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Proverbially Fond of Cheating: Women and the Nineteenth-Century Croquet Craze

In 1866, *The Nation* reported that “of all the epidemics that have swept over our land, the swiftest and most infectious is croquet.” Imported from Victorian England, croquet was less a game than a social function, an opportunity for people to meet in unfettered social intercourse, and ideal for courting. The author of an 1865 handbook of Newport Croquet Club claimed the game owed its popularity to “the delights of out-of-doors exercise and social enjoyment, fresh air and friendship—two things which are of all others most effective for promoting happiness.” Women particularly loved croquet, and this caused cultural problems. It had not been so long since Lydia Child cautioned that activities such as skating and sliding should not take place in mixed company. But croquet was considered particularly suitable for women since it required delicate skill rather than strength, flattered bodily appearance, and took place in zones suitable for courtship. The New Orleans *Daily Picayune* commented. “There are few prettier sights than a number of young ladies and gentlemen upon some level greensward pursuing a painted croquet ball, and entering fully into the spirit of the game.” In 1867, one newspaper reported, “never in the history of outdoor sports in this country has any game achieved so suddenly a popularity with both sexes, but especially with the Ladies, as Croquet has.”

Consequently, the croquet craze drew opposition, mostly centered on the threat of heterosocial leisure. Men and women playing together at archery, roller skating, croquet, or lawn tennis raised the specter of extreme sexual danger for women, unregulated by traditional social norms. In 1898, one magazine editorialized, “The game is the gaping jaw of Hades. It would be well if the enthusiasm of the clergy and laity were enlisted for suppressing the immoral practice of croquet.” Croquet was momentarily banned in Boston and when croquet players overran Martha’s Vineyard campgrounds in 1860s, the Camp Meeting Association took the drastic step of forbidding the game during the week of the meeting. Almost every Gilded Age resort hotel had a croquet lawn. “where people wrangled and bickered and—let it be whispered—sometimes cheated over that effete game.” But many witnesses singled out women as the greatest offenders. An 1865 croquet manual claimed, “Young ladies are proverbially fond of cheating at this game but they do it only because...they think that men like it.” Many men believed women brought confusion to sport; their participation upset gender roles. The *New York Times* explained away the shortage of male croquet players by reporting that women constantly cheated, and therefore men would not play with them.

Numerous accusations of female deception, and the lack of passionate denials, lead one to believe that women, those pedestal-bound public paragons of virtue, did in fact often cheat at croquet. The concept of liminality developed by Arnold van Gennep, and Victor and Edith Turner, helps explain this curious anomaly. Individuals longing for

a deeper and less restrictive range of experience and meaning participated in 'liminoid rituals,' whose symbols were in some way antithetical to the existing rules, hierarchies, and duties that normally governed social life. In the twilight-zone world of liminality, the ritualist shed normal responses and behaved speculatively without anxiety. Previous orderings of thought and behavior (such as morally superior women) could be criticized or revised, and unprecedented modes of ordering relations between people and genders became possible and/or desirable. Nineteenth-century croquet lawns provided a venue where middle- and upper class women could tentatively challenge, in a ritual setting, the so-called 'cult of domesticity.'