As early as 1868 Anthony Trollope warned that sports have a most serious influence on the lives of a vast proportion of Englishmen of the upper and middle classes. It is almost rare to find a man under forty who is not a votary of one of them; – and among most men over forty the passion for them does not easily die out.

It would be a fallacy, then, to suggest that sports, games, and play were primarily Edwardian occupations. Certainly games and sports have been played for centuries, and historians such as Neil Tranter, Mike Huggins, and Richard Holt rightly point to the growth of sports throughout the Victorian era. Yet while Victorians presided over a tremendous growth in sports and games, it was Edwardians who saw their apotheosis. As Andrew Horrall observes about the sport of cycling alone, ‘though the first amateur cycling club was founded in 1869, it was three decades before the sport boiled over in sensation’ (54).

Ultimately, it was Edwardians, not Victorians, who witnessed the increased acceptance of sports, games, and play both on an international and domestic level. To realize this, one perhaps needs only to remember that the Olympic Games were revived in 1896 and brought to English soil in 1908. Moreover, the Victorian view of sports as manly public schoolboy pursuits shifted significantly by the turn of the twentieth century with the advent of the figure Sally Mitchell calls the ‘New Girl,’ an adolescent female who carved out a space of her own, a space which
included sports. Edwardians, more than their Victorian predecessors, increasingly grappled with and accepted the roles that sports and games could have in the lives of women and children. Victorians’ unease over the gendered nature of croquet culminated in Edwardians’ embrace of lawn tennis and cycling, and the emergence of popular children’s leisure movements such as Robert Baden-Powell’s Boy Scouts and eventual Girl Guides.

Unsurprisingly, then, Edwardian literature of childhood is filled with images of playful children, and particularly of female children exploring and experiencing the possible gendered dimensions of play. Nowhere is this more the case than in moments of domesticity. In Frances Hodgson Burnett’s *The Secret Garden* (1911), Mary Lennox may play happily outside in the garden, and happily in the little Indian room, but once she meets her cousin Colin in the house, it is all his, and her playful tendencies must succumb to performing ayah-nursing acts and serving as native guide for his explorations of the garden, house, and Indian-room. As critics such as Elizabeth Lennox Keyser and others have long noted, the book shifts in focus from girl-child to boy-child, and by its end seems to forget Mary altogether in its restoration of the lords of the great manor. By the end of the text, Colin Craven has house, garden, and even story. But Mary’s actions and the plural ‘lords’ (one an adult, one a child) suggest another preoccupation affiliated with domesticity in Edwardian texts of childhood: the play of adulthood and domesticity itself.

In texts as varied as Henry James’ *What Maisie Knew* (1897; revised 1907), J. M. Barrie’s *Peter and Wendy* (1911), and Edith Nesbit’s *The Story of the Amulet* (1906), children are depicted as playing at being grown-ups, often in the form of playing house or maintaining domestic order, but in so doing they show how much adults play at it, too. Adulthood is threatened by these texts, which at every turn promise to give adults the lie, to expose their deepest secrets, and reveal the intersections between reality (often dark) and play (often equally as dark). More to the point, these texts consistently suggest that home and play cannot co-exist. When they try to dwell together, they only do so uncomfortably: home is an interference to true play in these texts. It is as if in trying to play together play realizes it is in competition with itself: one can play at home – at ‘playing house’ – in these texts, but doing so reveals that domesticity itself is a game, a system of order, acts, and imagined space imposed on individual players often, though not always, by choice. Domestic play has its own rules, some even necessary for survival, but many inventive embellishments. Through their attempts to separate play and home, adult writers often try desperately to keep play-worlds