

**The Idea of Leisure:
The Search for an Anachronism in Early Modern England**

Graeme Kristofer Hefner

Georgia State University

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Anachronisms and Popular Culture

In 1618 King James I of England issued the *Declaration of Sports* assuring the people of England that no lawful recreation would be barred from them. The Puritans had been campaigning against sports on Sundays, believing it to be a godless behavior. The *Declaration* asks: “For when shall the common people have leave to exercise, if not upon the Sundays and Holy-days, seeing they must apply their labour and win their living in all working-days?”¹ The choice of the word exercise is telling, and it is repeated often in the document. The King is not just protecting the rights of his people to enjoy themselves, as is evidenced further by a quote from later in the *Declaration*: “barreth the common and meaner sort of people from using such exercises as may make their bodies more able for war, when His Majesty or his successors shall have occasion to use them.”²

By comparison the introduction to the *Compleat Gamester* by Charles Cotton, a guide to various sports and games, has this to say:

It is not (I'll assure you) any private interest of my own that caus'd me to adventure on this subject, but the delight and benefit of every individual person; Delight to such as who will pass away their spare minutes in harmless recreation if not abus'd; and Profit to all...some seeking to satisfie the Mind, some the Body, and others both in a joint motion.³

This is a very different picture of the purpose and nature of recreation than that given by the *Declaration of Sports*. Sports and games today are considered leisure activities. They are entertaining diversions that serve no greater purpose in

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

2 *Declaration of Sports*.

3 Charles Cotton, *The Compleat Gamester* (London: 1674), Introduction.

society except personal enjoyment. Yet just because they are understood as such today does not mean that they have always been viewed in terms of leisure. To deal with the history of leisure in early modern England, it must first be established if leisure even *existed* at the time in the popular culture of England.

The problem is what Michel Foucault called a conceptual break, a rupture between two time periods. According to this theory, people living in England in the sixteenth and seventeenth century had no concept of leisure because the idea had not been invented yet. Activities that we today would recognize as leisure pursuits were present, and even prevalent, during the early modern period in England, but they were not categorized as such because leisure did not exist in their mental framework. The cognitive ground work was not there. In this view writing about a history of leisure is thus anachronistic, a flawed projection of modern ideals and thoughts onto the actions of those who had no concept of them.⁴

This is not the same as looking for the word leisure. The word itself was used in England at the time, albeit not as it is used today. The early modern English definition of leisure was “opportunity” or “occasion.”⁵ The hunt for leisure is the search for the concept, not for the term.

There is also an idea within the conceptual break theory that, despite not existing as a concept, what we would recognize as leisure activities became less marginal throughout the early modern period in Europe. Part of the evidence for this

4 Forrest E. Baird and Walter Kaufmann, *Twentieth-Century Philosophy* (Upper Saddle River: Prentice Hall, 2003): 326-342. Catherine Belsey, *Poststructuralism: A Very Short Introduction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002). Peter Burke, “The Invention of Leisure in Early Modern Europe,” *Past and Present*, no 146 (1995): 136-140. Paul Rabinow and Nikolas Rose, *The Essential Foucault* (New York: The New Press, 2003).

5 Burke, 139.

is the proliferation of guidebooks describing recreations. These were a kind of “how-to-do-it” book that laid out the rules and traditions of a variety of activities that the reader would be expected to be familiar with.⁶

Of course this is not the only theory about leisure during the time period. Other historians feel that the lack of the modern definition and concept of leisure in the vernacular of the time does not mean that leisure did not exist. The actions that we consider today to be leisurely did exist and were performed. This alone is enough to prove the existence of leisure for some, who feel that leisure is an integral and ancient part of human nature, or at least human society. Key to this concept of leisure's history is the idea that leisure is *anything* that is not work.⁷

To discover whether leisure existed in early modern England, then, first it must be established what definition of leisure we are looking for. An extremely broad, polarized understanding of the term as *not-work* opposed to *work* is far too simple. Sleeping, for example, is *not-work*, but it is certainly not (necessarily) *leisure*. A better version of the term exists in the dictionary, defined as “freedom from demands of work or duty.”⁸ A leisure activity is also something done primarily for enjoyment, for the sheer pleasure of the activity itself. Boredom and leisure cannot go hand in hand.

The inclusion of *freedom from duty* in the definition makes finding leisure in early modern England much more complex. This is especially true when looking outside the aristocratic class, many of whom could be considered to have spent their

6 Burke, 144-145.

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

8 “Leisure,” <http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/leisure>.

whole life in a state of perpetual *not-work*.⁹ Popular culture cuts across class lines and involves those who work as well as those who do not have to, making it a better place to uncover the concept.

Naturally the terms “popular culture” and “aristocracy” introduce problems of their own. The bipolar model of elite culture as separate and distinct from common culture has been repeatedly challenged in recent years, successfully. Defining elite and popular are nearly as difficult as defining leisure.¹⁰ For the purposes of this study these terms must be taken out of contention. Popular culture in this paper is defined as where elite culture, taken to be the culture of those who are wealthy enough to not have to work for a living, regardless of class, met the culture of those of lesser economic means. One of these cultural connections was recreational gaming, something that is today considered a leisure activity, and is thus a natural area to search for an early modern concept of leisure.

Yet “sports” and “gaming” can also be problematic terms. For this study sports and games are *competitive* activities that have either a clearly defined or heavily implied set of rules. Dancing, for example, while a popular recreation of the time, is obviously not included in this definition, although it was still mentioned in the *Declaration of Sports*.

Examples of sports as popular culture abound. Tennis is a medieval game with humble origins; it was originally played using a ball, hands, and a wall, usually

⁹ Marfany, 177.

¹⁰ 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.

the wall of the players' church.¹¹ It was also a common activity at church events, particularly at the feasts of the dedication of the church, or wake, festivals.¹² Despite its common origins the sport was also extremely popular among the nobility. Henry VIII built several tennis courts into his palace at Hampton Court.¹³ Some authors considered full knowledge of the game a prerequisite for any proper gentleman and went out of their way to characterize this sport of the peasantry as a “noble” recreation. Robert Howlett's *The School of Recreation: Or, The Gentleman's Tutor*, published in 1684, states that:

This sport is indeed is of so universal an Acceptance, that **Majesty** it self is pleased to design it its Recommendation...and **Princes** and **Lords** admire it too for the most proper Recreation, to suit with...**true Nobility**...it makes the languid and slothful *brisk* and *frightful*; and rejects *Effeminacy* and *Delicacy*, as contemptible and unworthy so **Royal** and **Noble** a Recreation...it is reckoned one of the most absolute Qualifications of a well-bred **Gentleman**, throughly to understand this famous Game.¹⁴

In total the nobility and gentility of tennis are mentioned over ten times in just the two opening paragraphs of Howlett's chapter on the subject.¹⁵

Another example of this meeting of common and elite cultures in gaming can be seen with bowling. Alleys and greens for bowles were another feature of Hampton Court.¹⁶ However, Henry VIII also issued a proclamation banning the game for all people of common status because he feared that it was taking time away from the

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

12 Richard Suggett, “Festivals and Social Structure in Early Modern Wales,” *Past and Present*, no 152 (1996): 80, 90.

13 Simon Thurley, “Henry VIII and the Building of Hampton Court: A Reconstruction of the Tudor Palace,” *Architectural History* 31 (1988): 9.

14 Robert Howlett, *The School of Recreation: Or, The Gentleman's Tutor* (London: 1684): 133-134. Italics by Howlett, bold added by this author.

15 Howlett, 133-135.

16 Thurley, 29.

practice of archery. This law was specifically renewed by the *Declaration of Sports*.¹⁷ Characterizations of bowling in accounts of the time praise its nobility while decrying the natures of the majority of its participants and their “abuse” of the game.¹⁸ These players are described in the *School of Recreation* as “Damming-Rooks, Cunning Betters, Crafty Matchers, and base Booty-Players.”¹⁹ Obviously the prohibitions did not stop the “meaner sort” from playing.²⁰

By examining the descriptions of the sports and games illuminated in both the *Declaration of Sports* and the guidebooks to the popular recreations published in the seventeenth century, such as the *Compleat Gamester* by Charles Cotton and the *Country Contentments* by Gervase Markham, it is possible to get a clear picture of the nature of gaming, and therefor also of leisure, in the popular culture of early modern England. Freedom from demands of work is prevalent in all of these sources. The pleasure and enjoyment derived from individual recreations is also present, if less commonly mentioned than one would expect. Freedom from the demands of duty is much harder to ferret out. In fact, it is nearly entirely absent.

Accepted sports and games were, naturally, not considered work, and were also entertaining on their own merits; however, they also carried societal expectations, a duty to either God or country. Archery, to take the most extreme example, was recreational, but it was also heavy with social obligations to the militia.

17 Tho Cestren and James Tait, “The Declaration of Sports for Lancashire (1617),” *English Historical Review* 32, no 128 (1917): 564. *Declaration of Sports*.

18 Cotton, 47-48. Gervase Markham, *Country Contentments: Or, The Husbandmans Recreations*, 4th Edition (London: 1631): 57-58. Howlett, 130-131.

19 Howlett, 130.

20 As this paper is part of a larger work, major aspects of games and sports as popular culture are treated here only in summary, but are covered in detail in the companion essay “Activities of the People: Sports and Games of the Populace in Early Modern England,” currently available as a first draft at <http://www.juxentente.com/2007/03/28/activities-of-the-people/>.

Those activities that lacked this social duty were politically and, at least partially, societally unacceptable. Bowling, card, board, and dice games all come closest to what would be considered leisure, and they are frowned upon as idleness and wasted time by both religiously and politically, to the point of being legislated against.

The Declaration of Sports, Social Duties, and Idleness

The Puritan movement began in England in the 1560s with the expressed purpose of ridding the Church of any and all impurities. The only godly activities were those that could be found in the scriptures. Idleness lead to godlessness for the Puritans of early modern England; dancing about or shooting your bow on the sabbath was immoral. You were shirking your duty to honor God on his day. Games and sports, leaping and dancing: all of these activities, if not sins themselves, could easily lead to sinning.²¹ In 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.²²

The increasing restrictions on popular recreations reached the attention of James I. Issued first in 1617 in Lancashire, and again in 1618 for all of England, the *Declaration of Sports* clearly stated that games not otherwise prohibited by law were to be allowed on Sundays. Games that were already banned, bowling for example,

21 Burke, 143-144. 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.

22 Burke, 143-144. Cestren. Neil Harris, “Review: Fun and Games,” *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 7, no 1 (1976): 75. Tim Harris, ed., *Popular Culture in England, c. 1500-1850*, (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1995), 21.

remained illegal.²³ More important than the legality of specific sports were the reasons why the crown wanted them to remain legalized. Although the world mirth is mentioned once, for the most part the sports are described as exercise. According to the *Declaration*, the people were not necessarily upset that they were unable to enjoy themselves on Sundays, they were upset that they were barred from “recreations and exercise.” The loss of this exercise is disturbing to the King because, as already quoted, it meant that the people did not have time to make their bodies fit and ready should they be needed for war.²⁴ Not only that, but the lack of exercise was seen as breeding drunkenness and discontented speeches, a political equivalent to the Puritan concept of idleness.²⁵

Although it may seem at first that the *Declaration of Sports* and the situation that spawned it showed that the Puritan definition of recreation was at odds with the King's definition, and certainly they were politically, both sides of the debate reveal that the idea of leisure as *freedom from duty* was entirely absent in the controversy over idleness and recreation. At issue was not the enjoyment or mirth of the people, but rather the social duties of the activities.²⁶ James was not upset that his people are being blocked from enjoying themselves; the *Declaration of Sports* was issued to prevent the Puritans from placing duty to God above secular duties.

Archery, for instance, had a very important social function related to the militia. The defense of the kingdom was an issue of constant debate and reform for both the Tudors and the early Stuarts, particularly under Charles I's “Perfect Militia”

²³ Cestren. *Declaration of Sports*.

²⁴ *Declaration of Sports*.

²⁵ *Declaration of Sports*.

²⁶ Neil Harris, 75.

reforms.²⁷ Practicing with the bow was considered a recreation, and a sport, in the *Declaration of Sports*, but its entire character is tied up in the value it provides to society, as mentioned previously in the quote from the *Declaration* about making their bodies more fit for war.²⁸ This was not a new phenomenon; since the middle ages the use of the bow had been considered so important that its practice was legislated into society. A royal statute in 1512 required that any man with boys in his house between the ages of seven and seventeen to provide both a bow and instruction in its use. So important was archery that the fear of its practice being in decline was a theme throughout the fifteenth, sixteenth, and the early seventeenth centuries.²⁹

While archery has a direct and obvious function to society because of its military application, the other activities mentioned in the *Declaration of Sports* are not so obviously related to any duty at first glance. Leaping, vaulting, even dancing all have their part to play, however; their duty as expressed in the *Declaration* is to keep the body fit. All of the games and recreations are carefully described in terms of exercise. As stated, the working population must have their leave to exercise on Sunday since they had no other chance in the week. Leaping and vaulting keep the body fit for fighting, should it be required. This idea of fitness for war means that

27 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.

28 *Declaration of Sports*.

29 Humfrey Barkwick, *A Breefe Discourse Concerning the force and effect of all manuell weapons of fire, and the disability of the Long-Bowe or Archery, in respect of others of greater force now in use* (London: 1592). Cotton, 203-204. Howlett, 121. Markham, 56-57. Orme, 62-63. R. S., *A Brieffe Treatise To Proouee the Necessitie and Excellence of the use of Archerie* (London: 1596).

even dancing had a duty to fulfill.³⁰

This is, in part, the *idleness* that the Puritans were legislating against. However important to the defense of the kingdom, when practiced on a Sunday the *duty* to practice shooting and exercise was being placed above the *duty* to honor God. They wanted a focus on godly activities rather than secular activities.³¹

Likewise the King was not defending the rights of his people to be idle if they so wished, or their right to entertain themselves on Sundays. The *Declaration of Sports* decries what happens when the people are left idle without recreation, but it also continues the prohibitions on what are considered, politically, improper sports or games. Idleness, both the Puritan version and the King's version, is thus revealed as the shirking of responsibilities, of *duty*, either to God (and society) or the King (and society). Your duty to society was satisfied if you practiced your archery on Sunday, or participated in leaping, vaulting, or any other “harmless recreation” that kept your body fit and in shape. Even though they were referred to as recreations, entertainment was not their primary attribute as mentioned in the *Declaration of Sports*. When these socially functional activities were prohibited to the people idleness occurred. Those unable to participate were sure, according to the *Declaration*, to indulge in drink and other societal ills because of their idleness.³² The *freedom from duty* prerequisite in the concept of leisure is entirely missing here. Even something like vaulting or dancing was cast as exercise, keeping the body fit for bigger and better things.

³⁰ *Declaration of Sports*.

³¹ Tim Harris, *Popular Culture*, 21.

³² *Declaration of Sports*.

Further evidence within the *Declaration of Sports* for this prevailing sense of *duty*, and the lack of concern with *entertainment* or *enjoyment*, can be seen in the reference to bowling, which is “at all times in the meaner sort of people by law prohibited.”³³ As mentioned previously, bowling was popular among the nobility and the commons; so much so that it was feared to be interfering with archery. It was a game widely enjoyed, but one that interfered with more important sports.

Guides to the Recreations: Exercise Will Set You Free

The social duties carried by popular sports and games are not visible only in the *Declaration of Sports*. They are also apparent in the guides to recreations published throughout the seventeenth century. These books were primarily aimed at gentlemen, or at least those with enough money to afford them, and were designed to teach the reader everything they needed to know about the recreations they would be expected to participate in and be familiar with. This audience and function is readily evident by their titles, such as Gervase Markham's *The Country Contentments: Or, The Husbandmans Recreations, Contaying the Wholesome Experiences, in which any man ought to Recreate himself after the toyle of more serious Businesse*, or Robert Howlett's *The School of Recreation: Or, the Gentleman's Tutor to the Most Ingenious Exercises*. Due to the audience some of the recreations covered are obviously outside of the popular culture of the time; hawking, no matter how prevalent it was amongst the gentility, was not an activity that was going to be shared by the lower orders of society.³⁴ A large portion of the sports covered in these

³³ *Declaration of Sports*.

³⁴ Howlett, 23. Markham, 36. Arthur MacGregor, “Animals and the Early Stuarts: Hunting and

guidebooks can be considered part of popular culture, however, and it is within these games that it is readily apparent that the concept of social duty in recreation was not restricted just to royal proclamations and religious radicalism.³⁵

Once again archery was the pastime that wore its social duty on its sleeve most noticeably. Rarely is it mentioned outside of its military context. Markham's *Country Contentments* introduces it as follows:

Shooting in the Long-bowe, which is both healthful for the Body, and necessary for the Common wealth, the first extending the Limbes and making them plyant; the other, an able strength fit to preserue and defend his Countrey.³⁶

Nowhere in this description is practicing the longbow referenced as “fun,” “pleasurable,” “entertaining,” or any other term that could be recognized as part of the qualifications for leisure's *enjoyment* definition. While it is not work, the duty implied in archery is exercise and martial practice. It is only later in the chapter, when discussing what replacements for the longbow an infirm man may consider, that Markham references the activity as pleasurable. Specifically, he states that the crossbow can be used to give much the same pleasure as the user formerly enjoyed shooting the longbow; shooting the crossbow also carries equal military value.³⁷

Robert Howlett's *School of Recreation*, written almost seventy years after the *Country Contentments* in 1684, and Charles Cotton's *Compleat Gamester* from 1674 use much the same language to describe the sport. Howlett elaborates further on the

Hawking at the Court of James I and Charles I,” *Archives of Natural History* [Great Britain] 16, no 3 (1989): 305-318.

³⁵ See footnote 20 for more detail on how these sports and games can be considered part of popular culture.

³⁶ Markham, 56.

³⁷ Markham, 57.

ways that archery helps the body, stating that it “disperses our stagnated blood.” And again, as in the *Country Contentments*, the use of the crossbow is recommended in both as a replacement for this infirm in the arms or back.³⁸

While archery had a direct and obvious value to society, other sports contributed solely through the exercise and health they brought to the body. Tennis was a good example of this. “Not inferior [to other sports], eyther for health or action, are the Tenise” is how the sport is introduced in the *Country Contentments*.³⁹ The *School of Recreation* reaches hyperbolic heights in its description of the game, with Howlett saying that:

I know it is a *derivative Vertue* which descended to the true *English Gentleman*, from that so excellent Method of Education used amongst the Warlike Nation of the *Gothes*- Who...amongst the greatest Severities, as *Beatings* and *Wounds*, *Change of Heat into sudden Cold*, *lying upon Boards*, *coursely clad*, and *Feeding on Ordinary*, but strong *Food*, used themselves to the most tedious, wearisome and Violent Exercises, as *Ridings*, *Darting*, *Shooting &c.* *Wearing heavy Armes*, *Swimming on Horse-Back and in Armour*; And had they been acquainted with this Exercise of *Tennis*, would not have omitted that neither.⁴⁰

The characterization of tennis as good for the body is readily apparent. It is an exercise so violent that it can be considered a virtue; it is a stress on the body worthy of people who swim in armor and sleep on boards. As described tennis certainly sounds like something that might improve a person's constitution, but it certainly does not seem like a pleasurable or fun way to spend your time, or something that most people would participate in willingly, although they obviously did.

Bowling, much maligned for its negative effects on more important

38 Cotton, 203-205. Howlett, 121-128.

39 Markham, 58.

40 Howlett, 134. Italics are from the original text.

recreations, was also sometimes presented as something that does a body good. In 1615 the *Country Contentments* say that “howsoever unlawful in the abuse thereof, yet exercised with moderation, is even of Physitions themselves held exceedingly wholesome.”⁴¹ The positive effect that bowling has on the body was apparently enough to make up for the downsides of the sport in small doses. This is an opinion shared by Charles Cotton, whose *Compleat Gamester* describes the sport in much the same way: very healthful for the body, it could be more highly recommended if only fewer people played it.⁴² In a similar vein Robert Howlett again reaches for grand hyperbole. Whereas tennis was a game worthy of the Goths, bowling was so good for the body that it was invented by the Lydians during a “great Death and Famine.” They played every second day to forget their hunger and drive away the tediousness of starving to death. Characterized as such, bowling is “of infinite use for the diverting of Melancholy, [and] for Exercise of the Body.”⁴³

As written, the majority of sports were valued primarily for the health they brought to the participant. However enjoyable they might be, at first there is no sense of them being free from the social *duty* to keep oneself in shape. But what about Howlett's statement about bowling being of “infinite use” for relieving boredom and melancholy? True, it is still primarily characterized by its healthy affect on the body, but there is something more there.

41 Markham, 57.

42 Cotton, 47.

43 Howlett, 129-132.

Leisure in an Idle Sheep's Clothing

Bowling, so far, sounds like the closest thing to a leisure activity: it was not work, it was so enjoyable that people went out of their way to play it in large numbers despite it being illegal, and while it was valued for exercise, this was overshadowed by the duty to practice your archery. While shooting the bow, tennis, bowling, and sports like them were all popular and class agnostic enough to be part of the popular culture of early modern England, all could be said to have had a greater duty to fulfill to society than merely the enjoyment they provided to those partaking of them. But there was an entirely separate set of popular games that did not fulfill this function, that provided nothing other than the pleasure of those playing them.

Though bowling scratches the surface of this font of idleness, table games, dicing, and card play are even better examples. When the *Declaration of Sports* states that being deprived of the ability to exercise on Sundays will lead the people to alehouses along with general drunkenness and tippling, these activities are being indirectly referenced; all were common in ale and coffee houses, which often had communal sets of cards and dice.⁴⁴ Idleness crops up again here, this time as a shirking of the responsibilities to God *and* to Country, rather than one or the other.⁴⁵

⁴⁴ 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.

⁴⁵ Of course, these are also activities with strong associations with gambling. Gambling was considered a large problem, of course, but the amount written on it both then and now is too large to tackle in this paper and at least mostly outside of its focus. Partly this is because all of the activities referenced were gambled on in some way or fashion, as described in Howlett, Markham, and Cotton; the *Compleat Gamester* even gives detailed instructions on how to cheat your opponents out of their money. This being said, I will discuss gambling where it is particularly relevant to the point being made, but a discussion of the larger issues involved will not be attempted.

Playing cards were so popular that they were used as instructional tools for learning a variety of trade skills, and specially printed packs were essential propaganda tools in political debates. Decks with scenes from the Popish Plot or other major controversies were widely advertised in newspapers; some sold so well that the metal plates used to press them had to be re-cut for additional print runs.⁴⁶

Descriptions of card games varied widely from those of the more active games. The largest part of the *Compleat Gamester* is concerned with them; twenty chapters are devoted to the subject in total, each covering a single game type. The pleasure that the games bring to those who play them is the focus of all of the descriptions. No time is wasted describing the healthy nature of the games or their rugged origins, which would be decidedly difficult to justify with card games. Instead the commentary is full of accounts of how crafty and complex the games are, or of how satisfying the strategy of the hands is. The focus is always on the game play itself.⁴⁷ If individual sets of rules are characterized by nature at all it is usually by adjectives such as “delightful,” or by the amount of money that is to be won at the game.⁴⁸ For example, All-Fours is described as a game that “may be lookt upon as trivial and inconsequential, yet I have known *Kentish* Gentlemen who...have play'd considerable sums of money at it.”⁴⁹

There is no greater duty to be found in the accounts of board, or table, games either. They are also purely for enjoyment. Irish, a game that used dice and thirty “men” and played like a slower version of backgammon, which was also common, is

⁴⁶ Tim Harris, *London Crowds*, 98-108. Whiting.

⁴⁷ Cotton, 81-153.

⁴⁸ Cotton, 57.

⁴⁹ Cotton, 111.

called “ingenious” and praised for its complexity and the skill required to play. Tick-Tack, another board game, is also mentioned as being particularly deep in strategy.⁵⁰ The enjoyment of table games comes from their depth of play, and not from any higher purpose.

The passages on dice games echo those used for cards and tables, except for the constant mentions of just how addictive their play can be. Even in a guide that, in a sense, advocates their play by discussing rules and strategy, dicing is a home-wrecker. Hazzard, one of the most popular dice games, is so enthralling that “when a man begins to play he knows not when to leave off; and having once accustom'd himself to play at *Hazzard* he hardly ever minds anything else.” The player will never be as happy as when playing Hazzard until he finally pries himself away from it for good.⁵¹ *Inn and Inn*, another game of dice described in the *Compleat Gamester*, does not get the same length of discussion concerning its addictive properties; the author merely knows “how many worthy Families it hath ruin'd.”⁵²

No matter how popular cards, dice, and tables were in popular culture, they were also campaigned against with zeal very different from that reserved for the more functional recreations like tennis. The descriptions offered of dice games in the *Compleat Gamester* are tame in comparison to the tracts published seeking prohibitions against all dice games, including table games such as backgammon that required dice for their play.⁵³ The only board game that could be said to have any

⁵⁰ Cotton, 154-163.

⁵¹ Cotton, 172-173.

⁵² Cotton, 166-167.

⁵³ James Balmford, *A short and plaine dialog concerning the unlawfulness of playing at cards or tables* (London: 1593). Burke, 143-144. Richard Crimsal, *Iohn Hadlands advice: or a warning for all young men that have meanes advising them to forsake lewd company cards, dice, and*

higher purpose, any greater respectability in society, is chess. Chess was extremely well known through all the classes and knowledge of its play was expected among the nobility. But this acceptability is not the only thing that separates the game of kings from its baser cousins; chess was also unpopular, with play described as tedious, despite praises of the unrivaled complexity of the game and the depth of strategy possible.⁵⁴ Not even King James I liked to play the royal game.⁵⁵

Bowling can also be included amongst the idle recreations. Very different from the indoor games, bowling was so pleasurable and popular that despite being illegal for almost a century by the time of the *Declaration of Sports* the secretary of state forgot completely that the game had any prohibitions against it when compiling the first draft of the *Declaration* for Lancashire in 1617. The reminder of bowling's illegality was not inserted until the broader declaration issued in 1618.⁵⁶ The *Country Contentments*, *Compleat Gamester*, and *School of Recreation*, whose publication dates cover almost the whole of the seventeenth century after the publication of the *Declaration of Sports*, continue to describe the game as having a major problem with both the number of people playing and the type of players they are.⁵⁷

Beyond being campaigned against by either, or both, the government and the Puritans, all of the above idle recreations have one other thing in common: they satisfy all of the requirements for the idea of leisure. They are leisure activities, free

queanes (London: 1635). 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. Tim Harris, *Popular Culture*, 21. Roberts, 294-295.

54 Cotton, 51. Gioachino Greco Damiano, *The Royall game of Chesse-play*, Translated by Francis Beale (London: 1656). Arthur Saul, *The famous game of Chesse-play* (London: 1673).

55 Paul Yachnin, "A Game at Chess and Chess Allegory," *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900* 22, no 2 (1982): 317-330.

56 Cestren, 564.

57 Cotton, 47-50. Howlett, 129-132. Markham, 57-58.

from work, free from duty, and imminently enjoyable. Quite obviously you were not working while you were playing backgammon in an alehouse. The pleasure derived from these games and sports cannot be denied either. Dicing was dangerously addictive by all accounts; cards and table games were less destructive but described as no less fun.

The only requirement left to be met is freedom from duty. Considering the illegality of bowling for the largest portion of the population and the vitriol written against it and dice and card games, the perceived duty of the players would be to *not* participate in those recreations. The final qualification for leisure is thus easily met. The question now becomes whether the existence of activities matching all the defined qualities of leisure is enough on its own to prove that leisure as a concept existed in Stuart England.

So Close Yet So Far

Just because there were some sports and games that met the defined requirements for leisure, does this mean that leisure as a concept can be said to have existed in the popular culture of early modern England?

Leisure as a valid counterpart to work, as an expected part of people's lives that is socially acceptable, did not exist in the early modern period in England. The fact that some sports and games existed that met all of the requirements for leisure activity cannot change this, no matter how popular they might have been. There was an expectation of duty, a duty you were not free from even when the work week had ended. Activities that met this expectation, no matter how pleasurable they might be,

cannot be true leisure activities as they never free the participant from *duty*. Games that did not meet the standards of this social duty were banned or campaigned against for political and religious reasons.

Yet leisure *did* exist, and not just in elite culture. The men huddled in a corner playing hazzard certainly knew they were not working and that a lot of people would prefer that they spend their time better; they were also having fun. While they may not have defined this concept in their head using the word leisure, that is precisely what it was. Stating that the idea was an anachronism is spurious.

The assumption that the guidebooks to recreation represent, in part, the decreasing marginalization of leisure is also incorrect. This does not truly occur until the industrial revolution.⁵⁸ For the most part the recreation guides cover activities that are socially acceptable and decidedly do not fit the definition of leisure. The sports and games identified as leisure had been a part of English culture since at least the Middle Ages. The origins are at the very least ancient in the case of dicing.⁵⁹ Having been popular before the early modern period, it is difficult to argue that they were marginalized at all; if they were, they certainly were no less so by the end of the period.

Ironically the only activity that shows an immense change into becoming less marginal *as leisure* is archery. One of the most popular recreations at the beginning of the early modern period in England, it faced a constant decline in popularity as its function to the militia became less important. By the end of the seventeenth century practice with the long bow was described as “little used now adays” and authors

⁵⁸ Burke. Marfany.

⁵⁹ Orme.

lamented at the low esteem with which shooting was regarded.⁶⁰ But as its popularity waned archery became more like a leisure activity; people participated just for the sheer pleasure of the activity, since the majority of the duty associated with the sport had disappeared.

So while leisure existed in early modern England, it was not considered a valid way to spend one's time. This unacceptability is not enough to decry the existence of leisure. Unpopular ideas can exist just as well as popular ones, thankfully enough. Still, one must be careful to not treat as synonymous recreation, sports, and leisure; such a conception surely is an actual anachronism.

⁶⁰ Barkwick. Cotton, 203-204. Howlett, 121. Markham, 56-57. R. S., *A Briefe Treatise To Prooue the Necessitie and Excellence of the use of Archerie* (London: 1596).

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