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A Cursory View of Cheating at Whist in the Eighteenth Century

M. M. McDowell

I. A Short History of the Game

> . . . Whist appear'd, the charm of ev'ry heart,
> The last best effort of inventive art.[1]

Matters of the least consequence enjoy the fiercest partisans. It is estimated that there are twenty million bridge players in the United States today, but their devotion to the game is more than matched by the passion displayed by the followers of whist, bridge's parent game, in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. By its proponents and detractors alike, whist was allowed to be the most scientific and intellectual of card games; but for many years the systems of cheating were more elaborate than the rules of play, and a knowledge of one was as necessary to success as the other.

There are two opinions concerning the derivation of the name of the game. Some claim that "whist" is a corruption of "whisk," a term employed in satire against the Elizabethan courtiers who affected to play it. Others say that "whist" is a variant, or synonym for "Hist! Be still!" and reflects the silence demanded of the players. Certainly the first other than passing reference to the game is to be found in Charles Cotton's 1674 *Compleat Gamester* in which whist appears in the context of its humble origins, with no pretense to intellectuality.

> 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 . . .[2]

Whist was at this time and as long as seventy years afterward a diversion of no fashion, enjoyed by kitchen help, sodden squires, and idle apprentices. Upon Jonathan Wild's visit to the sponging-house, Field-

[1] [Alexander Thomson], *Whist: A Poem, in Twelve Cantos* (London, 1791), Canto II, ll. 60–61.

[2] [Charles Cotton], *The Compleat Gamester* (London, 1674), p. 114.

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ing observes "whisk and swabbers was the game then in the chief vogue," and in Swift's "Essay on the Fates of Clergymen" it is mentioned as the favorite pastime of the Irish clergy, no compliment, perhaps, to the game.

Whist's popularity began to rise around 1730, when it was taken up in coffee-house societies, that of the Crown in particular, where the following rules were ratified:

> To play from a straight suit.
> To study your partner's hand as well as your own.
> Never to force your partner unnecessarily.
> To attend to the score.[3]

What today is considered cheating was in the beginning not only legal, but encouraged, as a profitable and honorable practice. By the time Hoyle's first treatise on whist appeared in 1743, the game had jumped into the highest levels of society, threatening the position of powerful piquet and beloved ombre. In the preface to his *Court Gamester*, Richard Seymour observes:

> Gameing 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.[4]

All the world could play at quadrille, piquet, ombre, loo, pharao, and whist, and most had a favorite at which they claimed proficiency. But if the door of gaming shut out of certain circles of society many worthy persons who from disinclination did not indulge in the cards, it let in others who had no other recommendation. One of the sharpers in *The Humours of Whist*, a dramatic satire in pointed opposition to Hoyle's treatise, gloats: "Thou knowest we have the Honour to be admitted into the best Company, which neither our Birth or Fortunes entitle us to, merely for our Reputation as good *Whist*-Players" (p. 10). Sharpers, by the way, were of two sorts: "swell" sharpers, who preyed upon the fashionable and wealthy, and "low" sharpers, who feasted upon those who, like Booth in *Amelia*, could ill afford to lose.

It was a few more years before the game had passed down from the uppermost ranks, into more respectable middle-class society. A young girl complains in the *Rambler* for 8 May 1750:

[3] Quoted in C. P. Hargrave, *A History of Playing Cards and A Bibliography of Cards and Gaming* (Boston, 1930), p. 209.

[4] Richard Seymour, *The Court Gamester* (London, 1732).

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As for play, I do think I may, indeed, indulge in that, now I am my own mistress. Papa made me drudge at whist 'till I was tired of it; and, far from wanting a head, Mr. Hoyle, when he had not given me above forty lessons, said I was one of his best scholars.

The young bride's father had paid dearly for his daughter's supposed proficiency, for Edmund Hoyle was at that time charging a guinea a lesson. (It is inferred that Papa was gulled by the whist-master.) Over the latter half of the century, whist increased steadily in popularity, reaching a peak in the card-rooms at Bath, whence emerged terrible tales of birthrights lost, estates dissipated, daughters bargained for, and virtue gambled away.

II. The Terrors of the Table

> That certainly was the most out-of-the-way Bite ever was heard of. — Upon the Pinch of the Game, when he must infallibly have lost it, the Dog eat the losing Card, by which means we dealt again, and faith he won the Game.[5]

Cheating was always an integral part of whist. I have included in appendices the intriguing instructions of Charles Cotton and Richard Seymour upon the subject, which are substantial portions of their treatises on the game. Sharpers flourished in the coffee-houses, preying upon the naively honest, the boastful vain, and even upon themselves. In the eighteenth century the primary methods of cheating were these: card-manipulation, signals, marked decks, and, of course, the simple and profitable device of stealing a glance at the opponents' hands.[6] Each deserves a few words of explanation.

Card-manipulation was within the province of the dealer, who by observing the marks on doctored cards and dealing from the bottom of the deck, or employing some other equally effective method, distributed the hands to his partnership's advantage. In this category be-

[5] For those who suspect the probability of Sir Calculation Puzzle's complaint in *The Humours of Whist* (pp. 12–13), I append a small anecdote of another sharper, a GI who operated exactly two centuries later: "The only way out was to make the ace vanish completely. . . . He lifted the top slice of bread from his ham sandwich, plastered some mustard on the meat, and unseen by the others, added the ace of spades. Then he calmly ate the sandwich, ace and all." — Michael MacDougall, *Danger in the Cards* (New York, 1943), p. 192.

[6] There is a modern proverb: "A single peek is worth a double finesse."

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long aces hidden in sleeves; concealed, stacked decks in the waistcoat pocket; and the ability to have the cards cut always to one's own favor. For the sharper, a decided advantage, even in only one of every four hands, when he dealt, was enough to produce a winning evening.

There were many ways to mark decks, many of them standardized and noted by Hoyle, Seymour, Cotton, *et al.* Though pattern-backed cards were popular in Italy and Germany from the seventeenth century on, it was not before the early nineteenth century that England had other than plain white backs for its playing cards. Thus it was that any accidental stain, crease, or bend would mark a card, so that a sharper, or anyone with careful observation, could, in a few rounds, distinguish any number of cards in the deck by their ever so slightly differentiated appearance. And, too, the decks were not so carefully manufactured that there were no variations in the size of the cards; 1/32″ is easily felt by sensitive fingers. Pin-pricks, creases, bends could all be unnoticeably applied to an unmarked deck during the course of an evening, so that there was little need to resort to the substitution of a deck in which honors had all been shaved one way, and low cards another. To the practiced eye, and it must be remembered that the game was the sharper's livelihood, a marked card was instantly recognizable, so that, even if he were not dealing, the cheat could tell what cards constituted the opponents' hands, and this was more than enough of an edge.

Signals are of necessity between confederates. Those confederates were partners who by the manner in which they held the cards, or how many times they blinked their eyes, or how heavily they laid trumps on the table, or by the arrangement of cards in their hands, conveyed any amount of valuable knowledge to one another. Rather than another player, the cheat might be a kibitzer, who stood behind the opponent and "piped" (that is, conveyed specific information by the number of fingers he laid on the stem of his pipe) or otherwise signalled the opponent's hand to the sharper. Sharpers prided themselves on the elaborateness and subtlety of their signs. The author of *The Humours of Whist* ridicules this attitude in his preface:

> The Author is preparing a Dissertation *upon Signs* at *Whist*, in which will be contained all manual and ocular Intimations in the most elaborate Exactness, as well as the most secret, yet most significant Manner of Conveyance; calculated for the Emolument of weak Players, and which will be explained for the further easy Price of Five Pieces.

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Verbal signals, though in direct opposition to the spirit of the game, were always in vogue. "Upon my word!" signified Clubs; "By Gad!" denoted Hearts, and so forth — these methods were less subtle, but still highly effective. Overlooking the opponents' hands needs no explication: it was universally practiced.

"Sharpers" is not perhaps a term strictly correct; often these men were as clumsy as their victims, and were in their lack of subtlety caught, and punished, though not usually by the law. "His Grace and Lord *Slim* . . . are both stript, faith, by *Lurchum* and *Shuffle*; but, being discover'd making Signs to one another, they were forc'd to refund, and afterwards the Rascals were kick'd out, as they deserv'd, ha! ha! ha!"[7] It is not surprising that, before long, cheating had been institutionalized — the owners of the crooked coffee-houses and gaming tables taking cuts and providing marked cards. What is most remarkable, perhaps, is that year after year the gullible were so numerous.

> . . . for the other two honourable gentlemen were not only greater masters of the game, and somewhat soberer than poor Booth, having, with all the art in their power, evaded the bottle; but they had, moreover, another small advantage over their adversaries; both of them, by means of some certain private signs, previously agreed upon between them, being always acquainted with the principal cards in each other's hands. It cannot be wondered, therefore, that fortune was on their side; for, however she may be reported to favour fools, she never, I believe, shows them any countenance when they engage in play with knaves.[8]

III. The Rout

> 'Detest cards?' cries Mrs. James; 'how can you be so stupid? I would not live a day without them: nay, indeed, I do not believe I should be able to exist. Is there so delightful a sight in the world as the four honours in one's own hand, unless it be three natural aces at brag? . . .'[9]

In the eighteenth century, it was unheard of not to play for stakes, and those stakes were rarely inconsequential. And, wherever there were addicts to the game, or where stakes were admitted, there was

[7] *The Humours of Whist* (London, 1743), p. 35.
[8] Henry Fielding, *Amelia* (London, 1832), II, 211.
[9] *Ibid.*, II, 154.

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sure to be cheating. Even the royal family (Seymour's *Court Gamester* was dedicated to "the young princesses") were not exempt from this generalization. George II's son Frederick, Prince of Wales, was known to have had a penchant for card-trickery, and once cheated Bubb Doddington out of £5000 in a single evening; and it was while he was at the card table that George II so composedly received the news of the death of his heir.

Judging from the intensity of satire directed against them, fashionable ladies were of all England the most addicted to card-playing. Their routs, which began with an evening of treacherous gossip, were fortified with a midnight supper, and lasted about the card-tables until dawn. Gaming ladies never saw their husbands; they spent their coal money; and for their ill-fortune they accused their friends, or kicked the lap-dog. Peers' wives in unconcealing masks haunted the pharao tables, universally a rigged game, wasted their fortunes, and compromised their virtue. "Haggard Looks and pale Complexion are the natural Indication of a Female Gamester," wrote Addison, and the rest of London was no kinder than he. She is pictured as shrewish, factious, and slovenly, prone to lying, cheating, and gossiping. She is worse than any of her coffee-house counterparts; her routs and card-parties are her only concern. She is not at home to abstemious friends, is sorely put out to leave off her play on Sundays, and spends her spare hours in memorizing Hoyle's intricate tables of probabilities. There was something repulsive in the idea of a woman obsessed, forsaking her family, friends, and home life for the sake of a few painted pictures, whose arrangement was usually more a source of frustration and anger than of pleasure. Such was the popular view.

Richard Seymour probably had such ladies in mind when he gave precise instructions on how to mark cards in such a manner that they might be discernible to the marker, but not to the adversary. A fine-pointed pen and a small dish of spring water might turn an unhappy loser into a delighted winner, who knew whom to play for honors. Eighteenth-century playing cards were of stiff cardboard, and dealing was not so easy as it is today. Based on observations in the literature, I judge that it was not difficult to mis-deal purposely two cards to this player, or out-of-turn, or otherwise to distribute the hands to one's taste. Even if unable to deal according to her desire, a lady might know what her partner and opponents held, and this was no small advantage. The writers of the *Gamester*'s all claimed that they were

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publishing this information for the protection of the innocent from the sharpers, but it is doubtful that only the innocent received the benefit of Cotton and Seymour's advice.

To the end of his 1732 *Court Gamester*, Richard Seymour appended a poem by Swift entitled "The Journal of a Gameing Lady of Quality," which was twenty-four hours in the life of an ombre hostess. I quote the two sections which deal with cheating, fashionable cheating — for though ombre and whist are dissimilar, that certain advantage may be gained in both by the same methods.

Now, loit'ring o'er her Tea and Cream,
She enters on her usual Theme;
Her last Night's ill Success repeats,
Calls Lady *Spade* a hundred Cheats;
She slipt, *Spadillio* in her Breast,
Then thought to turn it to a Jest.
There's Mrs. *Cut*, and *She* combine,
And to teach others give the Sign,
Thro ev'ry Game pursues her Tale,
Like Hunters o'er their Evening Ale.
. . .
I saw you touch your Wedding Ring,
Before my Lady call'd a *King*.
You spoke a Word begun with *H*,
And I know who you mean to teach,
Because you held the *King* of *Hearts*;
Fye, Madam, leave these little Arts.
That's not so bad as, one that rubs
Her Chair, to call the *King* of *Clubs*,
And makes her Partner understand
A *Matadore* is in her Hand.
Madam, you have no Cause to flounce,
I swear I saw you thrice *Renounce*.
And truly, Madam, I know when
Instead of *Five* you scor'd me *Ten*.
Spadillio here has got a Mark,
A Child may know it in the Dark;
I guess the Hand it seldom fails,
I wish some Folks would pair their Nails.

There are nine specific instances of trickery: five signals, verbal and visual; one example of card-manipulation; an incorrect scoring; a deliberate infraction of the rules; and one card marked by indenting it with a sharp fingernail, so that it would be recognizable each time it

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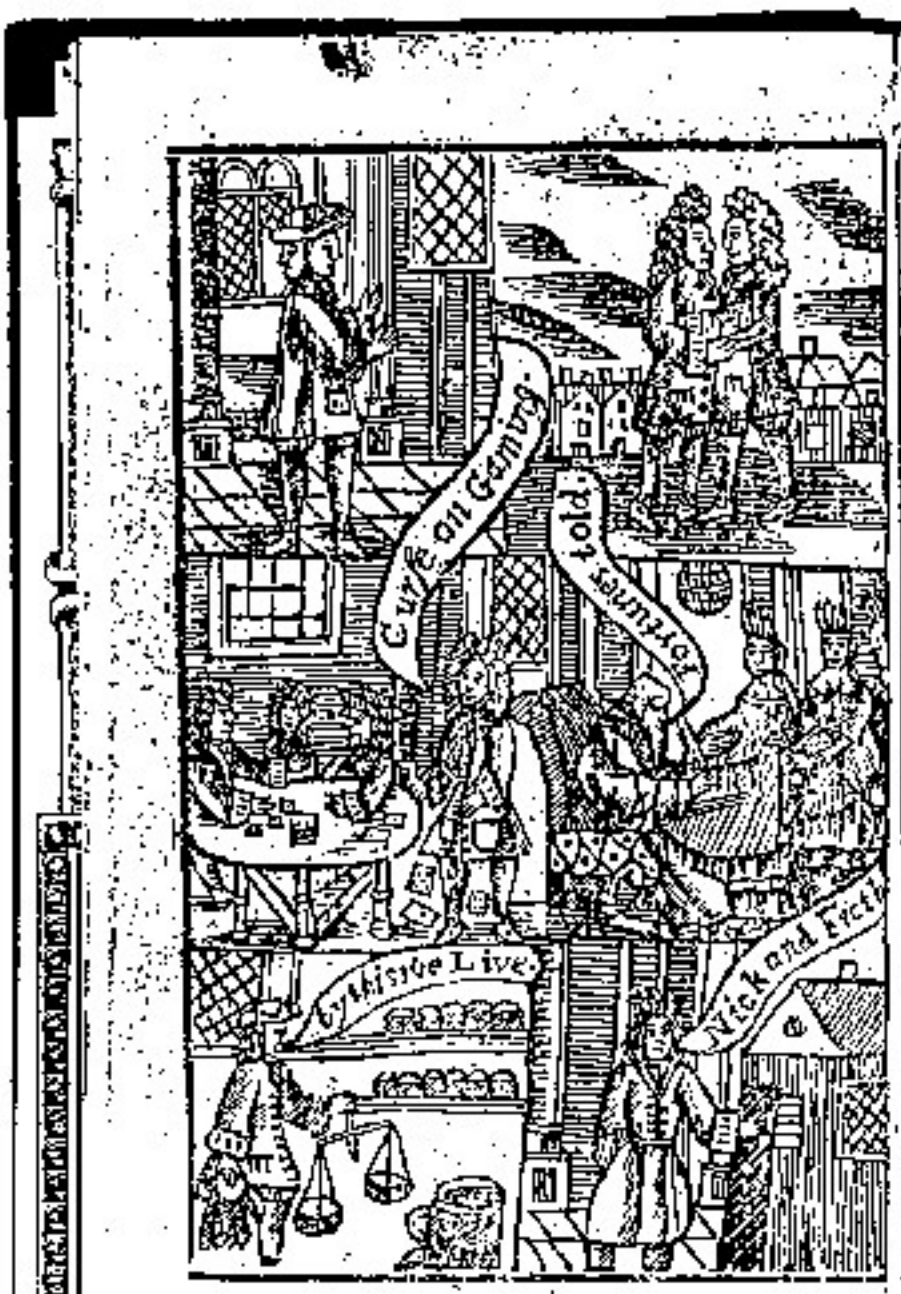

Diſmonted *Jonas* does at firſt appear;
The Cozening Tapſter does bring up the Reer
Treacherous *Joab* does *Amaſa* kill,
And Gameſters do of Cheating take their fill.
Th' Aſtrologer a formal Tale does tell,
The Baker Courſe, and yet too Light does ſe

Do no Right, Take no Wrong;
Keep what you have, Get what you can

OR

The Way of the World
DISPLAYD;

In ſeveral Profitable ESSAYS,
Serious and Comical:
Diſcovering

I. The Treachery of Falſe-Friends.
II. The Tricks and Cheats uſually impos'd on the Unthinking and Ignorant, by the Town-Sharpers.
III. The Deceits us'd in particular Trades and Profeſſions.

The whole intermixt with Pleaſant Relations, Comical Deſcriptions, and Satyrical Characters; being very Delightful and Inſtructive, for the Diverſion of the Wiſe, and the Information of the Otherwiſe.

By *S. H.* Miſodolus.

Felix quem faciunt aliena pericula cautum.

LONDON: Printed for *Robert Gifford*, in *Old-Bedlam*, without *Biſhopſgate*. 1711.
Price Bound One Shilling.

PLATE I

DO NO RIGHT, TAKE NO WRONG; KEEP WHAT YOU HAVE, GET WHAT YOU CAN OR THE WAY OF THE WORLD DISPLAYD . . . BY S. H. MISODOLUS (1711)

This odd little volume contains, among many other instructive essays, a philosophical passage on gaming, an interesting lexicon of the sharper's vocabulary, and histories of ancient and modern gamesters, cheats, and victims. The pithy conclusion to Misodolus' philosophical musings is that "In short, Gaming is an enchanting Witchcraft, begotten by those two Devils Idleness and Avarice" (p. 34).

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PLATE II

Satirical playing cards first appeared late in the seventeenth century. Those shown here, from a deck of about 1715–1720 displaying the English penchant for economic "bubbles," propose establishment of houses of public comfort in North Britain, life insurance, a riot-control device, and North American colonization. (*Fearing Collection, Houghton Library* F1727.15*)

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Tune of Cold and Raw.
Sung by M.r Peachum

If any Wench Venus's Girdle wear,
Though she be never so ugly;
Lillys and Roses will quickly appear,
And her Face look wondrous smugly.
Beneath y.e left Ear so fitt but a Cord,
(A Rope so charming a Zone is!)
The Youth in his Cart hath a Air of a Lord,
And we cry, There dies an Adonis.

Flute.

Tune of Allin a misty Morning.
Sung by
Jenny Diver.

Before the Barn door crowing,
The Cock by Hens attended,
His Eyes around him throwing,
Stands for a while suspended.
Then One he singles from y.e Crew,
And cheers the happy Hen;
With how do you do, & how do you do,
And how do you do again.

Tune of Now ponder well ye Parents dear.
Sung by Polly Peachum

Oh ponder well! be not severe;
So save a wretched Wife!
For on the Rope that hangs my Dear,
Depends poor Polly's Life.

Flute.

Tune of Bony dun Dee.
Sung by —
Mackheath.

Flute.

The Charge is prepar'd; y.e lawyers are met,
The Judges all rang'd (a terrible Show!)
I go, undismay'd —— *For Death is a Debt,*
A Debt on demand. —— *So, take what I owe*
Then farewell my Love. Dear Charmers adieu
Content.ed I die —— *'Tis well for you.*
Here ends all Dispute the rest of our Lives,
For this way at once I please all my Wives.

PLATE III

Each card from this pack, which dates from 1728, sported a song from *The Beggar's Opera*. The deck evidently was cut from a large sheet or sheets of printed cardboard; only the indices of the diamonds and hearts were colored. Similar decks were adorned with "love mottoes," "witty sayings," proverbs, and Aesop's fables. (*Houghton Library* 15459.625.20*)

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THE

HUMOURS

OF

WHIST.

A

DRAMATIC SATIRE,

As Acted every Day at

WHITE's

AND OTHER

Coffee-Houses and *Assemblies.*

Quando
Major avaritiæ patuit ſinus? Alea quando
Hos animos? neq; enim loculis comitantibus itur
Ad caſum Tabulæ, poſitâ ſed luditur arcâ.
JUV. Sat. 1.

LONDON:
Printed for J. ROBERTS, in *Warwick-Lane.*

MDCCXLIII.

[Price One Shilling.]

PLATE IV

THE HUMOURS OF WHIST (1743)

In a note to the Preface, which is a strongly-worded warning against literary pirates, the author assures any party that might be interested in producing this little dramatic piece on the stage, that "A Set of curious Songs are ready to be clapt in (little inferior, if not equal to any in the *Beggar's Opera*) in case the said Representation takes place." It never did, but we may be assured that the sharpers and their gulls played through their scenes every night of the week.

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Mr. *HOYLE's*

GAMES

OF

Whist, Quadrille, Piquet, Chess, AND Back-Gammon,

COMPLETE.

In which are contained,

The Method of PLAYING and BETTING, at THOSE GAMES, upon equal, or advantageous Terms.

INCLUDING

The LAWS of the several GAMES.

The THIRTEENTH EDITION.

To which is now first added,

Two *New Cases* at *Whist*, never before printed;

ALSO,

The *New Laws* of the Game at *Whist*,

As played at

White's and *Saunders's* Chocolate-Houses.

LONDON:

Printed for THOMAS OSBORNE, in Gray's-Inn;
HENRY WOODFALL,
And RICHARD BALDWIN, both in Pater-noster-Row.

[Price Three Shillings, neatly bound.]

Edmond Hoyle

PLATE V

MR. HOYLE'S GAMES (176-?)

The signed title page of one of the last editions of Hoyle's *Games* to be published in his lifetime. The signature of the publisher, Thomas Osborne, is unfortunately cut off at the bottom of the page. Even as late as the 1760s the chocolate- and coffee-houses determined the rules, and set the fashions of play in whist.

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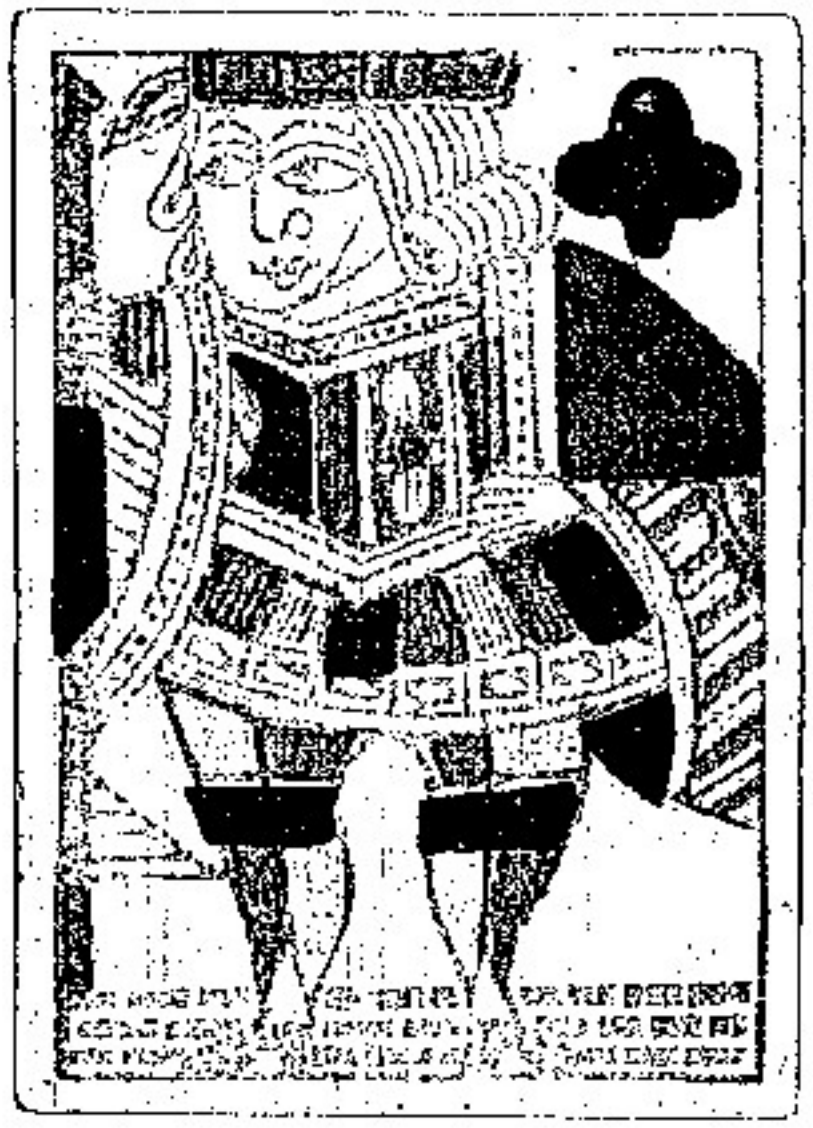

PLATE VI

These cards are from an English pack of about 1765, intended for exportation. The deck is printed on inferior cardboard, and the court cards, of much cruder design than those of Plate VII, are colored in only four shades: red, blue, black, and olive. Many of the cards could be easily identified by spots, creases, foxing, tears, and stains on their plain backs. (*Whitney Collection, Houghton Library* SG3102.3*)

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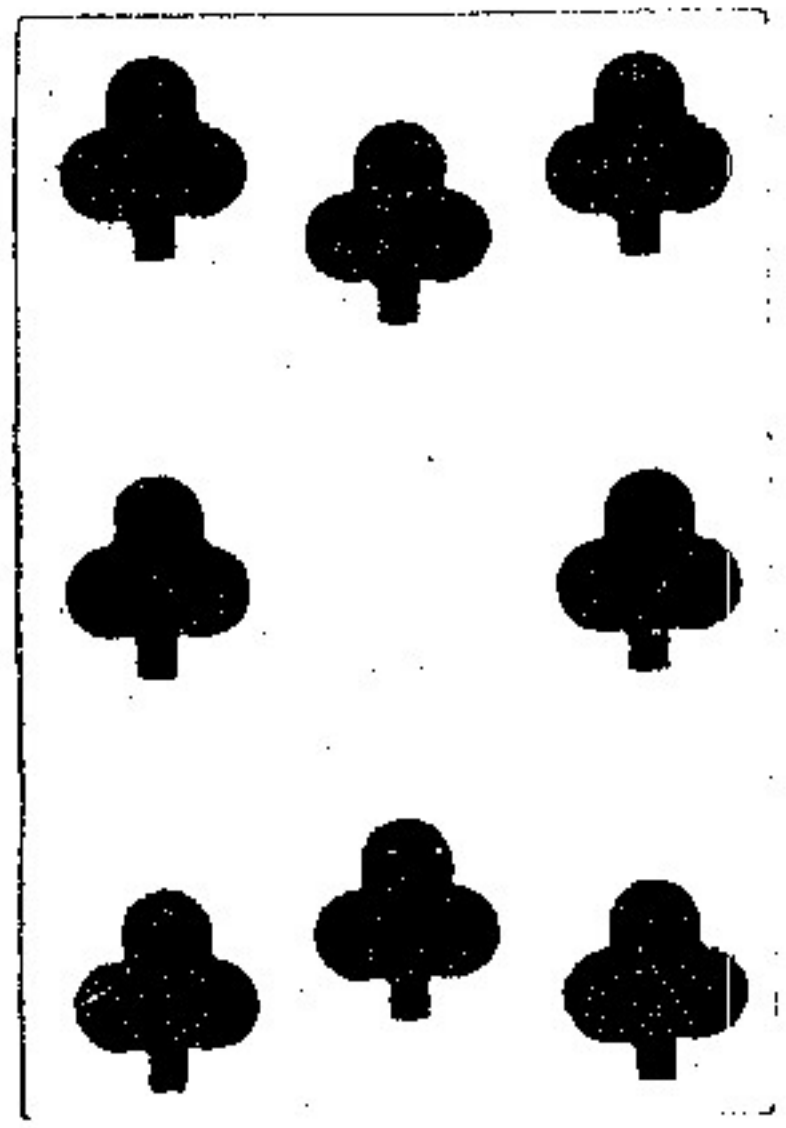

PLATE VII

These four cards are from an English domestic pack of the period 1776–1789. The court cards are carefully printed on stiff cardboard, and hand colored in five shades: blue, red, black, olive, and peach. The pip cards, as usual, are simply stenciled. Indices and double-heads, lacking here, were nineteenth-century innovations. (*Whitney Collection, Houghton Library* SG3102.8*)

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EXPLANATION.

The grand Figure represents a human Creature. The Dart in his right Hand intimates Cruelty; the black Spot on the left denotes Artifice and Perfidy; the yellow in his Garment is a Sign of Jealousy, and the red of Anger; the Bladder in his Feet betokens Vanity of Genius and the Feather in his Cap bespeaks Promotion.

THE CARD

VOL. I.

Quicquid agunt Homines, Votum, Timor, Ira, Voluptas,
Gaudia, Discursus, nostri Farrago Libelli.

Juv.

LONDON:
Printed for the MAKER,
AND
Sold by J. NEWBERY, at the Bible and Sun, in St. Paul's Church-Yard.
MDCCLV.

PLATE VIII

THE CARD [BY JOHN KIDGELL] (1755)

A benign knave of clubs serves as frontispiece to a rather heavy-handed novel of ill manners. In the second volume, however, there is a delightful description of a whist rout in Tunbridge Wells, whose illustrious or infamous participants included Roderick Random, Mrs. Booby (late Miss Pamela Andrews), Joseph Andrews, Tom Jones, Clarissa Harlowe, Sir Charles Grandison, and even Donna Dulcinea del Toboso. A rout indeed.

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went round. It seems impossible that such an evening, with half one's mind lurking for a chance at the small advantage, the other half so wary of being taken in, should afford pleasure. But perhaps it was best that these delightful and single-minded ladies turned their talents against one another. Too many tales are told of wives who, at public gaming tables, are lent money by sharpers that had cheated them, were cheated of that loan, lent more, and finally forgiven the whole for certain small favors reluctantly bestowed.

IV. Tables, Schemes, and Calculations

> *Hoyle* tutor'd me in the several games at cards, and under the name of guarding me from being cheated, insensibly gave me a taste for sharping.[10]

Edmund Hoyle, who spent over half a century in the study of games and gaming, made whist both scientific and eminently respectable. He not only established rules and procedure, but went to great lengths in the explication of correct and presumably winning play. The many editions of his works, which included treatises not only on whist, but on piquet, ombre, quadrille, chess, and other games, were sold out as quickly as they could be printed. As each new edition appeared, all the talk in St. James's Park for days was the minute revisions of rules that had occurred in the past half year. The books were pirated of course; at one time there were nine separate law suits against the publishers in the city who had illegally added Hoyle's *Rules* to their lists. For twenty years Hoyle and his publisher autographed the title page of each copy of the book as a proof of authenticity. Whist, whose rules before had depended in the main upon the whim of the company gathered round the table, now had a champion, a law-maker, a judge, and a scholar.

Hoyle's great contributions to the crystallizing of whist rules, procedure, and strategy are, and always were, indisputable. At the time Hoyle was writing his treatises, however, there were some few detractors. Though now their names are lost, and Hoyle's immortalized, their objections are well-taken, and, if justly considered, must lessen perceptibly the reputation of the great gamester. Hoyle's first treatise

[10] "The Humorous Life of a Physician," *The Gentleman's Magazine*, XXV (February 1755), 75.

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on whist appeared in 1743. It contained not only the laws of the game, suggested by common use and codified by him, but also points of strategy for the beginner; complicated and copious tables of odds, calculations, and probabilities for the playing of the hand and wagering too; and dozens of cases to illustrate all the various points. Truly whist had become scientific.

The Humours of Whist, a satire on both the man and his game, appeared the same year. Hoyle was ridiculed for his obsession with gaming: a man who had spent half a century in the study of carding, who made a living at it as surely as did the lowest sharper, and who, vanity of vanities, was convinced of the game's ultimate importance. Hoyle, in the character of Professor Whiston is made to speak: "In short, Sir, I hope to see the Time when *Whist* shall become our most darling Pursuit, and have the Pleasure to see the Nation playing one universal Game, *Sundays* not excepted" (p. 24).

In the satire, Hoyle's rules, advice, and strategy are shown to have quite a different effect from the intended, that of strengthening the beginner's game, and fortifying the honest player against the sharper. What seems to have happened in actuality is that the complications of Hoyle were ammunition for the knowledgeable, and only served to bewilder the unskilful and gullible. Lawyers, duchesses, and maids-below-stairs spent hours each day in the memorization of Hoyle's odds: when you hold such and such cards, it is a 47 to 35 chance that your right-hand opponent holds the King of trumps. There is not now, and was not then, any substitute for thoughtful, attentive play; and a sharper with one small technical advantage was lengths ahead of the amateur whose head was crowded with Hoyle's schemes.

The satirist's objections were appropriate enough in 1743; but how much more applicable five years later when Hoyle publicized his technique of "Artificial Memory," a supposedly fool-proof system in which a whist player, whose memory was not all that was to be desired, could, by the particular arranging and constant re-arranging of the cards in his hand, "remember" how many trumps were still to be played, whether he had the highest, second, or third card in any particular suit, and other matters which are essential to even average playing. Often reprinted in Hoyle's manuals, the "Artificial Memory" was thought a capital system, and so it was — for the sharper. Anyone of moderate intelligence, by observing his opponent meticulously arranging and re-arranging his hand after the play of every trick, and

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with reference to Hoyle's system, could determine with accuracy just what cards the forgetful player held. For instance, trumps were held on the extreme left of the hand in descending order; by the typical play of the smallest trump it was obvious how many cards of the suit were held. When the King of a suit became the highest card out, it was moved to a new position in the hand; and if this allowed the player to recall the fact, it also provided his opponents and his unfortunate partner with the same information. As if this were not enough, the amateur would also carefully turn his court-cards right side up at every deal (double-headed cards were not available in England before the middle of the nineteenth century), marking most of the honors in his hand. With the right players and sharpers, Hoyle's "Artificial Memory" obviated the need for marked cards or manipulation — any advantage is advantage enough. Hoyle had betrayed those whom he meant to help.

V. The Decline of Cheating

"No people cheat like the English." [11]

There is no doubt that in Georgian England cheating was ubiquitous. Sharpers were to be found in droves in the gaming-houses; inveterate gamblers devised their own schemes to beat the odds; fashionable ladies and swells even less than the others cared to lose money and face. Card-playing and gambling were extremely popular pastimes throughout the eighteenth century. As the next century approached, the love of play grew into a mania: if contemporary tracts are to be believed, thousands were led yearly to their destruction in the back-rooms of the London gambling establishments. The card-rooms at Bath, which though respectable were never entirely free from sharpers, were the resort of young ladies of quality, gentlemen of frightful reputation, old ladies of impaired hearing, and, most memorably, of Mr. Pickwick.

Then, at the end of every hand, Miss Bolo would inquire with a dismal countenance and reproachful sigh, why Mr. Pickwick had not returned that diamond, or led the club, or roughed the spade, or finessed the heart, or led through the honour, or brought out the ace, or played up to the king, or some such

[11] Lord Melbourne to Queen Victoria, quoted in Elizabeth Longford, *Queen Victoria, Born to Succeed* (New York, 1964), p. 69.

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thing . . . Miss Bolo rose from the table considerably agitated, and went straight home, in a flood of tears, and a sedan chair.[12]

There is noticeably no mention of sharping, or even of ocular indulgence; only obsession with the game. Whist was now the most popular game in England; all men and women of good parts were capable of whiling away an empty hour or two, but the thought of cheating had become loathsome, a betrayal of the spirit of the game, and something unworthy of the players. Polite society was given over to an honesty in cards which prevails to this day, and sharping was left mainly to the professionals. Warnings now were given out only to reckless habitués against cheaters and rigged games; but whist was looked on as innocent and pleasant amusement for young clergymen and newly-made widows. Cards had become strictly uniform in manufacture, with double-heads, and intricately painted backs — casual cheating by the non-professional was difficult to perform and easy to spot, and for the most part unrewarding, since general public prudence had lowered the stakes in polite society to a level of insignificance. At only one point in the Victorian Age was there any controversy over cheating at whist, and that was outrage at the complicated system of signals and discards imported from America — but in a matter of a few years, this too had been incorporated into the strategy of the game, and whist was wholly respectable.

APPENDIX 1

From Charles Cotton, *The Compleat Gamester*, Chapter XI:
English Ruff and Honours, and Whist (pp. 117–120)

He that can by craft over-look his adversaries Game hath a great advantage, for by that means he may partly know what to play securely; or if he can have some petty glimpse of his Partners hand. There is a way by winking, or the fingers to discover to their Partners what Honours they have, as by the wink of one eye, or putting one finger on the nose or table, it signifies one Honour, shutting both the eyes, two; placing three fingers or four on the Table, three or four Honours. They have several ways of securing an Honour or more in the bottom when they deal, either to their Partners or selves; if to their Partner they place in the second lift next the top, 1, 2, 3, or four Aces, or Court cards all of a suit, according as they could get them together in the former deal, and place a Card of the same suit in the bottom, when the Cards are cut they must use their hand so dexterously as not to put the top in the bottom, but nimbly place where it was before.

[12] Charles Dickens, *The Posthumous Papers of the Pickwick Club* (London, 1887), II, 118.

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If they would secure Honours to themselves when dealing, they then place so many as they can get upon their lap or other place undiscerned, and after the Cards are cut, then clap them very neatly under. But the cleanliest rooking way is by the breef, that is take a pack of Cards and open them, then take out all the Honours, that is as aforesaid, the four Aces, the four Kings, &c. then take the rest and cut a little from the edges of them all alike, by which means the Honours will be broader than the rest, so that when your Adversary cuts to you, you are certain of an Honour, when you cut to your Adversary cut at the ends, and then it is a chance if you cut him an Honour, because the Cards at the ends are all of a length, thus you may make breefs end-ways as well as side-ways.

There are a sort of cunning fellows about this City, who before they go to play will plant half a dozen of these Packs (nay sometimes half a score) in the hands of a Drawer, who to avoid being suspected will call to their confederate Drawer for a fresh pack of Cards, who brings them as from a shop new, and some of these Packs shall be so finely markt, whereby the Gamester shall plainly and certainly know every Card therein contain'd by the outside, although the best of other eyes shall not discern where any mark was made at all; and this done with that variety that every Card of every suit shall have a different distinguishable mark.

Some have a way to slick with a slick-stone all the Honours very smooth, by which means he will be sure to cut his Partner an Honour, and so his Partner to him again, and that is done by lying a forefinger on the top indifferent hard, and giving a slurring jerk to the rest which will slip off from the slickt Card.

It is impossible to shew you all the Cheats of this Game, since your cunning Gamester is always studying new inventions to deceive the ignorant.

Appendix 2

From Richard Seymour, *The Court Gamester* (London, 1732), the Postscript (pp. 100–103). Seymour is quoting in part from *The Whole Art and Mystery of Modern Gaming, fully Exposed and Detected*, by a Gentleman (London, 1726).

Picquet is now become so common, that even the meanest People have been instructed, and let into all the Tricks and Secrets of it, in order to render them compleat Sharpers. . . .

I shall next mention some things relating to Picquet, which are equally applicable to all other *Games* at *Cards*, viz.

Marked Cards.

It cannot be denied, that to know the *Aces*, *Kings*, *Queens* and *Knaves*, is the principal Part of this *Game*; and all other *Games* at *Cards*, especially, since by this means, any Card you desire may be secured at Pleasure.

First then, I shall shew how I have known *Cards* marked.

1. *Aces* with one Spot, at the opposite Corners . . .

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II. *Kings* with Two Spots . . .
III. *Queens* with one Spot, traversed . . .
IV. *Knaves* with Two Spots . . .

The next Difficulty will be to mark the *Cards* in such a Manner, that *They* may not be discovered by your *Adversary*, and at the same time appear plain to *your Self*, which is to be thus effected.

Make a fine-pointed Pen, and take some clear Spring-Water, and make your Dots upon the glazed Cards at the Corners according to the Directions above, and they will pass if they are well done; you may Colour your Water with *Indian-Ink* to make the *Marks* more or less conspicuous, as you will best judge by your Eye.

Thirty-two Cards are the Number made use of at PICQUET, so that just half of them will be known to you; and in *Dealing* you may have an opportunity to give yourself those you like best; and if you cannot conveniently *change* the *Pack* according to your Desire, you will commonly know what you are to *take in*, which is a demonstrative Advantage to win any one's Money.

All the Inference I shall draw from this Gentleman's Informations, is, that as none of my *Fair-Readers*, it is hoped, ever practice such base Arts; they only stand here, as a fixed Brand, against those who seem to glory in the detestable Life of a sharping Gamester.

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CONTRIBUTORS TO THIS ISSUE

WILLIAM BENTINCK-SMITH has edited the *Harvard Alumni Bulletin* (1946–1954) and *The Harvard Book*, which was published by the Harvard University Press in 1953; he was Assistant to the President of Harvard University (1954–1971), and is now Publication Associate in the Development Office of the University and Honorary Curator of Type Specimens and Letter Design in the Harvard College Library.

M. M. MCDOWELL, who was graduated from Harvard College in 1972, is now working for a doctorate in English literature at Brandeis.

RONALD PRIMEAU, Assistant Professor in the Department of English in Central Michigan University at Mount Pleasant, has contributed articles to a number of literary and philological journals and collections.

MICHAEL WEST has recently moved from Wesleyan University to the Department of English in the University of Pittsburgh; his Harvard dissertation, in 1965, was on Dryden, but American literature has been the subject of most of his published articles.

ROBERT LEE WOLFF, Coolidge Professor of History at Harvard, combines teaching and research on the Byzantine and Ottoman Empires with a long-standing interest in the nineteenth-century English novel; his books on the latter subject include *The Golden Key: A Study of the Fiction of George MacDonald* (Yale University Press, 1961), *Strange Stories*, published by Gambit, Inc., of Boston in 1971, and *Sensational Victorian: The Life and Fiction of Mary Elizabeth Braddon*, which will be issued by the same publisher later this year.

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