing political movements. Political and inflammatory scenes were printed onto cards, as well as country maps and lessons on how to spell, write, and cipher. These special packs were common enough to be advertised widely in newspapers; prices ranged from a shilling to four pence for the specially printed editions. The expense of the cards was offset by the communal use of the decks in alehouses and other establishments.⁴⁸ As well, the advertisements for the card packs stated that they had suits and numbers so that they could be played with as well as common cards; common cards would likely have been even cheaper than the prices above. The success of these propaganda cards could be so great as to outstrip supply. Francis Barlow's Popish Plot pack was popular enough that the copper plates used to print it had to be re-cut.⁴⁹

Further attesting to the popularity of playing cards in the culture is the number of tracts written using a card game as a metaphor in a political tract or a poem.⁵⁰ A like number of pamphlets were published decrying games of cards for reasons of religion,

⁴⁸ Tim Harris, *London Crowds in the Reign of Charles II: Propaganda and politics from the Restoration until the exclusion crisis* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987): 98-108. J.R.S. Whiting, "A Handful of History: Playing Cards in Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries," *History Today* 31 (1981): 40-43.

⁴⁹ Whiting, 40.

⁵⁰ Edmund Gayton, *Chartae scriptae: or A new game at cards, call'd Play by the booke* (Oxford: 1645). L.P., *Vvin at first, lost at last; or, A new game at cards* (London: 1660). George Wither, *The knave of clubs* (London: 1643).

mostly for their association with gambling and games of chance; some of these also took the form of poems and songs.⁵¹

The sheer number of card games listed in the recreation guides also shows the popularity of cards. There are twenty chapters dedicated to them in the *Compleat Gamester*, containing the games of: Picket, Gleek, L'Ombre, Cribbage, All-Fours, English Ruff and Honors, Whist, French-Ruff, Five-Cards, Costly-Colours, Bone-Ace, Putt, Wit and Reason, Memory, Plain-dealing, Queen Nazareen, Lanterloo, Penneech, Post and Pair, Bankafalet, and Beast.⁵² Some of these are immediately familiar even today; Memory is obvious, as are Whist and “Cribbage”.

The descriptions of some of the individual games reveal a lot about their prevalence. Strategies for betting and gambling in general abound, of course.⁵³ Whist and English Ruff are described as so common in the *Compleat Gamester* that every child in the whole of the realm is assumed to have a “competent knowledg in that recreation,” making the author “unwilling to speak anything more of them than this, that there may be a great deal of art used in Dealing.”⁵⁴ This is followed by an involved discussion in how to cheat at the game.⁵⁵ Sometimes the discussions of gambling and popularity are

⁵¹ James Balmford, *A short and plaine dialog concerning the vnlawfulnes of playing at cards or tables* (London: 1593). Richard Crimsal, *John Hadlands advice: or a warning for all young men that have meanes advising them to forsake lewd company cards, dice, and queanes* (London: 1635).

⁵² Cotton, contents.

⁵³ Cotton, 81-153.

⁵⁴ Cotton, 114.

⁵⁵ Cotton, 114-120.

combined; Five-Cards, Post and Pair, and All-Fours are written as games much played for considerable sums of money.⁵⁶

Dicing was often mixed in with cards in both condemnations and discussions because they were played in the same places, and because they had the same the negative associations with gambling.⁵⁷ Dice are also associated with the common board games of the time, referred to as table games or merely games of “tables,” most of which used dice, were bet on, and protested along with other games of chance.⁵⁸ Board games were well established in the culture of elites and others by the end of the Middle Ages, including familiar games such as chess, backgammon, and nine men’s morris.⁵⁹

Chess was well enough known that, much like playing cards, aspects of it were used in metaphorical and poetical statements on completely unrelated issues, such as the state of the kingdom.⁶⁰ A multitude of guides were written specifically for the game of chess, detailing different tactics and gambits for victory.⁶¹ Charles Cotton refers to the game as “more difficult to be understood than any other game whatever,” and believes

⁵⁶ Cotton, 111, 123.

⁵⁷ The issue of gambling is too large to tackle in a paper of this length, however, it was perceived as a huge problem in Stuart England. I think it is safe to skirt around the issue of gambling in this case since the reasons that recreations are popular are less important than the fact that they were; everything covered in this paper was bet on at some point. For more on how big a problem gambling, and gambling debts, were during Stuart England see: James E. Evans, "A Sceane of Uttmost Vanity': The Spectacle of Gambling in Late Stuart Culture," *Studies in Eighteenth Century Culture*, no 31 (2002), 1-20. As this work expands into a larger piece on the whole of leisure, popular culture, and recreation during the period gambling will be treated in further detail.

⁵⁸ Balmford, Crimsal.

⁵⁹ Orme, 58-60.

⁶⁰ William Cartwright, *The game at chesse* (London: 1643). Damiano da Odenara, *Ludus scacchiae: = cheese-play A game, both pleasant, wittie, and politicke*, Translated by G.B. (London: 1597). Paul Yachnin, “A Game at Chess and Chess Allegory,” *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900* 22, no 2 (1982): 317-330.

⁶¹ Gioachino Greco, *The Royall game of Chesse-play*, Translated by Francis Beale (London: 1656). Arthur Saul, *The famous game of Chesse-play* (London: 1673).

that this, combined with the tedious length of play, is the reason for the game's unpopularity; he only writes of it because of the singularly ingenious manner of the game.⁶² The unpopularity of chess is surprising at first. Yet, despite being described as a famous, princely and royal game, chess is completely absent from the guides to the noble recreations such as the *Country Contentments* and the *School of Recreation*.⁶³ Although it was very commonly known, even amongst the poor, chess was not that commonly played. It was a royal game that not even the king liked to play.⁶⁴

The more popular table games identified by the *Compleat Gamester*, the only guide to deal in depth with them, are Irish, Back-Gammon, Tick-Tack, Dubblets, Sice-Ace, and Ketch-Dolt. Backgammon is of course familiar, but aspects of all of the above would be immediately recognizable to anyone familiar with board games four hundred years later. All involved dice, and the majority used representative tokens that even in the 1600s were referred to colloquially as "men." The random aspect was very important to these early board games; they were not yet far removed from pure dice games.⁶⁵ Interestingly some scholars have written about the game of "tables" as synonymous with backgammon, when contemporary sources show that this is clearly not correct.⁶⁶

Pure dicing games are referred to in the *Compleat Gamester* as "Games without the Tables." It mentions only three: Inn and Inn, Passage, and Hazzard. Gambling and risk were completely bound together in these games; betting is required in the rules. Even

⁶² Cotton, 51.

⁶³ Cotton, 51. Greco. Howlett. Markham, *Country Contentments*. Saul.

⁶⁴ Yachnin, 317.

⁶⁵ Cotton, 154-163.

⁶⁶ Delmar E. Solem, "Some Elizabethan Game Scenes," *Educational Theatre Journal* 6, no 1 (1954): 16.

in a guide describing how to play them, in a sense advocating their play, these dice games are written of as so addictive as to be destructive. Of hazzard Charles Cotton writes:

“Certainly *Hazzard* is the most bewitching Game that is plaid on the Dice...happy is he that having been much inclined to this-spending-money-wasting Game, hath...resolved for the future never to be concerned with it.”⁶⁷

Cards and dice are always associated with the common people; their popularity comes as no surprise. Tennis, on the other hand, is not often grouped with common sports. Yet its origins are with the peasantry. First emerging as a named game in the fifteenth century, tennis was originally played against a wall.⁶⁸ Most often this wall was part of the players’ church, as tennis was a common game at the periodic “wake” festivals.⁶⁹ In a roundabout way, then, tennis’ legality was assured in the *Declaration of Sports*, as the wake festivals and the activities associated with them are expressly allowed.⁷⁰

The descriptions of tennis in the recreational guides are highly reminiscent of those for bowling. In addition to being a game of the commons, tennis was also extremely popular among the nobility; Henry VIII had courts to go with his bowling green at Hampton Court.⁷¹ Tennis, and its sister sport baloone, are mentioned in only a paragraph in the *Country Contentments*, grouped in the same chapter of “particular

⁶⁷ Cotton, 172-173. This again relates back to the dangers of gambling, mentioned previously in footnote 57.

⁶⁸ Orme, 62.

⁶⁹ Suggett, 80, 90.

⁷⁰ *Declaration of Sports*.

⁷¹ Thurley, 9.

recreations” of the commons as bowling and archery.⁷² In contrast, Robert Howlett goes far out of his way to characterize the game as royal and proper. The nobility and gentility of the game are referenced more than ten times in just the opening two paragraphs of his chapter on the subject. In fact, according to Howlett, “it is reckoned one of the most absolute Qualifications of a well-bred Gentleman” to be completely familiar with the game.⁷³ But it was also one of the qualifications of a commoner at a church festival, again showing that games and sports of all kinds crossed all the class barriers of early modern England, creating a shared popular culture.

Conclusion

No social or economic subdivision of people in early modern England, or any time period, contains a single monolithic culture unique to it. A definition that implies otherwise is an obvious oversimplification, as well as counter to what popular culture should mean. For anything to be a true part of popular culture it must cross these numerous divides and be a familiar part of life for, if not all, at least the majority.

Recreations and leisure, exemplified by sports and games, accomplished this. While there were activities that were restricted to the majority of the population either by law or income, this does not mean that they were not a part of popular culture. Hunting and angling in the noble tradition are likely bad examples of this given how different their practice was in the poorer elements of society as compared to the more organized sporting aspects of their practice by the wealthier classes, yet the commons were familiar with them, and did enjoy them in some fashion. But there were better examples.

⁷² Markham, *Country Contentments*, 58.

⁷³ Howlett, 133-135.

Bowling was so popular among the commons that even multiple laws against it did nothing to curb its popularity. Although considered a recreation of the elites, complete with royal patronage, the descriptions of the game were filled with condemnations of the nature of the average player. This makes it a perfect example of gaming as popular culture, an activity that was popular amongst a multitude of social and economic classes. Archery and tennis were likewise equally likely to be enjoyed in a reserved section of a palace as in a churchyard. Henry VIII built tennis courts into his palace at Hampton Court, but the sport he built them to play originated with peasants smacking a leather ball against the wall of a church with their bare hands. No amount of writing praising the royal or noble nature of the game could take away its common origins. This connection between classes, and cultures, proves not only that gaming was a part of popular culture in early modern England, but also that a history of popular culture is still possible.

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