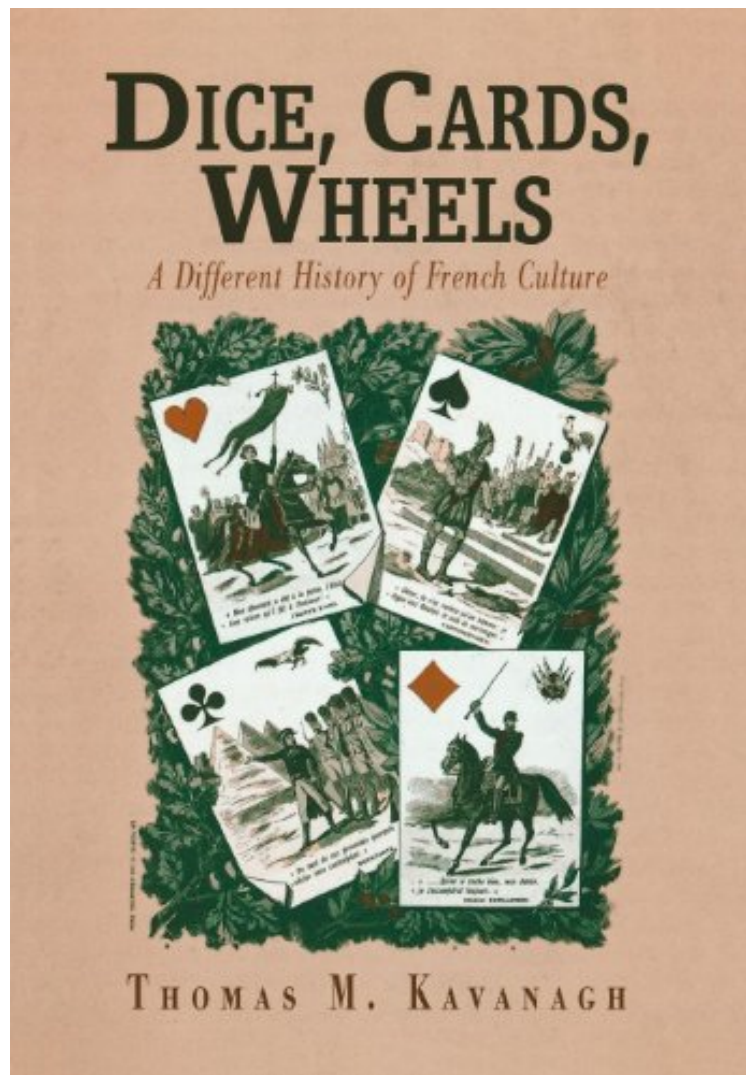


(Mobile pdf) Dice, Cards, Wheels: A Different History of French Culture (Critical Authors and Issues)

## Dice, Cards, Wheels: A Different History of French Culture (Critical Authors and Issues)

*Thomas M. Kavanagh*

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**Thomas M. Kavanagh : Dice, Cards, Wheels: A Different History of French Culture (Critical Authors and Issues)** before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Dice, Cards, Wheels: A Different History of French Culture (Critical Authors and Issues):

Gambling has been a practice central to many cultures throughout history. In Dice, Cards, Wheels, Thomas M.

Kavanagh scrutinizes the changing face of the gambler in France over a period of eight centuries, using gambling and its representations in literature as a lens through which to observe French culture. Kavanagh argues that the way people gamble tells us something otherwise unrecognized about the values, conflicts, and cultures that define a period or class. To gamble is to enter a world traced out by the rules and protocols of the game the gambler plays. That world may be an alternative to the established order, but the shape and structure of the game reveal indirectly hidden tensions, fears, and prohibitions. Drawing on literature from the Middle Ages to the present, Kavanagh reconstructs the figure of the gambler and his evolving personae. He examines, among other examples, Bodel's dicing in a twelfth-century tavern for the conversion of the Muslim world; Pascal's post-Reformation redefinition of salvation as the gambler's prize; the aristocratic libertine's celebration of the bluff; and Balzac's, Barbey d'Aureville's, and Bourget's nineteenth-century revisions of the gambler. *Dice, Cards, Wheels* embraces the tremendous breadth of French history and emerges as a broad-ranging study of the different forms of gambling, from the dice games of the Middle Ages to the digital slot machines of the twenty-first century, and what those games tell us about French culture and history.

"With his connoisseur's knowledge (and manifest love) of the rules, and ruses, of games and the culture that they shape, Kavanagh makes a convincing case that gambling ought to be considered not a moral failing or individual pathology but a conspicuous, and uncommonly revelatory, practice that sets the social scene that it dramatizes." *Journal of Modern History*

About the Author Thomas M. Kavanagh is Professor of French at Yale University. Among his previous books is *Esthetics of the Moment: Literature and Art in the French Enlightenment*, also available from the University of Pennsylvania Press. Excerpt. Reprinted by permission. All rights reserved.

Introduction Gambling, in terms of cultural significance, is as invisible as it is ubiquitous. Most often dismissed as one of the little things of life, it is assumed to be a practice that is unchanging and unimportant. The studies that do address it tend to fly in wildly divergent directions: moral diatribes against a perceived social evil, biographies of famous gamblers, and histories of particular games. My intention in this study is instead to look at something else: at what gambling tells us about the larger culture of which it is a part, about a different history inscribed in gambling as a constant confrontation with the enigma of chance and its implications for the individual and for society. Gambling has a diversity of forms—dice, cards, wheels, drawings, etc.—as well as different ways of bringing people together: as cheering opponents of the house's edge, as paired teams in private settings, and as isolated adversaries each against all. These forms of gambling and ways of bringing people together can tell us, I would argue, something important and otherwise unrecognized about the contours of the culture in which they prevail. Gambling, like any social practice, most clearly yields its meaning when it is historicized. Doing that, moreover, can provide insights otherwise unrecognized into how a period has responded to the quandary of understanding what identity, agency and freedom might mean in a world ruled largely by chance. My goal is not to uncover some single and complete history of gambling, but to open a field of inquiry, to argue for the significance and validity of taking the history of gambling seriously. We lose something important in our attempts to understand a culture when we reduce gambling to nothing more than a universal vice, a dubious pastime without a history, something that speaks of little more than what Ann Fabian has called "the curious and constant realm of human greed." Gambling tends to fall between the cracks of serious scholarship for different reasons. While gambling is certainly a form of play, it relates only obliquely to the two most important philosophical traditions addressing that concept: the Schillerian and the Nietzschean. Friedrich von Schiller's celebration of play begins from the Kantian premise that reason's superiority to the senses is a corollary to the freedom only reason brings from the necessity governing the material world. In his *On the Aesthetic Education of Man* Schiller builds on that premise an analysis of play that designates it as the highest form of human activity. In that series of letters Schiller argues for what he calls a *spieltrieb*, a play-drive that stands as the perfecting synthesis of both the sense-drive and the form-drive. The sense-drive, humankind's lowest common denominator, operates within the material world, within what is subject to time and change, within the phenomenal and the finite. The form-drive, to the contrary, invokes the power of reason to arrive at harmonies and laws that annul the chaos of time and change in favor of the continuous, the immutable, and the universal. The play-drive, bringing together and transcending both sense and reason, achieves the fully human by reconciling being with becoming, nature with freedom. The play-drive, as Schiller sees it, expresses itself in esthetic activities that allow individuals both to feel themselves as physical beings and to know themselves as rational actors. Schiller's claim that "man only plays when he is in the fullest sense of the word a human being, and he is only fully a human being when he plays" will surely draw a strong second from the gambler, but even this rapid summary of what he means by play makes it clear that the paradigm he proposes, its celebration of play as an activity perfecting reason's power to lift us above the contingencies of actual experience, applies only problematically to the gambler's fixation on the next point that might be thrown. Schiller's understanding of play found its most important twentieth-century proponent in Johan Huizinga whose *homo ludens*, as we shall see in our first chapter, is likewise not someone to be found waiting his turn for the dice. The second philosophical tradition dealing with play, the Nietzschean, pulls that activity in a different, anti-rational direction. Friedrich Nietzsche drew his inspiration from Arthur Schopenhauer's rejection of the Cartesian separation between subject and object, between the knower and what is known. For Schopenhauer, humankind must be seen as one with a force of Will that is itself cosubstantial with the world as a

continuum of physical forces in restless and relentless movement. Nietzsche's philosophy of play is part of his return to a pre-Socratic tradition rejecting any role for ethics and rationality in a world seen as the arena of the Will to Power's arbitrary, purposeless, and violent movement. Nietzsche uses the term "play" to designate a Dionysian exaltation in chance and contingency as primordial forces freeing the individual from the constraining baggage of law, necessity, purpose, and morality. Again, while Nietzsche's call in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* for a world that has become "a dice table for divine dice and dice players" who might "dance on the feet of Chance" is sure to strike a responsive chord in any gambler's heart, his injunction that the player move beyond all subservience to rule and purpose hardly provides a useful model for understanding the moves and motives of the canny gambler. Nietzsche's antiethics of pure play has exercised an enormous influence over philosophers as important as Martin Heidegger, Eugen Fink, and Gilles Deleuze, but his and their paradigm of play can apply to the gambler only in his most postmodern incarnation. Moving from philosophy to the more pragmatic disciplines of sociology, psychology, and psychoanalysis, nuanced attention to gamblers, especially in the age of the commercial casino, tends to be shunted toward a view of them as sorry victims of a contradiction they fail to understand. As the sociologist Harvie Ferguson has pointed out, gamblers may play to win, but the fact is that they consistently lose and they are well aware that they lose. Faced with that paradox, social scientists tend to have one of two reactions to gamblers: to dismiss them as hopelessly stupid or to posit some unconscious masochism as the root cause of their folly. Those assuming gamblers to be stupid, and understandably far less interested in the pigeons than their pluckers, look long and severely at the commercial practices of the gaming industry, at how states and government bodies choose to regulate them, and at the larger economic and political implications of legalized gambling. Those who exercise the second option, those who see gamblers as compulsively expiating some unconscious sin, have opened the doors to the legions of therapists and counselors attending to the "problem gambler." Handsomely financed by a casino industry frightened that any lack of solicitude on its part for the travails of its customers might lead to its suffering the same fate as the tobacco industry, this branch of the therapeutic community has produced a huge body of reports and studies equating gambling with individual pathology. In our secular age, these caregivers to the psyche often assume a posture of denunciation not unlike that once associated with organized religion. Of the social sciences, it is cultural anthropology and more specifically Clifford Geertz's groundbreaking "Deep Play" of 1972 that still provides the best model for an approach to gambling capable of articulating its larger cultural significance. Neither drowning his subject in abstractions nor subjecting it to moral judgment, Geertz begins that study by carefully describing the practices of the Balinese cockfights and the society-wide gambling they generate. What he finds in that blood sport and the intensity with which the Balinese live it is a way for that culture to speak to itself of what could otherwise never be said. The cockfight temporarily merges "man and beast, good and evil, ego and id, the creative power of aroused masculinity and the destructive power of loosened animality" in a way that produces "a bloody drama of hatred, cruelty, violence, and death" (420-21). In so doing, it stages for all to see and live vicariously an imaginary yet profoundly frightening version of themselves that cannot otherwise be avowed but which functions as the justification of all the rules and restraints setting the human and the social apart from brute animal carnage. For Geertz, getting at the real stakes of these cockfights raises the larger interpretive question of "how it is that we perceive qualities in things—paintings, books, melodies, plays—that we do not feel we can assert literally to be there" (444). Understanding the "deep play" of this Balinese gambling ritual becomes for Geertz an example of what he calls "social semantics" (448). The cockfight, recognized both as "only a game" because it is set apart from society yet also as "more than a game" for what it says of that society, becomes for Geertz a "paradigmatic human event" (450). Neither blandly typical nor portentously universal, the cockfight is paradigmatic by reason of the way it allows us to perceive the hidden at work within the visible. As he analyzes the Balinese cockfight, Geertz pushes toward a view of that ritual as the expression of a conflicted social unconscious, as a practice that makes gambling a metaphor for what cannot be said directly or literally. Relying less than he on a psychoanalytic model, I will nevertheless look at gambling as an activity that questions the established order. If, as Jackson Lears has claimed, gambling is "a different way of being in the world," it is because the gambler's embrace of the game's conflicted but threatening contingency presupposes both a different world and a different law governing that world. That other world brings with it the freedom of stepping outside what proclaims itself as necessity, the freedom of no longer accepting the existing order as the only game in town. Geertz's approach to gambling, his careful attention to the details of the cockfight and the social tensions surrounding it, also makes clear why there can be no general or universal history of gambling. The way people gamble, and what that activity says of them, are parts of a larger cultural whole defined by the contours and tensions of a given society at a given time. Respecting that need for specificity, this study will focus primarily on gambling in France at various moments over the last eight centuries. Yet, even limited to a single culture, the history of gambling as social semantics can never be articulated as a continuous and integrated narrative. In the chapters that follow, rather than offering a seamless progression from period to period, I will focus instead on what I would call "flash points." I mean by flash point the intersection of a specific form of gambling and a work representing it in a way that opens onto the larger issues confronting that culture at that time. Addressed to wide audiences of nongamblers as well as gamblers, these works show how gambling's dialectic between the random and the determined, between chaos and order, brings into play the larger ethical, economic and cultural

conflicts defining a given period. After an opening chapter that examines the challenges involved in articulating a cultural history of gambling and the relation of that history to the changing attitudes toward chance within the French tradition, Chapter Two focuses on Jehan Bodel's early thirteenth-century religious play *Le Jeu de Saint Nicolas*. In it, dicing and the boisterous vitality of the tavern provide the setting for the story of a conversion to the Christian faith of not only the King of Africa but of the entire Moslem world. Juxtaposing tavern and palace, urban masses and monarch, money and faith, this play uses the dice game, hazard, to question the defining polarities of medieval culture. Chapter Three looks at the way the seventeenth-century moralist Blaise Pascal restages and extends Bodel's synthesis of gambling and salvation. Pascal's well known argument from *Les Penses* on "The Obligation to Bet" reveals, when juxtaposed with his chance-haunted disquisition on aristocratic morality in *Letters on the Condition of the Great*, unsettling similarities between astute gambling and the protocols of salvation in a postreformation world. Chapters Four, Five, and Six, moving to the eighteenth century, examine how that period's major antagonists, the aristocracy and the emerging bourgeoisie, came to gamble so differently. Chapter Four shows how the rules and strategies of the Enlightenment's most popular card game, *brelan*, reveal in its essence the ethics of bluff that motivated the manipulations and deceptions of libertinage as the signature style of a threatened aristocracy. Chapter Five takes up the specific case of Casanova, the eighteenth century's most illustrious gambler and lover. His expertise not only at the aristocratic games of pharaon and biribi but at the popular gambling of the lottery makes his portrayal of gambling one of the most revealing mirrors of the Enlightenment's defining divisions. Chapter Six examines three plays staging the figure of the gambler, two from the beginning of the century and one from well after its midpoint. Taken together, they highlight the massive shift in gambling's cultural implications imposed by the ascendant bourgeoisie. While Dancourt's *La Dsolation des joueuses* and Regnard's *Le Joueur* mirthfully warn that love and sentiment can never be squared with the gambler's devotion to evanescent pleasures, Saurin's *Bverlei* recasts gambling as a grievous transgression not against sentiment, but against a new civic reverence for money and its orderly transmission. Continuing to the nineteenth century, Chapter Seven analyzes Balzac's *The Wild Ass's Skin* and its opening juxtaposition of the gambling den's game of *trente et quarante* with an antiquary's shop that overflows with the debris of history. In bringing these two locales together, Balzac shows how gambling acquired a new meaning within the context of the dashed dreams of Revolution and Empire that would haunt nineteenth-century France. No longer a function of family and inheritance, gambling becomes a metaphor of larger historical and political forces redefining the individual as a nexus of will and power forced to act within a context he can never control. Chapter Eight examines how Barbey d'Aureville's novella "Beneath the Cards in a Game of Whist" uses that forerunner of bridge as the symbol of a new aristocracy emerging from the violent social conflicts that punctuated the century. For Barbey, the interpretive skills of the astute gambler become the hallmark of a new elite distinguished by its ability to detect and elucidate the singular, the hidden, and the mysterious lurking at the underside of whatever cards life happens to deal. Chapter Nine turns to Paul Bourget's elusive sketch titled "A Gambler" to focus on the ambiguities and contradictions that would redefine the figure of the gambler during the twentieth century. Displacing gambling's implications from the historical to the psychological, Bourget draws the portrait of a life constructed as denial. Baccarat becomes for his gambler-who-will-never-gamble-again the eruption, as frightening as it is exhilarating, of an unconscious force unraveling his fundamental image of himself. Chapter Ten brings this history of gambling to the present by examining the evolution of the casino within the French imaginary over the course of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Originally constructed as a space recreating a lost aristocratic past, the casino would become, by the end of the twentieth century, the emblem of a world both democratized and anesthetized. In telling that story, this chapter focuses on two films staging the casino as metaphor, Jacques Demy's *Baie des anges* and Jean-Pierre Melville's *Bob le flambeur*. Both these works use the casino as metaphor to explore enigmas at the core of modern life: the mystery of desire and its relation to chance in *Baie des anges* and the fragility of identity and its relation to purposeful action in *Bob le flambeur*. This study makes no mention of figures and events from the history of gambling in France that are surely as significant as those I have chosen to analyze. Roberto Rossellini's 1965 film *The Rise to Power of Louis XIV*, captures in a single short scene gambling's crucial role in the alliances and antipathies that defined the dynamics of the Sun King's court. In that sequence, an agent of Nicolas Fouquet, the immensely wealthy and soon-to-be-deposed *surintendant des finances*, discreetly attempts to secure the allegiance of the King's young mistress, Louise de la Vallire, with the offer of a purse that will allow her to take a place in Louis's favorite game of *hoca*. In the next century, no less a figure than Voltaire, shortly after his return from England in 1728, took full advantage of a flaw in the rules governing a lottery intended to restore confidence in royal treasury bonds. Working with a group of fellow philosophes, Voltaire found a perfectly legal way of manipulating ticket purchases that brought him a profit of over a half million livres while allowing him to turn the reading out of the winners' identifying phrases into a litany of anti-monarchic propaganda. Claiming of gambling that "this passion, so universally condemned, has never really been studied," Balzac set out in his *La Rabouilleuse* of 1842 to remedy that lack. His character the widow Descoigns, addicted to the lottery's long-shot three-number *terne*, allows him to show how that game's magical hopes have made of it "the most powerful fairy in all the world" (72). "Where is there today," Balzac asks, "another social force that can, for forty sous, make you happy for five days and deliver to you as a dream all the pleasures of civilization?" (72). Writing in the dark days of

the Occupation, Georges Bataille included in his *Le Coupable* of 1943 a chapter titled "On the Attraction of Gambling." Positing gambling as the revelation of a force that strips away humankind's most cherished pretensions, Bataille claims that "of few things does man have more fear than gambling." For him, gambling reveals in its purest form a frightening liberty, a universal contingency that, as "the vertiginous seduction of chance" (313), brings with it "the suicide of knowledge" (310). To gamble, for Bataille, is to recognize a dimension of experience where "being loses itself in what is beyond being" (327). If I bring this Introduction to a close with these brief allusions to other forms of gambling and to other flash points of their intersections with the larger culture, it is to point to what are only a few of the many options I have left unexamined as I argue for the value of the gambler's perspective on history, literature, and culture. My hope is that this study will encourage others to articulate more richly and more fully the many surprises of gambling's fascinating and ambiguous history.