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Thomas M. Kavanagh, *Dice, Cards, Wheels: A Different History of French Culture*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2005. viii + 251 pp. Figures, appendix, notes, index. \$45.00 U.S. (cl). ISBN 0-8122-3860-5.

Review by Thomas M. Luckett, Portland State University.

In the preface to *Dice, Cards, Wheels: A Different History of French Culture*, Thomas M. Kavanagh, professor of French at Yale University, summarizes the twin ambitions of his book: “to draw at broad strokes what could be called a cultural history of gambling as a social practice,” and “to articulate what gambling tells us about the broader culture of which it is a part” (p. vii). He comes much closer to achieving the second goal than the first. After an initial chapter on western attitudes toward chance and risk since Aristotle, Kavanagh presents a series of nine loosely-connected essays that explore gambling as a theme in French literature from the thirteenth century to the twentieth. Each essay focuses on a particular literary classic or small group of related classics, or—in the final chapter—on a pair of films. The sorts of questions that one would expect to see answered in a true cultural history of gambling go largely unexplored. How many people in France gambled, and what were the average sums won or lost? Who gambled with whom? Did time spent gambling together tend to strengthen or undermine patronage networks? What was the role of the royal court in setting fashions for gambling? How did the incidence of gambling correlate with that of dueling and other forms of criminality, or with the rise of disposable income? After turning the final page, the reader still does not know.

Yet Kavanagh answers other, perhaps equally interesting questions as he shows how a series of great French writers have depicted the allure of gambling, and used it as a metaphor for something larger and more subversive. Gambling, they have implied, offers a brief but exhilarating liberation from the rules of modern society, and indeed from the constraints of time itself. In the words of Anatole France, it allows us to experience “in a second months, years, a lifetime of fear and hope” (p. 104). Even for the puritanical Blaise Pascal, there is something about gambling that gives us access to the incomprehensibly infinite and timeless. French writers have thus tended to use stories about gambling as a vehicle to protest what they perceived as most stultifying, rule-bound, and predictable in their society. If he has not written “a different history of French culture,” Kavanagh has perhaps written a “different history”—in the sense of a noteworthy and highly original history—of French literature.

My attempt in the previous paragraph to summarize his thesis should not imply, however, that Kavanagh imposes a single, ready-made interpretation on a wide variety of works. Indeed, perhaps his greatest strength is his appreciation of the rich textures of the corpus of French literature, and of the individuality of the works he has chosen to examine. He also appreciates the individuality of the games themselves (lansequenet, baccarat, whist, etc.), whose rules he explains clearly and relates to metaphorical themes in the literature that describes them. This review cannot summarize each chapter in the detail it deserves, but only suggest a few of Kavanagh’s many insights.

Chapter two concerns a play of the early thirteenth century, Jehan Bodel’s *Le Jeu de Saint Nicolas*, which brings together sacred and profane themes by juxtaposing a lowly game of dice (the original *jeu de hasard*) and a crusade to convert Muslim Africa. The rest of the volume focuses on the seventeenth to twentieth centuries. Chapter three examines the works of Blaise Pascal, who with Pierre de Fermat founded probability theory as a branch of modern mathematics by studying the average expected winnings of games of chance. In the *Pensées*, Pascal went on to denounce the activity of gaming as a

sinful diversion from one's wretchedness before God. Yet in a famous passage of the same work, he described the decision to believe in God as a "wager" whose average expected winnings are infinite. Often viewed as precociously modern, even existentialist, Pascal becomes in Kavanagh's hands more of a reactionary whose blasphemous "reconciliation of the gambler's edge and the mystery of salvation" would please no one. "Caught between aristocratic pretense and bourgeois merit, Pascal's gambling pilgrim would have no place in the world to come" (pp. 66-67).

The next three chapters deal with writings of the later seventeenth and eighteenth centuries: libertine novels (chapter four), the memoirs of Casanova (chapter five), and theater (chapter six). Of greatest interest to this reviewer is his depiction in chapter four of the Enlightenment debate over the morality of a card game called "brelan." Rather like American poker, brelan involved bluffing. Success, that is, depended on raising the wager in such a way as to deceive one's opponent about the strength of one's hand. The marquis de Mirabeau thought that brelan should be outlawed since it encouraged shrewdness and subterfuge. Kavanagh shows that such novelists as Claude Prosper Jolyot de Crébillon drew a comparison between brelan and the ruses of sexual seduction. Finally, Kavanagh argues, brelan was a metaphor for the French aristocracy for whom, stripped of real political power by the centralizing monarchy, maintenance of status had become a constant game of bluff.

As Kavanagh enters the macabre world of nineteenth-century fiction, the corpses begin to pile up. He focuses separately on Honoré de Balzac's *Wild Ass's Skin* (chapter seven), Barbey d'Aurevilly's "Beneath the Cards in a Game of Whist" (chapter eight), and Paul Bourget's "A Gambler" (chapter nine), helpfully providing an English translation of this last story as an appendix. Corpses, especially hidden corpses, serve as a metaphor for the dangerous undersides of losing cards. For nineteenth-century writers, gambling was deadly, and the allure of gambling could not be separated from an ultimately self-destructive fascination with death itself. In Bourget's short story, a young painter named Miraut chooses to wager his last 200 francs rather than send it to a former classmate and his lover who have fallen on hard times. The next day, having won 10,000 francs at the gaming table, he finds the couple dead in the garret where they have just committed suicide. Significantly, a painting that Miraut has recently sold depicts Ophelia, the seductive dead girl, who symbolizes the danger and beauty of gambling itself. Kavanagh's final chapter (chapter ten) describes the rise of the modern casino and explores similar themes of obsession and self-destruction in two films of the 1950s, Jacques Demy's *Baie des anges* and Jean-Pierre Melville's *Bob le flambeur*.

Somewhat surprisingly, *Dice, Cards, Wheels* says very little about the parallel rise of probability theory since the seventeenth century. We can easily forgive Kavanagh the omission since this was the subject of one of his earlier studies, *Enlightenment and the Shadows of Chance*.^[1] Still, in the one chapter that discusses probability theory at some length, it is alarming to come across a passage suggesting that he does not understand the mathematics of it as well as he should. 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?

But perhaps the greatest weakness of Kavanagh's study of gambling is the two clichés to which he reduces all the rich textures of French social history: the decline of the aristocracy and the rise of the bourgeoisie. For Kavanagh, the French aristocracy has been declining—traumatically and inexorably—for at least the last four centuries. With a certain amount of hedging he even reads this theme back into

the thirteenth-century, arguing that the “dialectic between palace and tavern” in the *Jeu de Saint Nicolas* reflects the separation of the world of “faith and privilege” from that of “wealth and trade” (p. 41).

Since the Middle Ages, “wealth and trade” have steadily gained the upper hand, imposing rules and taming risks, while the adventure-loving, risk-seeking aristocracy has withdrawn ever further into its decadent gaming rooms. Like Casanova, the aristocracy embraced gambling’s “power to transform the world into a stage on which he might act out a noble indifference to risk grounded in something he saw as far more real than the accidents of birth” (p. 109). Then in the nineteenth century the bourgeois investors Louis and François Blanc ruined even the gaming rooms when they created the first modern casinos. At Bad Homburg and Monaco, gamblers now wagered only against the house. “Gone from the new casino was gambling’s status as a field of honor, as a site for the valiant jousting that provided Casanova, the would-be chevalier de Seingalt, with proof of his having bested the English milord who challenged his entire stake” (p. 196). Having declined for so long, “faith and privilege” must surely have hit bottom by the middle twentieth century, but in his conclusion Kavanagh does not hesitate to read the introduction of slot machines into French casinos since the 1970s as yet another episode in the decline of the aristocracy. How low can it go?

Yet Kavanagh proves that second-rate sociology can inspire first-rate literary criticism. For this reviewer, perhaps the greatest revelation was his reading of Balzac’s *Wild Ass’s Skin*, a novel that I have long loved but now realize that I never understood. As Raphaël visits first the gambling room of the Palais Royal and then the curiosity shop on the Quai Voltaire, both sites function as perverse metaphors for France’s chaotic history since 1789. Regimes have risen and fallen in apparently random succession like the fortunes at the gaming table, leaving a jumbled debris of former glories. “What distinguishes the antiquary’s goods from the gambling den? Only words” (p. 148).

NOTES

[1] Thomas M. Kavanagh, *Enlightenment and the Shadows of Chance* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993).

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