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978-0-521-39113-9 - Sporting with the Gods: The Rhetoric of Play and Game in American Culture

Michael Oriard

Excerpt

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Prologue

“The Game and the Nation”

To borrow a simile from the foot-ball field, we believe that men must play fair, but that there must be no shirking, and that success can come only to the player who “hits the line hard.”

Theodore Roosevelt, *American Ideals* (1897)

Boys, you’ve heard the new rules read. Now the question is: what can we do to beat them?

Buck Ewing, baseball manager (c. 1900)

In 1902, American readers opened a novel (often enough to make it the number-one best seller of the year) on a scene of frontier sport. A group of cowboys is trying to lasso a seemingly uncatchable wild pony, an animal as adept at avoiding the rope as a “skilful boxer” at ducking opponents’ hard rights and lefts. To entertainment-starved passengers from the East, belatedly entering the dusty Western town in which this drama is set, the whirling, plunging horses and the laughing, cursing cowboys make for grand “sport,” with the wild ponies clearly the reigning champs. But someone, the Easterner on the train who reports the tale, suddenly notices a smoothly tigerish, well-muscled young man on the outskirts of the melee, who now enters the contest. With a barely perceptible motion he flicks his rope once, the noose snaking out straight and falling true. Just like that, “the thing was done.” The pony abruptly tame as a choir boy, a fellow passenger marvels, “That man knows his business.”

Thus was introduced to American readers a figure who would become the prototype for the nation’s most popular fictional hero over the next

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half-century. The novel, of course, was Owen Wister's *The Virginian*, whose story was already familiar to many readers in 1902, as it had appeared in several installments of *Harper's* magazine over the previous decade. Woven into a novel now, Wister's western sketches offered readers an episodic narrative that follows the adventures of the "slim young giant" of this opening scene through a series of performances that make Western life seem joyously unending sport. "Cowboys at their play" in the local saloon nearly come to violence over poker, but they more innocently also compete in verbal contests in which wit wins respect without threatening physical harm. At the center of this frolicsome company stands the hero of the pony-roping. The several sportive incidents of this opening sequence culminate in the young man's bet with a "rollicking" friend that he can trick a salesman out of his bed in the overcrowded boarding house. The saloon empties, as the rest of the cowboys pour out to witness the outcome of the Virginian's little "game," bursting into hilarity and applauding with appreciation when the half-dressed city man bolts into their midst with terror in his eyes and a triumphant Virginian in his bed. The cowboys explode in a whirling, raucous dance through the streets, "prancing and roaring" and sweeping the entire male community into varied "gambols," muting their merriment only when they learn that a local woman is sick. Even the laconic Virginian, whose "internal mirth" has not cracked his deadpan performance, at last lets loose in "wildly disporting himself." "What world am I in?" the narrator wonders as he drops to sleep several hours later at the end of his first eventful day in the West. A "great playground of young men," he answers himself when he has begun to understand.¹

With the morning sun the cowboys return to work, but their spirits never wander far from play. The Virginian remains a boy among boys as well as a man among men in this Western playground. As a cowboy, the Virginian is a ranch worker who rises to foreman and by novel's end to owner and entrepreneur. But to abandon this hero altogether to a world of labor would have dulled his aura irreparably. A fundamental tension between work and play lies at the heart of the novel, together with the more obvious conflicts between East and West, civilization and nature, male and female definitions of society. Wister found his solution in an elaborate exposition of cowboy life as a "game" – play, but play with a purpose – out of which he developed a full-scale political and moral philosophy. Although the Virginian enjoys his boyish pranks, in his serious moods life to him is more truly a hard game of chance and skill, in which *quality* will win out. "Equality is a great big bluff," the Virginian tells the schoolteacher Molly; life is full of winners and losers, born unequal and remaining unequal in their ability to play the hands they're dealt (144). Wister dramatized this theme most conspicuously

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"THE GAME AND THE NATION"

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midway through the novel in three chapters titled "The Game and the Nation," Acts First, Second, and Last (the entire episode appeared initially as a single story in *Harper's* in May 1900). At the center of these chapters is an elaborate contest between the Virginian and his archenemy Trampas; at stake is the loyalty of the men for whom the Virginian, as ranch foreman, has responsibility on a cattle drive and their return by train. Trampas plays against his hated rival by attempting to lure the men to the Montana goldfields. But the deeper stake is human worth and national ideals. In the perennial conflict between "the quality and the equality," Wister's narrator declares that the American way is summed up in the phrase, "Let the best man win." The Virginian and Trampas compete both to determine the "best man" and to validate America's commitment to meritocracy.

On the train taking the steers east, while the cowboys play a "harmless game of poker," the Virginian elucidates this deeper game. Having read Sir Walter Scott's *Kenilworth* as part of his program of self-education under Molly's guidance, he explains to his Eastern friend, our guide throughout the narrative, that the great men and women of English history and literature all played a kind of political poker, their relative achievements measurable as skill at this game. "Victoria'd get pretty nigh slain sliding chips out agaynst Elizabeth," the Virginian declares; then in describing Shakespeare's Prince Hal he makes his point more explicit:

Now cyards are only one o' the manifestations of poker in this hyeh world. . . . If a man is built like that Prince boy was built (and it's away down deep beyond brains), he'll play winnin' poker with whatever hand he's holdin' when the trouble begins. Maybe it will be a mean triflin' army, or an empty six-shooter, or a lame hawss, or maybe just nothin' but his natural countenance. Most any old thing will do for a fello' like that Prince boy to play poker with. (154–6)

Although the narrator is only puzzled, the reader knows that the Virginian and Trampas are engaged in such a game of poker themselves.

The narrator in fact, representing an effete Eastern upper class whose values the Virginian repeatedly challenges, becomes an unwitting chip in this contest. When the poker becomes verbal, the Virginian scores a point then loses several more when his tenderfoot friend falls for one of the cowboys' tall tales. But he recoups all his losses, sweeping the table in effect and winning the loyalty of his entire crew, when his last, most elaborate play leaves Trampas soundly beaten. As the men await their train, whether to Billings with the Virginian or to Rawhide with Trampas, the Virginian forages for enough frog legs to feed the hungry passengers. Before a partly knowing, partly uncomprehending audience of townsfolk, Eastern travelers, Indians, and his own men, the Virginian

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plays his hand. The meal eaten, he spins a tale of frog-ranching in Tulare County where wages are high but the work risky: The frogs not only threaten to break through their fence, they also prove extremely difficult to brand. With Trampas hanging on every word, the Virginian draws out the story with increasingly preposterous details, then concludes his melodrama of greed and revenge, “Frawgs are dead, Trampas, and so are you.” A friend jumps in, “Rise up liars, and salute your king!” The men are his and Trampas is beaten “at his own game” (200–6).

Defeat in a liars’ contest would seem of little consequence to men who live a hard physical life, but “the game” has potent connotations in this Western world. Most simply, it is but another name for the Western code that governs the Virginian’s actions toward Trampas throughout the novel. Clashing first with his enemy over an actual poker game in the opening chapters, then in the liars’ contest for the loyalty of the other cowboys, the Virginian settles the matter at last in the novel’s climactic shootout. Following a series of “move[s] in a game” in which the Virginian’s friends assure “no foul play” (456, 479) – and against the wishes of Molly, whose wedding to the hero must await the outcome of this manly business – the final contest is waged as the code demands. Man to man and by the rules, the Virginian faces his enemy and beats him fairly, while Molly waits for him after all.

That “the game” serves in *The Virginian* as the fundamental metaphor for life is obvious; what must be more carefully noted is the heterogeneous nature of this game and its specific and deep connections to Progressive Era American culture. The central contest between hero and villain is set explicitly against the rule of law: a higher code rooted in “the ancient eternal way between man and man,” as opposed to the way of “the great mediocrity” that “goes to law in these personal matters” (463). The woman, naturally, fails to comprehend this manly game. Molly plays her own little “games”: the evasive and hypocritical games of love (132–3) that contrast sharply to the open contests of the Virginian and the other cowboys, even the scoundrel Trampas. The masculine and feminine worlds are utterly separate, colliding most painfully when Molly learns that her lover has lynched a man as the code requires (we’ll return to this crucial scene) and when he must choose to meet Trampas, man to man, before he can meet her, man to woman, for their wedding. The Virginian would be no man to marry her should he violate these priorities.

A second individual outside the forthright masculine world of the game is a traveling “missionary to us pore cowboys,” as the Virginian calls Reverend MacBride, a bigoted Calvinist who preaches innate depravity and predestination to men whose simple virtues dwarf his own claim to sanctity. The Virginian’s sporting code amounts to a natural religion,

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presided over by an umpire God who "plays a square game with us if He plays at all" (220). When the bishop who is to marry Molly and the Virginian acknowledges that the groom's meeting with Trampas must take precedence over the church's sacraments, the novel suggests that *true* religion and the cowboy's game are entirely compatible. In fact, "the game" amounts finally to a man's calling in both the theological and the secular senses of that word. Late in the novel, the hero describes to Molly someone returning "afteh he had played some more of the game." Molly, as a woman, is puzzled. "The game?" she asks. "Life, ma'am," the Virginian translates. "Whatever he was a-doin' in the world of men" (349–50).

Our hero's own "game" in this sense becomes clear only at the end of the novel. In what seems almost an afterthought, an answer to curious readers who might wonder what happens to the cowboy after marrying the schoolteacher, the narrator reports that over the years he has traded his cattle for a coal mine and other "various enterprises," and has become "an important man" in the newly prospering West. This anticlimactic telescoping of the Virginian's mature years actually amounts to the most significant element in the novel's relationship to its culture. In the cowboy's metamorphosis into an entrepreneur, his values and elaborately worked out code come to represent not the loftier ethic of a vanished pastoral West but the morality of American capitalism in the era of Rockefeller and Carnegie. They also represent work transformed into play. In the novel's final pages, the Virginian honeymoons with Molly in a Western Eden, where the man becomes a boy again, at play with his bride in their earthly paradise, then after this rejuvenation returns to work and duty. Molly worries "that his work would kill him," but the narrator doubts it. The man who plays at his work by the rules of the game is no mere drudge on a treadmill. In *The Virginian's* last chapter, the cowboy hero has become a sporting entrepreneur, his game the energizing spirit of a commercial age.

The triumph of "the game" in the Progressive Era

The Virginian became a number-one best seller in 1902 (and continued to sell well enough to rank fifth the following year) not by formulating an original worldview but by incorporating commonly held ideas into a compelling narrative formula. This novel, then, not only became the *ur*-text for the most popular literary and film genre for the next six decades, it also expresses the *Zeitgeist* of its own age in a particularly effective way. To speak casually of "the game" of business, or politics, or social relations, or what have you, has become so commonplace today as to seem an unconscious use of our vernacular language.

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But such usages have a history, and the turn of the century marks the period when this metaphor first became both conspicuous and pervasive. Those who wrote about “the game” in the Progressive Era did it self-consciously, with a sense of expressing serious ideas through the metaphor, not just of echoing a familiar colloquialism. And what they expressed touched many of the deepest beliefs and anxieties of the age.

A taxonomy of “the game” in the Progressive Era yields at least four different types, each of them present in Wister’s novel. In the first place there is the “game” as a social/political philosophy: the game played by the Virginian against Trampas for position and power. This is the game of the Western code, of men in nature, but it is also the game of the hero’s personal honor, its other roots lying implicitly in his Southern heritage. An altogether different kind of “game” – an anti-game really – appears in the Virginian’s courtship of Molly: a contest between a man and a woman with love at stake, in which “winning” is possible only when the game is abandoned. And finally, there are two “games” in which some sort of “salvation” (rather than merely secular reward) is at stake: on the one hand, the “game” of a man’s calling, as the hero describes it to Molly; on the other, a more desperate “game” barely hinted at in *The Virginian* but suggested by the unequal dealing of hands by Chance or Fate for the poker game of life. These last two games represent two perspectives on the same metaphysical issue: “liberal” and “conservative” accounts of human possibility. In the first, winning is assured for the deserving and persevering – the “quality,” as the Virginian puts it, but in a more obviously transcendent sense now; in the second, losing is inevitable, but a sort of tragic victory is possible for those who fail heroically by not backing down.

An astonishing range of writers in the 1890s and early years of the twentieth century explored these “games” in a variety of contexts. The new generation of male novelists, including Richard Harding Davis, Stephen Crane, Frank Norris, Theodore Dreiser, and Jack London, as well as numerous lesser known figures, seems to have been obsessed with imagining life in terms of these various games. Davis, Crane, Norris, and London all wrote about actual sports in their journalism and fiction, but they more revealingly used conspicuous sporting metaphors in their writing about war, business, and survival. Crane claimed that football taught him all he needed to know about war in order to write *The Red Badge of Courage*; however dubious, the claim itself is revealing, and the novel does in fact use sporting metaphors in striking ways.² More typically, Crane’s short fiction reveals an obsession with chance, sometimes with characters who are actual gamblers, at other times through metaphor. Dreiser and London shared this preoccupation with chance, and they also shared with Frank Norris a deeper fascination with a sort

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of Nietzschean sportsman who engaged the powers of the universe in a cosmic contest. In Dreiser's Cowperwood novels, Norris's unfinished trilogy of the wheat, and much of London's work, the gods and their nearly godlike adversaries quarrel in the heavens while punier mortals merely watch, dumbstruck with awe and their own mediocrity.

The least read of these writers today was the most popular and influential in his own time. Richard Harding Davis was the beau ideal of "manliness" in the 1890s and early 1900s: handsome enough to model for Charles Gibson; like Crane, Norris, and London, an athlete himself and a writer of sports journalism; with Crane and London, among the most famous war correspondents of the age. Davis's fiction is full of "soldiers of fortune" who are governed by ethical codes derived from the athletic field, but it is his war correspondence that most strikingly suggests the power of "the game" as a metaphor of masculine heroism. Davis's account of the Greco-Turkish War opens with a description of the opposing armies as "two football teams lined up for a scrimmage." He compared scenes in the Boer War to a "crowd on the bleaching boards at a base-ball match" and to Derby day at Epsom Downs, the muddy uniforms of French soldiers in World War I to "those of football players on a rainy day at the end of the first half," the Rough Riders in Cuba to gridiron heroes "moving in obedience to the captain's signals." For Davis, there seems to have been no difference between the heroism of the football field and the heroism of the battlefield, and no irony in describing the one in terms of the other.³

To these major figures of America's literary "strenuous age" can be added dozens of others. In addition to the Western fiction that quickly settled into popular formulas, stories about politics and business in particular became vehicles for elaborating on "the game." "Frontrunners" and "dark horses," "holding all the cards" and daring "bluffs" peppered the political lexicon of both the smoke-filled rooms and the fictional renderings of them, usually to expose a corrupt politician as a game-playing villain. An old Irish pol in Alfred Henry Lewis's *The Boss* (1903) explains to his protegee, "City Government is but a game; so's all government." A crusading reformer in I. K. Friedman's *The Radical* (1907) denounces the game's basic unfairness by describing life as "a game of blindman's buff through which the poor stumble, blindfolded, exploited by wealth, mocked at by law, abandoned by justice."⁴ The businessman, on the other hand, evoked more ambivalence. Not only Norris, London, and Dreiser, but such writers as Will Payne, Frederic C. Howe, and Henry Kitchell Webster routinely portrayed speculation as gambling, business transactions as competitive games played less for the monetary stake than for the exhilaration of the play itself. Their attitudes were deeply divided over the consequences of such contests. In their novels,

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compassion for the powerless majority, for whom dollars meant survival rather than sport, competed with fascination for the titanic player who often loomed grandest in heroic defeat.

“The game,” in short, expressed deeply felt American beliefs at the turn of the century, part worldview, part fantasy. Americans had no monopoly on this metaphor, but at least within the Anglo-American world there were significant national differences. The English version of “the game” – in Kipling’s fiction, in Henry Newbolt’s “*Vitaï Lampada*” (with its endlessly quoted refrain, “Play up! Play up! and play the game”), in the patriotic rhetoric of World War I – seems to have been more consistent and uniform: an expression of the gentleman’s code of conduct that dates from the Renaissance and was reconstituted in the nineteenth century as the public-school ethos. This “games-ethic,” as one of its historians has termed it, served in late-Victorian and Edwardian England as virtually an official creed for the ruling classes at home, at war, and throughout a far-flung empire.⁵ In America, on the other hand, in a society whose class divisions were considerably less stable, “the game” was more diffuse, contested, and contradictory. At times the characterization of power and powerlessness, wealth and poverty, success and failure as the stakes in a game exposed the immorality of the winners or the amorality of a system that recognized no higher values; at other times it celebrated this system – implying an open contest and a fair field, each player with an equal chance to win, the winners deserving their good fortune and the losers having no one to blame but themselves.

I will not presume to account fully for the ubiquitous sporting rhetoric of the age, but it is possible to identify some of its most important sources and uses. Race was a factor: Celebrations of combative sportiveness in much Progressive Era writing were directly tied to Anglo-Saxon racial destiny and were motivated primarily by the perceived dangers of dilution, even eclipse, by hordes of European, Asian, and Southern black emigrants to Eastern cities. Class was also a factor: in this case, not a comparable fear of the rising underclass, but in some cases a justification of the power and privilege already held by the ruling classes, more often the ambivalence of a privileged, but not fully empowered, middle class. Denunciations of these games voiced the complaints of the powerless and their advocates.

And gender was a factor, too, particularly for the male novelists I have been using as examples. Among those who most celebrated “the game,” many were motivated by fear that American culture had become dangerously “feminized.” Essays in leading journals with titles like “The Effeminisation of Man,” “The ‘Effeminization’ of the United States,” and “Feminization in School and Home” sounded the alarm that America needed to regird its loins to assure preeminence in a world of mechanistic

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force and Darwinian struggle.⁶ For writers the crisis seemed most acute. The dominance of women as both readers and authors, particularly since the 1850s, had by the 1890s created deep anxiety in a new generation of male novelists. In an age characterized by the nearly total estrangement of genteel literary culture from the world of masculine power in business and politics, literature and authorship themselves had become culturally defined as feminine. Norris, London, Upton Sinclair, and other writers promoted writing as *work*, not the aesthetic byproduct of leisure, and actively championed a "masculine" literature to counteract acculturated femininity.⁷ Wister's *Virginian* speaks out for this literary program when he plays critic of the books that Molly gives him to read. He has no use for George Eliot and the "frillery" of Jane Austin's *Emma* and *Pride and Prejudice*; Browning seems false and silly to him – "a smarty" (320, 349). Among Shakespeare's characters, he prefers Mercutio to Romeo ("no man") and finds the subject of *Othello* too shameful to write down; but the first part of *Henry IV* has the stuff of life.

The *Virginian* sounds here like Frank Norris, who attacked the effeminacy of recent American fiction on similar terms and called for a new "virile" literature, concerned with "that great, grim complication of men's doings that we call life." Fiction "is not an affair of women and aesthetes," Norris insisted in 1901:

The muse of American fiction is no chaste, delicate, super-refined mademoiselle of delicate roses and "elegant" attitudinizings, but a robust, red-armed *bonne femme* who rough-shoulders her way among men and among affairs, who finds a healthy pleasure in the jostlings of the mob and hearty delight in the honest, rough-and-tumble, Anglo-Saxon give-and-take knockabout that for us means life.

Norris's literary champions were Wister and Stephen Crane, Richard Harding Davis and above all Kipling (the foremost among the Anglo-American spokesmen for the "Great Game" of life).⁸ "The game" in its manifold versions – with its connotations of activism, adventure, strenuousness, risk, aggression, competition, all leavened by fair play – became the favorite metaphor of a generation of male writers obsessed with manliness.

The gender imprint on "the game" was clear to women writers as well. In Edith Wharton's *The House of Mirth* (1905), Lily Bart as a woman cannot play the "game" of business and speculation but is expected to play by the rules of a very different "game": attracting a husband or trading sexual favors for financial assistance. Money and power lie at the root of both kinds of games, but women are banned from the one and victimized by the other.⁹ The game thus reflected the unequal gender arrangements within American society, but also the peculiar relationship

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of belles lettres to those arrangements, by which powerlessness could become a major concern of any writer, male or female.

Those who embraced the image of “the game” fantasized or celebrated a way of living whose appeal had to be greatest for those in position to win life’s prizes. Those who dissented from this affirmative view reminded their readers that games had losers, too, some of whom had little chance from the start due to gender, race, or class; while even the winners might gain their victories through less than admirable traits. The game seemed truly sporting to some, merely devious to others; and to others yet, it simply disguised brute force. But all of these writers agreed that life in Progressive-Era America was in some striking way a “game.”

Sport and American values

In the metaphors I am describing, each element reflects on the other. The fact that business, say, was characterized as a game, rather than a battle, a calling, a duty, or a burden, tells us something important about cultural attitudes toward business during this period. From the other direction, that business could be celebrated by characterizing it as a game tells us something about games as well: that they were sufficiently important, or at least prominent, in the culture to be available as metaphors. This situation did not exist just a generation earlier. In the 1830s, Alexis de Tocqueville declared Americans “the most serious-minded people on earth,” a judgment echoing Frances Trollope’s belief, after traveling through the American West in the same period, that she “never saw any people who lived so much without amusement.”¹⁰ For the English statesman James Bryce to be astonished in 1905 by Americans’ “passion for looking on at and reading about athletic sports,” the culture had to have undergone a dramatic transformation.¹¹

Trollope’s and Bryce’s countrymen had much to do with that change. Victorian England was, quite simply, “the world’s game-master”;¹² Americans looked to the mother country for leadership in athletic matters as surely as they imitated British art, literature, and other cultural expressions. In the nineteenth century, as sport became highly organized in England and was imprinted with the ideology of the British ruling class, Americans read Thomas Carlyle, Herbert Spencer, Thomas Hughes, and Charles Kingsley on the values of sport as keenly as they read Dickens and Thackeray. Compressing a complex subject to a handful of key ideas, I would emphasize that the Victorian cult of athleticism began with a concern for physical health in the 1830s, gained momentum as sport was increasingly seen to be an agent for both the social control of the working classes (as “rational recreation”) and the character-molding of their future rulers, and reached its jingoistic extreme with the notion that cricket and