Response Page

The following responses were posted on the H-France discussion list in response to Thomas M. Luckett's review of Thomas M. Kavanagh, *Dice, Cards, Wheels: A Different History of French Culture*.

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The original review may be found on the H-France web page at:
http://www.h-france.net/vol6reviews/Vol6no109luckett.pdf

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Thomas M. Kavanagh
thomas.kavanagh@yale.edu

I am grateful to Thomas Luckett for his careful review of my book. As a teacher of literature, I even take the judgment by a historian that I manage to turn "tired clichés" of "second-rate sociology" into "first-rate literary criticism" as a compliment.

But neither Professor Luckett nor I is a mathematician. And I found somewhat cavalier his suggesting that basic probability theory is over my head. As he put it, summarizing a point of disagreement between Pascal and the chevalier de Méré, Kavanagh writes, "Were I to bet that, with one die, I could throw a six, the odds of my doing so would clearly be equal if I were allowed three throws. In fact the probability of obtaining at least one six in three throws is $P = 1$ $(5/6)3 = 91/216$, or roughly 0.42. Likewise, they would be substantially in my favor were I allowed four throws (p. 52). In my favor, yes, but not substantially so, since P is now roughly 0.51. Pascal and Méré both clearly understood this. Does Kavanagh?""

Kavanagh hopes he does. And he thought he made it clear, with the "For Méré, it all began around a dice game" just before the shift to the hypothesizing first-person which Luckett quotes, that the " there is not Kavanagh, but Méré as imagined by Pascal in his letter to Fermat."

I may well be the victim of my own over-indulgence in free indirect discourse, but it is perplexing that Professor Luckett should do the math for me and shake his finger when, in a note to my analysis, I summarize at length the mathematician Pierre Humbert's application of these same principles of probability theory to the thornier question of how many throws it would take to have an even chance of throwing a double six with two dice.