Steiner, Kristina

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8. (The Lack of) Female Representation and Diversity in Male-Dominated Sports as Depicted in Walter Tevis's *The Queen's Gambit* (1983)

Kristina A. Steiner, University of Bamberg 0009-0009-5882-8058

Abstract

Throughout the history of mankind, sports have primarily been considered an all-male sphere with women pushed to the sidelines. If women were to seriously participate in athletics, they were ultimately considered deviant since they acted against their "natural female development" (Colker and Widom 48). Based on the common belief that the 'weaker sex' should not exhaust itself by bodily work or physical exercise to sustain health for childbearing and motherhood, a powerful form of biological sexism was consolidated that inhibited female representation and participation in sports for years to come. Although developments in women's rights and feminism during the last two centuries have caused this sexist ideology to become more peripheral, women today remain underrepresented in disciplines typically considered 'masculine'.

This paper explores the (lack of) female representation and diversity in male-dominated sports, focusing on competitive chess as represented in Walter Tevis's *The Queen's Gambit* (1983). The themes of discrimination and marginalisation are central to this examination, as demonstrated by a closer look at the female protagonist, Beth Harmon, and her experiences as a young professional chess player. Reflecting on and incorporating real-world challenges such as patriarchal power structures and misogyny in sports, this paper finds that Tevis's novel does not allow a female professional to prevail without major setbacks and obstacles. It shows a female athlete who is severely inhibited by numerous strokes of fate, fuelled by drug abuse, isolation and self-hatred. Moreover, it seems that excelling in a 'male sphere' such as competitive chess is integral in forming Beth's deviant femininity which, in turn, threatens the traditional patriarchal system and thus leads to her being punished through mechanisms of ostracism and self-destruction.

Keywords

Competitive chess, discrimination, diversity, femininity, male-dominated sports, sex differences, *The Queen's Gambit*

Throughout human history, sport has been viewed primarily as a man's domain. From Ancient Greece through the Middle Ages to the Victorian era, women were pushed to the sidelines. Professional athleticism seemed an inadequate pastime for women as social scripts and perceptions relegated them to the domestic sphere. Women who sought to participate seriously in sports were often not only discouraged but discriminated against, marginalised and othered by being labelled as 'unfeminine' (Hargreaves 154, 171). The widespread belief that the 'weaker sex' should avoid physical exercise in order to maintain health for maternal and marital duties, such as childbearing, nursing, and motherhood, constructed a powerful form of biological sexism that has inhibited female representation and participation in sports for centuries (46). Although developments in women's rights and feminism over the last two centuries have pushed this sexist ideology to the periphery, women are still underrepresented in disciplines typically considered 'masculine' (e.g. rowing, weightlifting, or intellectual sports such as chess). By seemingly acting against their supposedly "natural female development" (Colker and Widom 48), female athletes challenge societal gender norms and thus threaten the pillars of hegemonic masculinity and patriarchal ideology.

According to Plaza et al., there has been a keen gender stereotyping of sporting activities across different cultures for centuries, distinguishing between typically 'masculine' and 'feminine' sports (203, 208). Previous studies have shown that sports which "involved physical contact and the use of force or heavy objects (e.g., rugby, team sports, fighting sports)" are more likely to be perceived as disciplines appropriate for men, whereas sports that focus on "gracefulness and expression (e.g., dancing, ice skating, gymnastics)" are generally considered more apt for women (203). However, gender stereotyping also extends to intellectual sports, as can be seen in competitive chess. Although chess is not necessarily associated with physical strength or acute combativeness – traits stereotypically associated with hegemonic masculinity –, female players are generally deemed inferior compared to male players (Maass et al. 231). Moreover, there is a decisive lack of female professionals in chess to begin with, especially at the top levels (Stafford 430; Bilalíc et al. 1161; Chabris and Glickman 1041).

In this paper, I want to shed light on the (lack of) female representation and diversity in male-dominated sports, focusing on competitive chess as represented in Walter Tevis's *The Queen's Gambit* (1983). This paper aims to examine the themes of discrimination and marginalisation through a closer look at the female protagonist, Beth Harmon, and her experiences as a young professional chess player. By examining real-world issues like patriarchal structures, discrimination, and misogyny, this paper contends that Tevis's novel portrays the female professional's success as contingent upon major challenges and setbacks. Excelling in a traditionally male-dominated sphere such as competitive chess becomes central to shaping Beth's

deviant femininity, which disrupts conventional patriarchal norms and, as a result, leads to 'retribution' through social exclusion and self-destructive tendencies.

This paper is divided into two parts. The first part reflects on women in professional sports from a cultural-historical perspective, followed by an overview of competitive chess. The second part provides a literary analysis of Tevis's *The Queen's Gambit*, focusing on Beth Harmon's character and experiences as a professional female athlete to demonstrate how her deviant femininity plays a role in the major setbacks and obstacles she faces in her 'uphill battle' to success.

A (Brief) History of Female Representation in Professional Sports

Although sports have existed since the onset of humanity, their documentation only began around 3,000 years ago in ancient Greece (Bellis). Women, however, have been largely absent from the historiography of sports (Kennard and Carter 16-17; Saavedra 439) and sports have been "characterized as a domain of preference for men" for more than three millennia (Plaza et. al. 202). As a male-governed and therefore patriarchal sphere, "sport embodies and recreates the principles and practices of gender inequality and male dominance and privilege in other realms of life" (McCrone 1-2). According to Spears, there has been a certain "paradox of acceptance of the few and rejection of the many" when it comes to the history of women in sports, and there have been various turning points in history where the role of women in sports has been renegotiated (3).

Looking back to ancient Greece, for instance, women were outright discouraged from athleticism (Saavedra 440). Paradoxically, although female athletes were not allowed to participate in the infamous Olympic Games, they were famously celebrated in Greek mythology. There, the women were often presented and praised as "horseback riders, hunters, swimmers, and sprinters" (Spears 3). However, exceptions existed. On the island of Crete, for example, women were allowed to hunt, drive chariots, "and engaged in bull-grappling or bull-dancing" (3). Spartan women were also known for racing and wrestling and began physical training already as young girls (Saavedra 440; Spears 4). Nevertheless, female athleticism was a privilege reserved for the few and not practised by the many.

Fast-forwarding to the Middle Ages, exercise was less a means of leisure and more a part of the daily work of most ordinary people – both men and women (McCrone 2). Sport was therefore known more as entertainment at fairs and festivals, where both men and women could partake "in ball games, foot races and contests of strength" (2). At such festivities, some women worked as acrobats – also known as "gleemaidens" – who entertained as tumblers and dancers (Spears 6; McCrone 2). However, it was at the other end of the social spectrum, among the upper classes, that women's athletics began to flourish. Although many of the popular disciplines

of the time (e.g. archery, jousting, and fencing) were largely associated with military training and therefore with men, there is evidence of noblewomen spending their pastimes hunting, horseback riding, and hawking (McCrone 3). Furthermore, Spears acknowledges that by the end of the fourteenth century, some upper-class women were ice-skating, hunting with bow and arrow, or playing hand tennis (5). Nonetheless, the primary athletic role of medieval women was passive and consisted mainly of being "spectator[s] who awarded prizes and provided inspiration and applause at [men's] tournaments " (McCrone 3).[26]

Until the mid to late 1800s, the relationship between women and sport was tense. According to the cultural ideals of Victorian society, a woman's proper place was at home. Men, on the other hand, "were identified with Culture" and predominantly associated with the public sphere, thus dominating the public domains that were off-limits to many women – including business, politics, and sports (Hargreaves 42-43). Unlike men, who were seen as "naturally aggressive, competitive and incisive—well suited to the rigours of the games field" (43), women were perceived as the 'weaker sex' and unable to "cope with the same level of physical activity as men" (Vertinsky 2). As a result, Victorian women were not only considered less athletic than men, but also completely "unsuited to take part in strenuous physical activities and competitive sports" (Hargreaves 43).

The Victorian ideal of "true womanhood", often aspired to by middle- and upper-class women during this period, further reinforced these stereotypical notions (Spears 7-8). The pursuit of this ideal became a material reality for many Victorian women. According to Hargreaves, "[s]ufficient numbers of middle-class women followed the dictates of fashion and wore restricting clothes, ate little and took no exercise, so that, not surprisingly, they would often faint, become ill and behave submissively, thus confirming the medical stereotype of the 'delicate' female" (47). Many contemporary medical experts echoed this belief and supported the idea that women were intellectually and physically inferior to men (Spears 9). Women were therefore advised to limit their energy reserves to motherhood and domestic management, and to refrain from athletic and intellectual exertion. Nevertheless, some medical practitioners advised women to engage in "*gentle forms* of physical exercise [...] taken in reasonable amounts" (e.g. gymnastics) to benefit their health (Hargreaves 48; emphasis in original). However, participation in non-recreational sports was still frowned upon as it harboured potential for physical, mental, and moral perils such as 'unwomanly conduct' (Vertinsky 22). This changed, however, when women gained access to higher education.

[26] Referring to the early modern period, McCrone also notes that Tudor ladies were known to have "played real tennis and battledore and shuttlecock" (3). However, there was a distinct lack of "physical play and exercise in [noblewomen's] education"(3), which again demonstrates that sport – even for noblewomen – was considered superfluous according to contemporary social conventions and patriarchal ideals.

By the 1860s, dissenting voices had emerged, "challenging ideas in the education of women, revolting against the clothing fashions imposed on them and demanding their legal and political rights" (Spears 7). The suffragette movement and other equal rights advocates were instrumental in helping women gain access to higher education and ushering in a new era for women in sports (McCrone 21). The ensuing developments in women's education became the main catalyst for the legitimisation of "more active forms of sport and exercise for women" and led to a rapid increase in the number of women in competitive sporting activities (Hargreaves 56). Many disciplines were innovated, modernised, or invented, while physical education for girls and women eventually became an integral part of the curriculum in most colleges and universities (57). Gradually, women became involved in competitive sports and joined intercollegiate teams; basketball, tennis, and swimming, for example, became popular but were not as recognised as men's intercollegiate sports programmes at the time (Spears 10-11).

For much of the twentieth century, debates about ideal femininity and women's roles in society dominated cultural discourses. Particularly in the 1950s and 1960s, the period in which Walter Tevis's *The Queen's Gambit* is set, conflicting notions of femininity were widely debated and renegotiated. With the men previously at war, many women not only took up jobs in service and industry but also participated in industry-sponsored sports (e.g. baseball, swimming) and engaged in team sports beyond intercollegiate and interscholastic contexts (Spears 12-13). With many women expected to maintain the home, care for the children, and support their husbands (Martins Lamb 1), they had less time or opportunity for exercise outside the home. Nevertheless, after the war, "[t]housands of women finished high school and entered college seeking more and more sport opportunities" (Spears 13). For those who wanted to pursue a serious athletic career, however, opportunities were few and far between.

Overall, the 1950s were a time of ostracism and submission for women. Following Festle, "athletically inclined women were few, were marginalized, and faced serious obstacles to competing in a supposedly 'masculine' activity" (1). Women in sports often encountered disapproval and systematic undervaluation; they were often classified as amateurs, treated with disrespect and rarely taken seriously when competing in male-run tournaments (1). At the same time, many worried about being perceived as 'unfeminine'. Hence, women's sports "had been tacitly identified as 'ladylike' or 'unladylike'" (Spears 13). By mid-century, there still reigned the widespread belief "that sport **masculinized** its practitioners" (Festle 3, emphasis in original) because it consisted of a number of components associated with stereotypical masculinity: "strenuous use of the body; muscles and sweat; aggressive use of space; potential for physical contact; loose clothing; competitiveness; selfishly motivated assertiveness; achievement-orientation; public display of emotions; discipline" (3).

Following these perceptions, sporting disciplines were systematically distinguished into those that were acceptable for women and those that were not, while gender essentialist notions were reinforced. According to Spears, "[s]wimming, gymnastics, riding, skiing, and tennis were among the accepted sports" (13). However, ball sports such as basketball or volleyball and even track racing were considered 'unladylike', discouraging many women from participating and causing spectators to question the femininity of the competitors (Spears 13-14; Festle 4).[27]

It was not until the civil rights and feminist movements began to change the social conscience of the country that the role of women in sports began to progress. During the 1960s and early 1970s, the focus of many women's rights groups was the elimination of sexual discrimination, which included equal treatment in sports (Bell). Gradually, "women made great strides in professional sports" and were celebrated for their athletic prowess (Spears 14). Following the fight for equal rights and the prohibition of sexual and racial discrimination, Title IX of the Educational Amendments was passed in 1972 in the US, declaring that no institution receiving federal aid could exclude any person from its educational program or (sports) activity on the basis of sex (14).

Female Representation in Competitive Chess as a Male-Dominated Sphere

Although participation rates of women in sports have increased tremendously across Western countries and other parts of the world, there is still a discrepancy between many disciplines regarding their societally perceived gender appropriateness. While many sports can be performed by any gender, some are still deliberately framed as either *feminine* or *masculine* (Pahlke 29). Typically, men's sports have a higher social standing than women's sports, and women have to work harder to gain the respect of their male competitors. As mentioned above, many women who wish to compete in male-dominated sports face "role conflict[s] between femininity and athletic prowess" (Duda 144). Breaking with traditional femininity is, thus, often met with marginalisation and discrimination (including sexism and harassment), but there also seems to be an imbalance in the winning ratio. According to Pahlke, women seem to have less chance of winning in male-dominated disciplines than male competitors (29). With competitive chess, this seems to be no different.

Chess is often described as "an intellectually demanding activity where men dominate at the top level" (Bilalić et. al. 1161). This definition suggests not only an underrepresentation of women but also a performance gap between men and women. But why is that? The reasons for these disparities have varied over the years. Previous

[27] Not only were women of colour excluded from professional sports due to racism and systematic discrimination (Morris), but they were doubly marginalised because they often lacked the resources to gain access to universities and prestigious sports such as tennis and equestrian (Spears 13).

studies have pointed to the so-called "stereotype threat" as a relevant, yet contested, cause (see Maass et al. 2008; Rothgerber and Wolsiefer 2014; Stafford 2018). This psychological effect occurs when "minorities underperform solely because they're aware of a stereotype that people of their group do worse" (Smerdon). Indeed, studies conducted among online chess players have shown that when the subjects "believed they were playing an opponent of the opposite sex, female players were less likely to win" (Stafford 430). However, Stafford found in his study that the female chess players in his sample "display[ed] a boost in performance when playing men compared with playing women" (433).

At the heart of stereotype threat, and gender stereotyping in general, are two perspectives on women's sporting performance: on the one hand, it reinforces the idea of women's athletic inferiority to men; on the other hand, there is the underlying notion that women who "perform exceptionally well" are often considered unfeminine (Maass et al. 233). These assumptions are consistent with hegemonic ideals of traditional femininity and patriarchal views of women in male-dominated athletic and intellectual fields (e.g. science, mathematics, mind sports). The disruption of gender expectations and, ultimately, patriarchal power structures can thus lead to mechanisms "try[ing] to control, disempower, and contain these 'leaks'" (Saavedra 444).

Yet, stereotype threat alone cannot explain the underrepresentation of women in chess, as it only touches on the psychological framework of some participants and varies in different tournament settings. Recent analyses have suggested that the research literature on stereotype threat may suffer from publication bias, which further calls into question the reliability of the phenomenon (Stafford 430). Nonetheless, women also fall behind when it comes to winning rate and their Elo rating, which is a measure of skill level based on the individual player's results against other rated players (Bilalić et. al. 1162). Currently, no woman has ever won the title of World Chess Champion and only 106 of the 2,000 best players in the world, known as grandmasters, are female (*Chess.com*). This disparity is reflected in the overall world rankings: there is currently only one woman, Hou Yifan (China), in the top 120 and only nineteen female players are in the top 500 (*Chess.com*; Baccellieri).[28] The gender gap at the top level of competitive chess can be further explained as a consequence of different participation rates (Chabris and Glickman 1145; Stafford 434). To explain this in mathematical terms, "more extreme values [e.g., best performance] are found in larger populations" (Bilalić et. al. 1163), suggesting that the best-performing players tend to be part of the larger group – namely male players. However, many scholars suggest that the participation rates are also influenced by

[28] Hou Yifan is currently ranked #101. See https://www.chess.com/ratings/women. This search was conducted on 14 September 2025.

other factors, such as gatekeeper effects, culturally manifested differences, and gender expectations (1161).

Gender stereotyping and sexist attitudes towards women have been commonplace in professional chess throughout the past century, particularly during the 1960s. In 1962, the famous grandmaster Robert 'Bobby' Fischer, who was one of the real-life inspirations behind Tevis's *The Queen's Gambit*, made the following statement about women in chess: "They're all weak, all women. They're stupid compared to men. They shouldn't play chess, you know. They're like beginners. They lose every single game against a man. There isn't a woman player in the world I can't give knight-odds to and still beat" (Fischer qtd. in Rodriguez). The denigration of female athletes is not only evident in the comments of some prominent male chess professionals, such as Bobby Fischer or Gary Kasparov,[29] but also in the media coverage of the time. This was particularly the case with Lisa Lane, another pioneering chess champion whose story helped to inform Tevis's protagonist.

Although Lane only started playing chess at university, she became the US women's champion after two years of training and immediately attracted media attention (McClain). In the early 1960s, she was one of the most unusual chess players and the first to ever adorn the cover of *Sports Illustrated*, which characterised Lane as "a girl who is not only beautiful but a chess champion as well" (Baccellieri). The respective coverage of her persona is reminiscent of contemporary discourses on women, which focused heavily on appearance rather than individual achievement.[30] Cantwell, the author of the article, repeatedly acknowledges Lane's attractiveness but also highlights "her volatile temper and extraordinary competitive drive [which] seemed to project her into crisis after crisis" (Cantwell). Although Lisa Lane's rise to success as a female chess champion in the mid-twentieth century was both unusual and remarkable, her success was ultimately overshadowed by her physical appearance and young age (McClain). At the same time, she was criticised for her 'unfeminine' attitude in competitions, which was accentuated by her aggressive behaviour and competitiveness. Similar structures can be observed in fictional representations of female athletes competing in male-dominated disciplines as can be seen in Tevis's *The Queen's Gambit*. How and to what extent the novel's protagonist faces discrimination and other obstacles will be examined below.

[29] In a 1989 interview, Kasparov also questioned the place of women in chess but eventually admitted his mistake in 2017 (Watson).

[30] Such stereotypical and superficial portrayals of women can also be found in chess magazines (Maass et al. 233). For further reading on the inequalities in chess culture and discussions on gender stereotypes in contemporary chess, see Jennifer Shahade's *Chess Bitch: Women in the Ultimate Intellectual Sport* (2005).

Being One Amongst Many: The Hardships of Success as a Female Professional as Depicted in *The Queen's Gambit* (1983)

From the start of the story, Beth is repeatedly described as an outsider – whether in the all-girl orphanage she grows up at, high school, or the male-dominated world of competitive chess. Throughout the book, Beth is repeatedly ostracised for her appearance, age, and personal interests. Even as a child, she features an androgynous look, describing herself as "a plain, brown-haired orphan girl in dull institutional clothes" (*QG* 28). Although all the girls at the Methuen Home for Orphaned Children are required to wear the same uniform and hairstyle (4), Beth's behaviour and interests set her apart from the majority. Unlike other girls her age, she does not play with dolls or cares much about 'girl things'. Instead of playing with dolls, she makes a habit of going to the basement to play chess with the caretaker, Mr. Shaibel. Beth's outsider status is additionally complemented by her good grades and overall performance at school with seemingly minimal effort. Early on, she becomes "the best student in class, even though she [is] the youngest" (6).

Similar dynamics can be observed after Beth is adopted and enters public high school. At Fairfield Junior High, she is once again considered the odd one out and is bullied for not being able to afford the trendiest clothes and for being the smartest in class. Because of that, she is also not pledged to any of the school's girls' clubs, which further marginalises her.[31] Still, Beth cannot seem to find a way to fit in with girls her age – especially in terms of her appearance. Unlike "[t]he girls who belonged to the clubs [and] wore lipstick and eye shadow; Beth wore no make-up and her hair still fell over her forehead in bangs" (52). Soon, Tevis's protagonist begins to constantly compare herself to other girls her age and women on magazine covers whose "hair shone [...] [and] lips were full and red" (53) – a clear reference to 1950s beauty standards and Hollywood idols like Marilyn Monroe and Rita Hayworth. Repeatedly, the young girl feels insecure about her looks, thinking her body "still [looks] like a boy's" (58), but has nobody to talk to. Unlike at Methuen – where Beth befriends and idolises the older, much more feminine and mature Jolene –, she has no friends at her new school. Instead, Beth escapes into playing chess, which is the only time she ever feels "not out of place" (28). In the 'male sphere' of chess, however, she is marginalised from other angles.

For most of her professional career, Beth stands out from the crowd. At her first tournament at a local high school at the age of eight, Beth is not only the only girl competing but also the youngest player present. During the competition, most of the players avoid eye contact and seem unable to comprehend that they have been beaten by a "little girl" (29). This becomes the basic tenor for most of Beth's career.

[31] It is only when Beth makes the headlines in *Life* magazine that she is invited to one of the girls' club parties, but is soon "astounded by the dullness of the evening", which is filled with discussions "about boys and dating and clothes" (96).

In all her future competitions, the teenager appears to be an oddity, often being the only female player and usually "the youngest there" (92). She is also often underestimated and frequently patronised. At the Kentucky State Championship (KSC), for instance, Beth is told at the registration desk that there is "'no women's section'" and that she will be "'eaten alive'" if she enters the open instead of the beginners' section (61). However, Beth stands her ground, refuses, and wins the competition anyway. This is also one of the few tournaments where other female players are explicitly mentioned. In fact, "there were four female players [including 12-year-old Beth]", but they were "all clumped together at the far end, playing against each other" (61). In this instance, the female players are not only spatially marginalised, but they are also ranked so low that it is much harder for them to climb up the ladder of success. As in real-life chess, women's participation rates decrease drastically at more professional levels of competition. But even at the leaderboard, Beth sometimes feels alone and "[gets] the sense that chess was a thing between men, and she was an outsider" (103).

It is not just women who are sparse in Tevis's chess microcosm; there is a general lack of diversity. At the KSC, Beth quickly notices that there are "no colored people" present (60). This continues throughout her entire career, especially at higher-level tournaments. At the US Championship, for example, Beth is again quick to acknowledge the lack of diversity when she plays against a Californian, of whom she comments, "[a]lthough he wore his hair in a kind of Afro, he was white—as all of them were" (152). The exception, however, is the International Invitational in Mexico City, where players from Brazil, Mexico, Chile, Argentina, and the Philippines compete. Yet only one player is mentioned by name – Octavio Marenco, a 34-year-old grandmaster from Brazil (117). Apart from Marenco, no other marginalised character is given any agency. On the contrary, the female competitors are merely described as "a Mexican official's niece, at Board Twenty-two, and an intense young housewife from Buenos Aires" (120).[32] The lack of diversity in Tevis's novel is also evident in its focus on American, Soviet, and Western European chess players and tournaments. Of course, the novel can be considered authentic in its reflections on the international chess champions of the 1950s to the early 2000s and the general tensions between the USA and the USSR during the Cold War, but this focus only

[32] The marginalisation of women of colour in sports is further epitomised by the character of Jolene, Beth's childhood friend from the orphanage. In a conversation with Beth, Jolene admits to being jealous of Beth's talent and her "'happy home'" after leaving Methuen (194). Jolene, who did not leave Methuen until she was eighteen, expresses that she had to work very hard to win a scholarship to university by "'doing serious volleyball'" (194). Although she is adept at a number of disciplines beyond volleyball, including handball, tennis, golf, and wrestling, she does not excel as Beth does at chess (195). But as a black woman, Jolene cannot be picky. Although she never wanted to be a sports coach, she cannot afford to go to university any other way than by accepting a scholarship for Phys. Ed. Unlike Beth, she has no family connections and cannot make a living as a professional athlete.

underlines the overall 'whiteness' of the discipline. Given that the majority of chess professionals today come from diverse cultural backgrounds and nationalities beyond the US and the Russian Federation,[33] Tevis's depiction of the male-dominated domain of chess not only reinforces the marginalisation of women but also reiterates the marginalisation of ethnic minorities.

In the novel, Beth Harmon is a thorn in the side of her male opponents. Not only is she the youngest female professional in a male-dominated sport, but she also radiates an aggressive and indomitable will to fight. The young girl is fiercely ambitious, easily angered, and merciless. She breaks with stereotypical gender expectations, which irritates many of her competitors. After all, Beth acts unexpectedly non-conformingly. As a teenager, she continues to be patronised and underestimated by many male players and officials; indeed, many try to lecture her or get furious when "be[ing] beaten by a woman" (127). Others either ignore her or, like former chess prodigy Benny Watts, take pleasure in mocking Beth and belittling her talent (87, 147). At one point, one of Watts's female friends even comments that his reaction is simply the result of "male chauvinism", which rings true for most of his male colleagues (167).

But even before Beth becomes a professional athlete, she is faced with a lot of opposition and incomprehension about her seriousness about chess. From the outset, she is told that "[g]irls don't play chess" (7). Her adoptive mother, Mrs. Wheatley, who embodies the traditional 1950s American suburban housewife, is even more irritated by Beth's desire to pursue "'a game for boys'" (46). After all, she says of herself, "'I haven't the mind for it. But my father used to play'", thereby contributing to the reproduction of gender stereotypes about chess (46). The media, however, are enticed by Beth's story. In an interview with *Life Magazine*, Beth is described as "A Girl Mozart [who] Startles the World of Chess" (94). The fact that she is being compared to a musical prodigy rather than a sporting idol only adds to the lack of seriousness ascribed to chess as a rather niche sporting discipline and to Beth's role within this sphere. Moreover, the then fourteen-year-old is mainly asked questions about her private life, such as whether she has a boyfriend and how it feels "'[b]eing a girl among all those men?'" (93). In the then-published article, Beth is described as "a young, unsmiling girl with brown eyes, [and] brown hair" who "is quiet and well-mannered" but "out for blood" (95). However, Beth is disappointed to find that the magazine "'didn't print half the things [she] told them'" (95). While men would certainly be asked about their sporting achievements and ambitions, Beth – just like Lisa Lane – is more readily reduced to her looks, gender, and private life.

[33] In the current top 100 chess ratings, there are eleven US grandmasters and six grandmasters who officially play under the Russian flag (e.g. Ian Nepomniachtchi [#15], Alexander Grischuk [#59]). After the invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, there have been six further Russian players who now play as neutral players under the FIDE flag. This search was conducted on 14 September 2025 (*Chess.com*, https://www.chess.com/ratings/standard/all).

However, there is another discriminatory distinction between the upbringing of male and female chess prodigies in Tevis's novel. Early on, we learn that Beth was neither encouraged nor taught how to play chess by anyone except Mr. Shaibel. Instead, the then-eight-year-old improved her skills by reading and practising on her own. This stands in stark contrast to many of her male opponents, who were encouraged from an early age, such as Benny Watts or Georgi Girev – the latter of whom started playing at the age of three and plans to become world champion by the age of thirteen. Tevis's protagonist eventually comes to the realisation that "if she had [had] half [Georgi's] chances, she would have been as good at ten" (206). But in Methuen, chess and Beth's deviance were not considered worthy of encouragement; on the contrary, they led to her being punished for misbehaviour (37).

Mental Health Issues and Substance Abuse

With professional sports come immense pressure to perform and stress, which can often lead to mental health problems. In fact, "women [in competitive sports] are about twice as likely to develop depression, anxiety, or an eating disorder as men" (Carreathers 9-10). This can also be observed in Tevis's protagonist. Beth, too, struggles with anxiety, substance abuse, and addiction during her teenage years. However, these can be traced back already to her time in the orphanage. Shortly after arriving at the institution at the age of eight, Beth is swiftly introduced to Methuen's daily 'pill-schedule' of vitamins and addictive tranquillisers. When Beth takes the tranquillisers for the first time, she immediately senses their effect: They "loosened something deep in her stomach and helped her doze away the tense hours at the orphanage" (*QG* 3). Tevis's protagonist soon develops a serious addiction to the pills, often saving them during the day to take all at once before bed to enhance their effect and to cope with her anxiety and loneliness. However, when Beth develops an interest in chess, she finds that winning has a similar effect to the drugs. After her first victory, Beth describes the feeling as "as wonderful as anything she had ever felt in her life" (11). As a result, Beth becomes addicted to winning and alternates between taking tranquillisers and later, at sixteen, alcohol.

Overall, Beth's anxieties stem from fears of failure, loneliness, and loss of control. Her fear of being left behind stems from childhood trauma and the loss of her mother in a car accident. For her, chess becomes both her main coping mechanism and a source of one of her worst fears – losing. As her career progresses, Beth learns to numb her fears by taking Librium, a prescription drug for insomnia and anxiety that can quickly lead to dependence and overdose (Yerby). Though after getting drunk for the first time at sixteen, Beth reckons that "[with] the pills there was a long wait before the swooning came into her stomach [... while the alcohol] gave her the same feeling with almost no wait" (*QG* 102). Especially before important matches, Beth's anxiety turns to paranoia and she gradually turns to drinking. Her addiction

culminates when her adoptive mother dies on the trip to Mexico, leaving Beth to fend for herself once more (143).

Although Beth's initial episode of alcoholism subsides after she wins the US championship against Benny Watts, she slips back into her addictive patterns after losing a second time to Borgov in Paris. Feeling "physically ill" on the flight back to Kentucky (177), she begins to realise her own limitations and fears that she will never be good enough to become world champion. Doubting herself and losing her will to fight, Beth spirals down a rabbit hole of self-destruction. No longer playing chess, taking showers, or eating proper food, Beth cuts herself off from the outside world and develops a new daily routine:

> The mornings were horrible, but she managed them. [...] By noon she usually passed out. She would awake [...], her head reeling. [...] Sometimes the drink had to be forced against a rejection of it by her body, but she did it. She would get it down and wait and the feelings would subside a bit. [...] Lunches came from a can [...] By the third week she was taking a Gibson up to bed with her on the nights she made it upstairs to bed [...] and drank it when she woke up in the middle of the night. (184-85)

By this time, Beth has lost control of herself; she no longer excels but even humiliates herself by being defeated in an amateur tournament (188-89). As a result, Beth fears that "she had somehow damaged her talent" (189), which becomes the tipping point for the protagonist to finally seek help. Jolene, her friend from the orphanage, takes Beth to the gym to improve her physical fitness and prepare her for the Grand Invitational in Moscow the following year. By quitting alcohol and tranquillisers, Beth returns to her former self, finally putting her self-destructive behaviour behind her and refocusing on her main goals in life: firstly, to defeat Borgov in Moscow and secondly, to become the first female World Chess Champion.

Beth's 'uphill battle' to success is marked by self-destructive tendencies, addiction, and isolation. As such, Tevis's protagonist serves as a fictional example of the real-world difficulties faced by female athletes in professional sports, especially in male-dominated disciplines. Unlike her successful male counterparts, such as Benny Watts or Vasily Borgov, Beth is constantly forced to prove herself as a worthy competitor because of her gender and age. One exception is a brief reference to Paul Morphy, a US chess champion from the nineteenth century who was said to have developed severe hallucinations at the height of his career. In Tevis's novel, Morphy provides a foil for Beth; he is described as a player of great talent who was known to be "well-mannered, well-dressed, smiling, [and] moving the big pieces with small, ladylike, blue-veined hands" (146). Much like Beth, Morphy is an outsider and displays a deviant and somewhat feminised masculinity, which is evident in the way his hands are described and how tenderly he behaves when around people. The fact that both Morphy and Beth seem unable to cope with their successful careers as

chess champions and their variations of feminine traits play into stereotypical notions that only 'real' men can truly excel in male-dominated sports.

Conclusion

For centuries, women had almost no opportunities to participate and gain recognition in sports. It was not until "the advent of the equal rights movements" that women were finally able to find a place as active participants in sports (Bell). Especially in male-dominated sports, as the name already suggests, women remain a minority. They are less likely to become part of their elite ranks due to unequal participation rates and other factors such as culturally manifested differences and societal gender role expectations.

For Walter Tevis's protagonist, chess was never just a "'game for boys'" (46). However, as the youngest and only female player in almost all competitions, Beth is always the outsider. As a result, she is often the target of people's lack of understanding, strange looks, and disrespect. Even at a young age, she encounters incidents of discrimination and sexism, underlining the unequal playing conditions between men and women within the realm of competitive chess. Her deviant femininity, which is largely influenced by her non-conforming attitudes, appearance, and fascination with chess, seems to be the catalyst for many of her experiences of ostracism and discrimination. In direct comparison to other girls, Beth is considered the odd one out at Methuen and Fairfield Junior High because of her ineptitude (and sometimes deliberate unwillingness) to conform to the standards of female beauty and conduct that were popular in mid-century America. In the 'male sphere' of chess, too, Beth is once again marginalised; only this time because of her enormous talent, competitiveness, and relentless ambition – traits traditionally ascribed to hegemonic masculinity.

Thus, Beth is dually marginalised because of her deviant femininity, which threatens the patriarchal system that is evident both in society and in the microcosm of competitive chess. As a result, Tevis's protagonist is repeatedly punished by mechanisms of ostracism and self-destruction, which are particularly evident in her patterns of addiction, isolation, and insecurities. Nevertheless, Beth Harmon defies the odds and eventually develops into the "serious, professional, [and] sufficient" woman we see at the end of the novel (149).

Like other male-dominated sports, competitive chess seems to function as a blueprint for women's journey of fighting for equal rights and gaining recognition – not only as equal sports competitors but equal human beings in modern societies. In this way, Tevis's novel depicts the larger web behind many socio-cultural spheres that have systematically discriminated against women and minorities for centuries. Tevis's fictional world of professional chess is just another arena in which "[w]omen

aren't disproportionately outnumbered just at the top of the leaderboard. They're disproportionately outnumbered *everywhere*, from youth competition up" (Baccellieri). By constructing Beth Harmon as a doubly marginalised character with traits of contemporary female chess champions like Lisa Lane, as well as male flagship athletes such as Paul Morphy or Bobby Fischer, she is representative of all those women who want(ed) to partake seriously in sports but are hindered and rejected by the heteronormative gender scripts that are still largely at work today.

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