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AN ENCHANTING WITCHCRAFT: MASCULINITY, MELANCHOLY, AND THE PATHOLOGY OF GAMING IN EARLY MODERN LONDON

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ABSTRACT: In seeking to illuminate the ways in which inchoate models of addiction emerged alongside the unprecedented popularity of gambling in Stuart London, this paper will explore the intersections between a rudimentary pathology of addiction and transformations in the epistemology of reason, the passions, and humoral psychology in the seventeenth century. By exploring the connections between endogenous and exogenous categories of mental illness, this study will examine the ways in which medicine, social expectations, and religion intersected in the seventeenth century alongside the historical relationship between evolving concepts of mental illness, stigma and the politics of blame and responsibility in the early modern period.

Keywords: gamester, witchcraft, masculinity, gaming, mathematics

Preferred Citation: Celeste Chamberland. "An Enchanting Witchcraft: Masculinity, Melancholy, and the Pathology of Gaming in Early Modern London" Occasional Paper Series, 36. Las Vegas: Center for Gaming Research, UNLV University Libraries, 2016.

Introduction

In the midst of the growing interest in games of chance in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century England, the term "gamester" emerged as a means of denoting the habitual, dedicated gambler. This paper explores the relationship between the emerging concept of the gamester and the first stirrings of medical concepts of addiction and problem gambling in early modern England. I first became interested in the history of gaming through my work in medical history, specifically with regard to the history of addiction. I

stumbled upon this topic while developing a history of medicine course. As I was preparing a section of the course on the history of addiction, it struck me how little was written on the history of addiction prior to the 19th century. At the risk of being too presentist or anachronistic, it is important for me to acknowledge that addiction is, obviously, a modern category first associated with the rise of psychiatry and the growing availability of narcotics in the 19th and 20th centuries. In seeking to uncover some of the first layers of the proto-medicalization of addiction, however, it occurred to

me that there was some pre-existing template prior to the rise of modern psychiatry, as the characteristics of dependence or addictive behaviors did not emerge out of the blue over night in the modern period. Although I am a historian of medicine, I am also a historian of early modern England, so I was particularly intrigued by the possibility of understanding the emergence of such behaviors in the 17th and 18th centuries, a time during which goods with addictive qualities, such as sugar, caffeine and tobacco became widely available. In the process of my research, however, I noticed that this period was also responsible for a significant increase in gaming, particularly card and dice games, and that there were many references to habitual gaming in language that seemed similar to the language of dependence and addiction a few centuries later.

At any rate, even though there were no equivalents to modern neuro-scientific categories of addiction in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, there was increasingly a shift away from moral and religious perceptions of mental illness toward what early modern medical theorists would have referred to as the more generalized category of madness. That's not to say that the discourse of moralizing ever disappears completely from the rhetoric of gaming – indeed it still persists to this day. However, such sanctimony increasingly exists in tandem with attempts to frame the activities of the gamester in medical terms. Over the course of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries the behavior of habitual gamblers who were driven to the depths of despair or the heights of joy was to a greater extent couched in terms of an emergent medicalization of the passions and thus provides an important template for understanding early medical models of addiction before the rise of modern psychiatry.

That observation is what led me to this project and my research at UNLV Special Collections. In seeking to learn more about this topic and the emergence of early models of addiction, I have consulted seminal texts pertaining to the context of gaming, particularly Charles Cotton's *The Compleat Gamester*, one of the first English treatises on gaming that does not vilify games of chance. There were many treatises written prior to Cotton in the sixteenth century, but these generally moralize and condemn gambling as sinful and demonstrative of idleness. Cotton, by contrast, represents one of the first attempts not only to develop a practical guide-book for games of chance, but also to portray the dangers of compulsive gambling as an illness rather than a moral defect. In addition, some of

the other texts I have had the opportunity to consult at UNLV Special Collections include Richard Seymour's *Court Gamester*, an early eighteenth-century guidebook for the games of chess and ombre, and *The Manners of the Age*, an early eighteenth-century moral satire that provides a sardonic commentary on the character of the gamester.

The Context of Gaming in Stuart England

References to games of chance in England appear in medieval sources as early as the twelfth and thirteenth centuries; moreover, the first public lottery in England was drawn in 1569, so gaming was not an invention of the Stuart period. However, over the course of the seventeenth century, England experienced an unprecedented surge of interest in card and dice games. Among the popular games of the period were hazzard, a dice game that was the precursor to the modern game of craps, table games such as backgammon, and card games, including *ombre* and *primero*. Notwithstanding a brief mid-century disruption caused by the turmoil and ensuing solemnity of the Civil War and Protectorate of the Puritanical Oliver Cromwell, to whom gaming was anathema, games of chance continued to grow in popularity, and, ultimately gained a significant boost with the Restoration of the Libertine monarch Charles II upon his return from French exile in 1660. In addition to Charles II's influence, however, there were several other factors that contributed to the growing popularity of gaming in the second half of the seventeenth century. Firstly, the growth of speculative capitalism in general, and more specifically, the legacy of stock and credit companies, along with the creation of The Bank of England in 1695, created a context in which speculation was rampant and the connection between economic wealth and pure chance was reinforced. Secondly, the knowledge of probability theory played a significant role in popularizing gambling. Probability theory first rose to prominence by virtue of the work of Girolamo Cardano, an Italian mathematician and inveterate gambler, whose writing in the mid-sixteenth century, particularly *Book on the Games of Chance*, represented the first text published on the theory of probability. Although Cardano's work is representative of the state of Italian gambling in the sixteenth century, his work was published in England in the mid-seventeenth century and contributed to the growth of probability theory in the English context. English mathematicians did not do much to advance the theory of probability, but they did embrace

the model propounded by Cardano and others. Regardless, the growing acceptance of probability theory is important to the conclusions of this study, because by reducing the risk and uncertainty of bets and separating “chance” from broadly religious beliefs, the new knowledge of probabilities enabled gamesters to exert some control over the whims of fortune and randomness.

In addition to the larger relationship between gambling and new mathematical models associated with a developing capitalist economy, gaming also provided a means of living for some and increasingly functioned as a mode of leisure, entertainment, and polite sociability for many others. By the end of the 17th century, gaming had become so fashionable that it was considered an essential component of polite society; it initially had aristocratic underpinnings, but was widely emulated and popularized by commoners. By the early seventeenth century, gaming had become so firmly entrenched within the English cultural context that it can be found throughout the works of Shakespeare and other dramatists.

Contemporary Responses to Gaming

All this, of course, begs the following question: how was the growing popularity of gambling received by contemporaries, particularly church and state authorities? Prior to the Restoration, perhaps the most widely documented responses were those of moralists. For example, the Anglican preacher, John Northbrooke, who sought to toe the line of Protestant morality, wrote a treatise in 1572 against the evils of theatre-going, dancing, dicing, and other “idle pastimes.” In this treatise, Northbrooke describes dice playing as wicked, odious, and a “filthie sinne.” [Northbrooke, f. M2v]. He also thought diceplaying was particularly vile, because it “opened a doore and a window” into other immoral acts such as “theft, murther, whoredom, swearing, blaspheming, banqueting, dauncing, rioting, drunkennesse, pride, covetousnesse, deceit, lying, brawling, fighting, etc....” [Northbrooke, f. 43v] Incidentally, he also genders games of chance as female, with his description of “diceplaying as the mother and cardplaying as the daughter.” Northbrooke was joined in his aversion to gambling by contemporaries such as Thomas Elyot, James Balmford, and other critics who condemned gambling because it encouraged idleness, challenged divine providence, created social disorder by impoverishing people who got carried away, or encouraged theft and deceit.

In addition to the moralists who typically represented the interests of the Protestant mainstream, prior to the Restoration, the English crown and Parliament sought to regulate gambling mostly in an attempt to maintain social order and prevent disruptions. However, since most gambling activities were officially illegal; it was difficult to develop or enforce any sort of licensing system. Edward IV in the fifteenth century and Henry VIII in the sixteenth, for example legally restricted all dicing and cardplay to the twelve-day Christmas holiday, with the rationale that most people would be celebrating during Christmas anyway, so gambling would not add any extra disruption. Despite the crown’s efforts, however, gambling only continued to grow in popularity and efforts shifted to legislation designed to curb excessive gambling rather than bring all gambling to a standstill. After the Restoration in 1660, Charles II reopened theatres and legalized card and dice games under license, which further encouraged the spread of gambling.

However, there were still attempts to regulate gambling and limit the potential for financial ruin. In 1664, for example, Parliament passed an act against “deceitful, dishonest, and excessive gaming.” Ten years later, furthermore, parliament passed an act to limit the stakes at *ombre* to 5 pounds, which was still a considerable amount of money at the time since it represented the average annual household income in London at the time. Such measures ultimately failed to make a significant dent in the popularity of gaming, as evidenced by contemporary social critiques, such as the London weekly newspaper, *The Connoisseur*, which in the early eighteenth century describes the widespread prevalence of games of chance and the growing incidence of gamester suicide as an epidemic. Notwithstanding the likelihood that such accounts exaggerated their descriptions, there are other indications that gambling continued largely unfettered, such as the increased output of card-makers and the never vacant office of the groom-porter, a royal official charged with the responsibility of overseeing card and dice games at court and resolving any gaming-related disputes.

Although the responses of moralists and state authorities represent some of the most well-known depictions of gaming in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, other scholars and commentators sought to reframe this discourse by shifting the focus toward health-related concerns. Among the first treatises to acknowledge the harmful mental and physical effects of problem gambling, Girolamo Cardano’s *Book on Games*

of Chance, reflected upon Cardano's personal experience with the anguish of gaming addiction. Though originally written in Latin in 1520, by the 1660s, it was translated and published in English. An inveterate gambler, Cardano explained that "gambling arouses anger and disturbs the mind."¹ In seeking to distance the mental damage associated with addictive gambling from moral judgment, moreover, Cardano explained that "it ought to be discussed by a medical doctor like one of the incurable diseases."² It is worth noting, however, that Cardano did temper his description of gambling by asserting that, in moderation, it could also serve as a counter-balance to anxiety. Nevertheless, Cardano's portrayal of habitual gambling as an incurable disease demonstrates the ways in which he drew connections between the lack of self-restraint engendered by the lure of games of chance and the physical manifestations of illness.

Like Cardano, Charles Cotton and Richard Seymour challenged the moral condemnation of gaming by writing practical instruction manuals and explaining the rules of popular games of chance. Cotton and Seymour were not solely apologists for gambling, however, as they recognized that the passions evoked by compulsive or habitual gaming could lead some gamblers to both financial ruin and mental collapse. Representing a shift in the politics of blame and responsibility, writers like Cotton began moving the rhetoric of the habitual gambler away from constructs of sin and immorality and instead couched problem gambling in terms of sickness or ill health. Cotton, the notorious pundit and burlesque poet, in particular, warned his readers of an insidious paralytic distemper that in its mildest form struck its hapless victims as "an itching disease, that makes some scratch the head;" in its more severe form it assaulted its ill-fated prey "as if they were bitten by a tarantula...laughing themselves to death."³ This treacherous affliction, which Cotton likened to an infection, led its victims to be disregarded, despised, and shunned by kith and kin until at last they were forced to make a "despicable exit."⁴ This terrifying specter, described in lurid detail by Cotton, was the result of a pan-European gambling boom that seemingly hypnotized his countrymen by adopting the guise of an "enchanted witchcraft."⁵

Like Cotton, the authors of *The Connoisseur* in 1757, roughly a century after the publication of the *Compleat Gamester*, describe the despair and frenzy associated with games of chance and the financial and personal ruin they frequently occasioned as similar to

being poisoned by wine, concluding that as a result of their fixation, gamblers not only ran the risk of squandering their fortunes, but hastened their own deaths, as though destroyed by "rotteness and filthy diseases." [Connoisseur, 111] Suicide, or self-murder, as it was also known in the 18th century, was thus, according to *the Connoisseur*, a tragic consequence of the folly and passion induced by compulsive gambling. The publication, furthermore, contended that if "this madness should continue to grow more and more epidemical, it will be expedient to have a bill of suicide distinct from the common bill of mortality," which was a weekly mortality statistic compiled and published in the city of London to keep a record of all deaths within the city.

Significance

In seeking to understand the larger historical significance and cultural impact of such depictions, it is clear that an early model of addiction emerged alongside the rhetoric of problem gambling that intersected with two distinct yet pervasive threads of cultural discourse in the seventeenth century. On the one hand, games of chance were performed within the ubiquitous context of a stringent shame culture that reinforced the connections between self-control, honor, and concepts of normative manhood. On the other hand, attempts to understand the intemperate passions and despair frequently occasioned by chronic gambling arose in tandem with evolving concepts of mental illness, particularly the emerging pathology of melancholy and madness as articulated by the Anglican minister and scholar Robert Burton and his contemporaries. Within the lexicon of early modern humoral theory – the prevailing medical and physiological model of the 17th century --madness referred to a generalized category of mental illness typically subdivided into four main categories: frenzy, mania, melancholy, and fatuity, each the result of a specific imbalance within the body. Although there was widespread disagreement among medical theorists about the etiology and physiological causes of madness, as Roy Porter has demonstrated, its diagnostic significance began to increase by the Stuart period due to a combination of contemporary fears of demonic possession, a desire to contain so-called social nuisances, and emerging concepts of mental illness as a bodily rather than exclusively spiritual condition.

In seeking to illuminate the ways in which incipient models of addiction and mental disorder emerged alongside the unprecedented popularity of gambling

in Stuart London, my research demonstrates that a rudimentary pathology of addiction intersected with transformations in the epistemology of reason, the passions, and humoral psychology in the seventeenth century. As a result of this confluence, habitual gambling functioned as an important catalyst for the proto-medicalization of addiction. Though far from devoid of religious moralizing that associated gambling and its accordant loss of restraint with concepts of sinfulness, sloth, and gluttony, seventeenth-century English descriptions of the addictive qualities of gaming depicted the condition as an illness or disease that evoked pity for the ill-fated victim who succumbed to both an inward loss of self-control and outward loss of status and honor in the face of abject desperation and the whims of Providence. Exploring these connections not only demonstrates the ways in which medicine, social expectations, and religion intersected in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, but also sheds light on the historical relationship between evolving concepts of mental illness, stigma and the politics of blame and responsibility in the early modern period.

In differentiating early modern categories of mental illness and subjectivity from modern paradigms of psychological diagnosis, however, we must resist the temptation to interpret concepts of melancholy, madness, or addiction in modern clinical terms that describe pathological conditions distinct from the cultures that created them. Not only were humoral conceptions of the body that underscore early modern perceptions of madness obsolete by the nineteenth century, but in the early modern period, the individual and social components of mental health and subjectivity were inseparable. As Mark Breitenberg asserts, “what Freud and his legacy develop as individual, psychic phenomena exists in the [early modern period] as predominantly social phenomena...in the more public context we associate with shame cultures.”⁶ Within the cultural context of Stuart England, distinctions between the corporeal body and the body politic of society were immaterial, since disruptions in one directly affected the wellbeing of the other. In particular, loss of control and self-restraint were especially damaging because they simultaneously threatened one’s social standing, physical health, and the larger macrocosm of social order. Medical theorists and moralists commonly attributed the causes of such intemperance to the loss of reason and humoral imbalance resulting from an inextricable confluence of social, physiological, and mental trauma.

In seeking to place the torment of problem gambling in early modern England within the larger rubric of addiction, however, it is, necessary to define this nebulous concept. Many scholars seeking the origins of a consistent nomenclature have accepted H.G. Levine’s argument that the clinical concept of addiction did not emerge until the nineteenth century; others, such as Jessica Warner and Harold Skulsky, contend that, despite the lack of standard terminology, by the seventeenth century, there was fairly widespread recognition of the dangers of addictive behaviors among medical theorists and moralists. As Jessica Warner explains in her analysis of alcoholism in seventeenth-century England, early modern attitudes toward heavy drinking conform to larger historical patterns of the medicalization of addictive behavior long before the development of a consistent nomenclature. According to Warner, the Anglican clergyman John Downname and his contemporaries described the excessive or chronic consumption of alcohol as a “madnesse” due to the ways in which it transformed perceptions of reason, emotion, and control of the passions.⁷ Although early modern medical theorists lacked a uniform vocabulary or epistemology regarding addiction, it is worth noting that even in modernity, “addiction” remains notoriously difficult to define.⁸ Inasmuch as consensus regarding any sort of standard historical definition of addiction remains elusive, in part because of the pervasive pejorative or trivialized associations of the term, for the purposes of this study, the medical category of addiction within the context of humoral psychology denotes several key characteristics: imbalance, loss of control, dependence, and perhaps most importantly in the honor-bound society of Stuart England, a loss of shame. Under the purview of humoral theory, such symptoms were at times classified as generalized madness and at others associated with the more specific category of melancholy, the result of an imbalance of black bile. Within the cultural framework of early modern England, the traits of melancholy and addiction coalesced in the identity of the “gamester.”⁹

So, rather than trying to diagnose early modern gamesters with the terminology of addiction that was not culturally available to them, my work turns this model on its head and rejects actors’ categories of addiction; instead, what I am trying to do is understand the medicalization of addiction as a process, as an archaeology, in which historical layers over time accumulate and contribute to what would ultimately be acknowledged as addiction or dependence, and

the proto-medicalization thereof. So rather than posthumously imposing modern diagnostic categories on the past, I am trying to understand how we got to those categories in the first place. Suffice it to say, concepts of addiction are still in flux and remain hotly contested subjects of debate among medical professionals and policy makers.

With regard to the link between gaming and mental illness, it is clear that financial ruin was a factor that led some gamblers to the depths of despair; but it wasn't just the financial consequences of gaming that caused such emotional distress. It is important to recognize that there were compelling social and cultural explanations for such distress that also stemmed from the social dimensions of games of chance. Card playing, in particular, provided an opportunity to temporarily erase social distinctions in a time of profound social stratification, since all participants were, at least in theory, equal in opportunity and subject to the same rules. Gambling, moreover, could potentially offer "relaxation from the mental rigour of public affairs," thus serving a cathartic purpose.¹⁰ At the same time, however, as Michael McDonald asserts, "the elaborate rules of contemporary card games mirrored the intricate rules of manners; violations of decorum were such an affront to the unbreakable conventions of honor that they could lead to suicidal despair, as evidenced by the somewhat embellished tale of Franny Braddock, a well-known Bath socialite who killed herself in 1731 after succumbing to the "hazardous dependence of gambling."¹¹ Honor was a crucial form of social currency in an era during which one's ability to function in society, participate in the market, or engage in any sort of financial transaction was wholly contingent on the quality of one's reputation. Losing one's honor was tantamount to dying a social death in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and could be a significant source of mental and emotional distress, particularly for men for whom honor provided a means of attaining social mobility and recognition.

For that reason, and because honor and card playing were both tied to norms of polite male sociability, the emergent medical discourse of problem gambling, furthermore, draws links between madness and normative concepts of the balanced male body – suggesting that it was most commonly a distinctly male disease. In his description of the paralytical distemper of addictive gambling, Cotton refers to the inability for some of his contemporaries to extricate themselves from the lure of the game as "extreme folly" and "madness

in the highest degree."¹² Exemplifying the extent of this madness, Cotton cites the example of a gambler reduced to the desperation of a drowning man, who "fastens upon anything next at hand. Amongst other of his shipwreck he hath happily lost shame, and this want supplies him."¹³ Within the honor-bound society of early modern England, this loss of shame was inconceivable and could only be attributed to a lack of volition on the part of the afflicted. As Mark Breitenberg asserts, humoral psychology associated the male body with a dangerous fluidity that was in constant need of regulation and control. Addictive gambling and its deleterious social consequences was a potential cause for the "vigilance of male reason" to be overthrown.¹⁴ As Cotton acknowledges, gambling could potentially result in such extreme outcomes that it would either lift the gambler "up to the top of mad joy with success, or plung'd to the bottom of despair by misfortune, always in extreams, always in a storm."¹⁵

The role of the passions in provoking mental illness was further corroborated by Robert Burton's lengthy assessment of melancholy that devoted a chapter to the role of the "love of gaming" as a cause of melancholy. Although Burton chastises the "idleness" of habitual gamblers, he also identifies the "violent passions" engendered by gambling as a cause of "misery, sorrowe, shame and discontent" that "makes sound men sicke and sad and wise men mad."¹⁶ For Burton, who understood melancholy to be an especially widespread social phenomenon, immoderate gambling not only caused grievous harm to mind and body, but also led many to neglect their vocations, abandon common sense, and degenerate into beasts. Trained as a clergyman without formalized medical education Burton describes himself as a physician in inclination only. Nevertheless, his treatise on melancholy, which he authored with the intent of addressing his own struggles with the condition and offering some therapeutic utility to others, provided a widely published encyclopedic compendium of knowledge about melancholy that firmly established the moral and physiological consequences of habitual gambling as a potential cause of madness.

Whereas Burton, Cotton, and Cardano offer important insight into the connection between problem gambling and conceptions of mental illness in the seventeenth century, their work represents a growing trend in the medico-philosophical literature of the early modern period. Although many of their contemporaries reviled gambling and the figure of the gambler as tantamount to sin and sloth, Burton,

Cotton, and Cardano represent an emerging attempt to diagnose, classify, and potentially treat both the moral and physical effects of addiction as a particularly pitiable category of madness. In seeking to explore the incipient pathology of addiction in Stuart England, this project demonstrates that the unprecedented popularity of gambling intersected with the stringent demands of shame culture and evolving concepts of mental illness to produce a model of addiction that reflected a culturally specific confluence of humoral psychology, concepts of honor and normative manhood, and the expanding acceptance of gambling in tandem with the ability to calculate probabilities and the potential profit resulting thereof. My intention in articulating the conclusions of this study is not to advance a neo-positivist argument or suggest that a clinical concept of addiction ahistorically emerged in isolation from the culture in which it was created in the seventeenth century, but rather to demonstrate that just as modern concepts of addiction are notoriously mired in an intricate synthesis of neurobiological research, cultural stigma, and debates about social causes and consequences, so too was the incipient awareness of addiction encapsulated in the figure of the gamester entangled in a profoundly complex fusion of moral, philosophical, and medical theory in early modern England.

Endnotes

- 1 Girolamo Cardano, *The Book on Games of Chance*
- 2 Cardano, 5.
- 3 Charles Cotton, *The Compleat Gamester* (London, 1674), B1r.
- 4 Cotton, 20.
- 5 Cotton, 123.
- 6 Mark Breitenberg, *Anxious Masculinity in Early Modern England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 12.
- 7 Jessica Warner, "Resolv'd to Drink No More: Addiction as a Pre-Industrial Construct," *Journal of Studies on Alcohol* 55 (1994): 685-91.
- 8 Skulsky, 17.
- 9 Adam Zucker, "The Social Stakes of Gambling in Early Modern London," *Masculinity and the Metropolis of Vice, 1550-1650*, ed. Amanda Bailey and Roze Hentschell (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2010), 76.
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- 11 Michael McDonald and Terence R. Murphy, *Sleepless Souls: Suicide in Early Modern England* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990), 279.
- 12 Cotton, 16.
- 13 Cotton, 20.
- 14 Breitenberg, 12.
- 15 Cotton, B1-B2
- 16 Robert Burton, *The Anatomy of Melancholy*, 160-161.

About the Author



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Number 36 | October 2016
Series Editor: David G. Schwartz

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