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Corry Cropper, *Playing at Monarchy: Sport as Metaphor in Nineteenth-Century France*. Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 2008. xxiv + 248 pp. Illustrations, notes, bibliography, and index. \$45.00 U.S. (cl). ISBN 978-0-8032-1773-7.

Review by Bradford Brown, Bradley University.

Is there still a line between cultural history and literary history? Some have suggested that the distinction has become obsolete. In response to the appearance last year of the massive and broad-minded compendium *A New Literary History of America* (partially inspired by the older *A New History of French Literature*), Mark Bauerlein has provocatively opined that "literary history is a dead activity. It's all cultural history now, and the old high/low distinctions are gone, too."<sup>[1]</sup> Corry Cropper's recent book *Playing at Monarchy* is an example of the new kind of literary history that provides some evidence for Bauerlein's thesis.<sup>[2]</sup> To the extent that Cropper consults not only less well known authors but nonfiction sources such as manuals, newspapers, and historical tracts, his study of writing about playing sports and games draws near to the interests and approaches of cultural historians. But to the extent that the topics which the book addresses are generated by the reading of canonical texts and driven by the purpose of using other sources to arrive at "new readings of significant literary works" (p. xxii), the scope and methodology of this study will appear foreign and unconvincing to the same historians.<sup>[3]</sup> Yet, even the most critical will find reason to applaud Cropper's effort to bridge the divide from the side of literary studies and to write with verve about the historical interconnections between the worlds of literature and sporting life.

In truth, Cropper does not intend to offer a history of how the French played in the nineteenth century. Rather the book is a series of arguments about how representations of sport in popular and literary culture were freighted with social and political meaning. And just as "sport" had a different meaning at the time--the word was successfully imported by 1854 and became established in the title of the Parisian weekly, *Le Sport*, which covered "horse races, hunts, shooting competitions, chess matches, balls (the dancing variety), beauty pageants, banquets, regattas, and dog races" (pp. xxi-xxii)--so too Cropper takes up a diverse range of activities of skill and chance. In separate chapters, the book considers representations of *jeu de paume* (early court tennis), bullfighting, chess and trictrac (a board game superficially resembling backgammon), hunting, fencing, and the origins of the modern Olympic Games. Cropper strays widely to make engaging references to medieval poems, the art of Goya, and recent sporting controversies, and along the way he reveals a breadth of knowledge about French literature from the seventeenth through twentieth centuries. But at its core, this book juxtaposes texts by literary luminaries--Balzac, Barbey d'Aurevilly, Flaubert, Gautier, Maupassant, Stendhal--with contemporary nineteenth-century nonfiction sources by figures such as Brantôme and Coubertin. Indeed, the two writers that Cropper returns to most often are Prosper Mérimée and Eugène Chapus, the latter a sometime sentimental novelist and founder of *Le Sport* who churned out books on sports, travel and etiquette for a bourgeois audience increasingly avid for markers of distinction.

Cropper wears his theory lightly with only occasional nods towards the usual suspects: Huizinga, Elias, Caillois, Foucault, Girard, Adorno, and especially Bourdieu. In general, the book tends to frame the representation of sports as a form of social capital implicated in "a cultural and political power

structure" (p. xiii) divided between a faltering nobility and a rising bourgeoisie. Although Cropper talks about class as a cultural construct (pp. xx, 183, 192 n. 15), mostly the analysis relies on social class as a pre-existing context for explanations that situate players as inept parvenus, agents of aristocratic resistance, or successful social climbers. In this sense the primary metaphor that Cropper himself uses for sport in the book is as a "mirror" of social realities and conflicts (pp. xiii, xxii). At other times, however, the analysis flirts with the possibility of seeing sport as a "vehicle" or "motor" for change (pp. xx, xxii, 168, 186-87) but that notion is infrequently asserted and not made central to the arguments of the various chapters which hinge on the cultural meaning of playing rather than on its social impact.

Analysis by social class completely trumps gender, a category that Cropper acknowledges in the Introduction (pp. xx-xxi), but declines to develop (although he does point out the relevance of the construction of masculinity in several instances, see pp. 98, 103, 114, 115, 150, 214 n. 56).<sup>[4]</sup> In other places, Cropper brings in critical theories of modernization--citing Adorno for example on the transformation of leisure time into leisure industry--but this issue is introduced in the Conclusion and remains underdeveloped there except for a brief consideration of utilitarianism in Chapus (pp. 181-83, see also 9-10). Along these lines, Cropper also suggests a desacralization of dueling in the nineteenth century once the association of victory with divine justice in *Roland*, *Le Cid*, and even *Liaisons Dangereuses* is later replaced by association with chance or magic (pp. 128-30, see also the quote from Caillois, pp. 17-18).

What of the political analysis implied by the title? The book invokes monarchy in several distinct ways. In the chapter on *jeu de paume* (sometimes called *le jeu des rois*) Cropper shows its symbolic connection in the 1800s with the values and politics of the old regime. Cropper gives an original if tendentious reading of Mérimée's ambiguous "La Vénus d'Ille" as revealing that author's growing skepticism of the July Monarchy (pp 8-15). This analysis is more persuasively developed in the following chapter where Cropper finds indirect political criticism of the July Monarchy in Mérimée's writing on Spanish bullfighting and *Carmen*. Politics then goes missing in the longest and arguably finest chapter which delineates Mérimée's aleatory model of history, ruled more by chance (as in the game trictrac) than in models with a larger respect for pattern in Balzac, Guizot, and Michelet (as in chess).

In another strong chapter on the subject of hunting, Cropper returns to the subject of political allegory in Mérimée whose 1829 novel, *Chronique du règne de Charles IX*, contains a coded denunciation of the person and reign of Charles X. This chapter also introduces the fascinating and plainspoken Elzéar Blaze, the author of a hunting manual (1836) and a collection of hunting stories (1840). Cropper suggests that Blaze's caustic dismissal of romanticized notions of aristocratic and royal hunting practices amounts to a mid-nineteenth-century "democratization of the hunt" (p. 103). Blaze thus contrasts with a theme of reactionary writing--identified by Cropper in Chapus, Denoyer de Noirmont, Chateaubriand, and even Balzac--that nostalgically regrets the passing of "the good old days" before the Revolution by retelling stories of hunting princes.

Chapter five makes the argument (against Robert Nye) that the resurgence of fencing under the Third Republic was aligned with monarchism (pp. 138, 146). And Cropper offers a revisionist argument in chapter six that Coubertin's support for the Olympics was rooted more in a long-standing opposition to revolutionary instability and support for noble privilege and a "pan-European monarchical community" (p. 177) rather than in post-1870 patriotism. So even in the last chapter, where one might otherwise expect it, nationalism does not make much of an appearance in Cropper's narrative (although there is a short discussion of nationalism in Chapus in the conclusion, see pp. 156-62, 184-86). Instead the focus is on the lingering problem of monarchy that shows up in writing about particular sports either as political allegory and satire or indirect professions of class and political alignments. This does not amount to much of an overarching argument for the book beyond the mirror metaphor, unless one wanted to attach it to Mayer's notion of the "Persistence of the Old Regime" (a book which Verso will apparently soon reprint in a new edition).<sup>[5]</sup>

In the end, the separate chapters are distinct enough from one another in scope and purpose to stand alone, and Cropper deserves credit for not trying to push the overall argument too far. There are times, of course, when the literary evidence seems too thin to support any definite conclusions about social transformation. And one can anticipate that the analysis of writing about other sporting activities—such as rowing, boxing and savate, wrestling, equestrian sports, billiard games like bagatelle, paille-maille or croquet, rugby, or even boules (which Cropper mentions, pp. 58-59)—might produce different conclusions or a broader reflection of post-Revolutionary politics and society. But at its best, *Playing at Monarchy* offers thoughtful interpretations of wonderfully odd and complex stories of social conflict as in Blaze's scatological story of the poaching grenadier who dines with a marquis (pp. 103-4), or Barbey d'Aurevilly's story of the adventures of Hauteclaira the female master fencer (pp. 146-51), or even of Chapus himself, the middle-class author who could ask "what is equality?" and then answer with a straight face "the utopia of the unworthy" all the while writing under the pen name of "vicomte de Marennes" (p. 107). Ultimately, Cropper's literary/cultural history succeeds in highlighting how the mixed history of sporting activities, perennially divided between the values of everyday pleasure and esteem for uncommon merit, resonated with authors in a country drawn towards both republicanism and aristocracy.

## NOTES

[1] Marcus Greil and Werner Sollors, eds., *A New Literary History of America* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2009); Denis Hollier, ed., *A New History of French Literature* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1989); Mark Bauerlein, Patricia Wald, and Werner Sollors, "Is This Literary History?" *The Chronicle of Higher Education* (1 November 2009): <http://chronicle.com/article/Is-This-Literary-History-/48956/>.

[2] Cropper's earlier published work includes "Mérimée's *Colomba* and the July Monarchy," *Nineteenth-Century French Studies* 29, nos. 1-2 (2000-1): 35-46; "Fictional Documentary: The Other as France in Mérimée's *Les Mormons*," *French Literature Series* 28 (2001): 51-64; "Playing at Monarchy: *Le jeu de paume* in Literature of Nineteenth-Century France," *French Review* 70, no. 4 (2002): 720-29; "Prosper Mérimée and the Subversive 'Historical' Short Story," *Nineteenth-Century French Studies* 33, nos. 1-2 (2004-5): 57-74; "Revolution Under the Mantilla: Mérimée's Spanish Theatre," *Dalhousie French Studies* 66 (2004): 11-19; "Haunting the Nouveaux Riches: Bohemia in Mérimée's "La Vénus d'Ille" and "Carmen," *Nineteenth-Century French Studies* 36, nos. 3-4 (Spring-Summer 2010): 183-98. Cropper is also editor of a website on Mérimée (<http://humanities.byu.edu/frenital/merimee/index.html>) and blogs at *The Sports Academic*: [www.thesportsacademic.com](http://www.thesportsacademic.com).

[3] For recent studies of the history of sport in France from social and cultural perspectives, see the following in *H-France Reviews*: Michael B. Miller on Christopher S. Thompson, *The Tour de France: A Cultural History* (Berkeley and London: University of California Press, 2006): <http://www.h-france.net/vol6reviews/Vol6no138miller.pdf>; Christopher S. Thompson on Georges Vigarello, *Du jeu ancien au show sportif: La naissance d'un mythe* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 2002): <http://www.h-france.net/vol3reviews/vol3no60thompson.pdf>; James E. Genova on H. L. Wesseling, *Certain Ideas of France: Essays on French History and Civilization* (Westport, Conn. and London: Greenwood Press, 2002): <http://www.h-france.net/vol3reviews/vol3no56genova.pdf>; Christopher S. Thompson on Philip Dine, *French Rugby Football: A Cultural History* (Oxford and New York: Berg, 2001): <http://www.h-france.net/vol2reviews/vol2no83thompson.pdf>; and W. Scott Haine on Carol E. Harrison, *The Bourgeois Citizen in Nineteenth-Century France: Gender, Sociability, and the Uses of Emulation* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1999): <http://www.h-france.net/vol2reviews/vol2no31haine.pdf>.

[4] For an example of a different approach to the history of sport that combines political and gender analysis, see Joan Tumblety, "The Soccer World Cup of 1938: Politics, Spectacles, and *la Culture Physique* in Interwar France," *French Historical Studies* 31, no. 1 (Winter, 2008): 77-116.

[5] Arno Mayer, *The Persistence of the Old Regime: Europe to the Great War* (New York: Pantheon, 1981).

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