

The WAGER, Vol 4(37) - Comparative Vignettes of Women with Gambling Problems

September 14, 1999

Below are two third-person depictions of women with gambling problems. The first dates from 1812, and was included by M.L. Weems in his verbosely titled tract, God's revenge against gambling exemplified in the miserable lives and untimely deaths of a number of persons from both sexes, who had sacrificed their health, wealth, and honor at the gaming tables."¹The second vignette is drawn from the final report of the National Gambling Impact Study Commission², published earlier this year. One hundred and seventy-seven years separate these accounts, and an examination of the two sources allows us to reflect on the multitudinous social changes that have occurred during the interim.



"Poor Miss Braddock! Her sorrows have long since been hushed into the grave,

and her unhallowed dust reunited with its native element. But still in the eye of weeping fancy, she is seen in all her looks of woe, as on that fatal morning, when, with unnatural hands, she destroyed her own existence. Her hair still hangs in neglected tresses on her heaving bosom- frequent and deep are her sighs, ending in piteous groans- her eyes are red with weeping; but now they weep no more: keen anguish has dried their source, and, "fixed on vacancy," they dart their fiery glare through the long black mazes of tortured thought. Poor distracted Girl! She is thinking, though now, alas! too late, of the bright honors once placed within her reach. The daughter of a British General- and blest [sic] with wit and wealth uncommon, she might have shone in the first circles of a great metropolis... But alas! deceived [sic] by demons whom she mistook for friends, she was led to a gaming table, which, in a few feverish years, swallowed up all! Not leaving even a wreck behind! Her bloom, her beauty, her fame, fortune, all, all, sacrificed to the most detestable of vices!.. Then gathering courage from despair, she resolves to snatch the sponge of fate, and at one bold dash to blot out all for ever. Whereupon starting up, with a smile of desperation, she dressed herself in her richest suit, as if preparing for her wedding night, and with a silk girdle, usually worn by the ladies in those days, she very deliberately hung herself over the door of her chamber. Her maid servant coming in, found her black in the face and dead. Examining her mouth, which was bloody, it was discovered that in her last agonies she had bitten off a part of her tongue." (Weems, 1812)



"Mary began visiting the riverboat casinos in Kansas City, Missouri, shortly after her husband of 40 years died. "It was something to do. The lights, the music, there were people around. You could forget where you were at," she said. March

9, 1997, marked the one-year anniversary of her husband's death. She decided to stay out that night to help forget the pain. She won several jackpots, including one of \$28,000. From then on, Mary became a regular. Casino workers knew her by name, and treated her as a VIP. In 1997, she received 14 W-2 forms from the casino, each representing a jackpot of over \$1,200. But behind the wins were many, many losses. The money from her husband's life insurance, his \$50,000 annual pension, and Mary's monthly social security payment all went to the casinos. She then racked up \$85,000 in debt on her 14 credit cards. She was forced to file for bankruptcy. Not once did anyone in the casinos ever ask this 60-year-old grandmother if she had a problem with gambling. Instead, besides the free rooms and meals at the casino, she was also bombarded with marketing mailings. "They know you have no control," she said. "They do everything they can to lure you in." (NGISC, 1999)

Although these are only two cases, comparing them raises some interesting questions about how our perceptions of gambling problems have changed (or failed to change). In each vignette, we might consider: 1) On whom is blame for problem gambling placed? 2) What quantitative and qualitative measures are used to support classifying each woman as a problem gambler? 3) What, if anything, does each vignette imply that could have been done to prevent these problems from arising? 4) How, if at all, would these passages differ if the subjects were men? By revisiting historical descriptions of gambling and its associated problems, we can better understand the nature of the discourse that pervades the topic today. Despite any differences in availability, legalization status, and related issues, at least one commonality unites the two depictions—seemingly irrational behavior and self-destructive actions that defy easy explanation.

Sources: 1Weems, M.L. (1812). God's revenge against gambling exemplified in the miserable lives and untimely deaths of a number of persons from both sexes, who had sacrificed their health, wealth, and honor at the gaming tables. Philadelphia, PA: Author. 2National Gambling Impact Study Commission. (1999). National gambling impact study commission final report. Washington, DC: Author.

The WAGER is funded, in part, by the National Center for Responsible Gaming, the Massachusetts Department of Public Health, the Andrews Foundation, the Addiction Technology Transfer Center of New England, the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Administration Services, and the Center for Substance Abuse

Treatment.