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# Illustrations

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# Introduction

## *Mountain Stages and How-to Manuals*

We were very conscious that knowledge about sport was  
knowledge about society.

Norbert Elias, *Quest for Excitement*

In Marie de France's twelfth-century poem "Les deux amants," a king, after the death of his queen, engages in what appears to be an incestuous relationship with his only daughter and refuses to allow her to marry. In order to keep his daughter for himself and silence his critics, he devises a plan: he will allow his daughter to marry, but the suitor must first carry the princess to the top of a nearby mountain without stopping to rest during the ascent. Many try, but even the strongest fail, and the king, it appears, will be able to maintain the status quo without sharing his daughter or his kingdom with another man. Love, of course, eventually enters his daughter's heart. But the object of her affection is a young nobleman who, according to the princess, is not strong enough to even make it halfway up the mountain. Aware of the impossibility of the task, he asks the princess to elope, but she refuses: her father would be too angry. The only way for them to remain together is for the young man to accept the challenge and carry the princess to the top of the mountain. He goes away to prepare, and the princess begins a fast in order to be as light as possible

for the climb. Her young suitor returns from his training armed with a drink that will strengthen his entire body, including veins and bones, when he needs it. The king is also prepared: he has invited all his relatives, his servants, and “all those he could have” to come and watch the attempt. And people do “come from far and wide” to see the big event. Indeed, the event has all the trappings of a mountain stage in the Tour de France: crowds lining the route to the summit; a challenging stage; fame, wealth, and a beautiful woman waiting at the finish; and the hidden influence of performance-enhancing drugs. All that is missing are commercial sponsors and a medical support crew. The king, however, has not invited the entire kingdom to cheer the young suitor on, but to assure that the young man follows the rule: no stopping. Halfway up the mountain the princess encourages the young athlete to drink the herbal beverage. The young man responds, “My love . . . I do not want to stop to drink even for the time I would need to take three steps. These people would scream and their noise would trouble me: they might throw off my concentration. I do not want to stop here.”<sup>1</sup> Under the scrutiny of the vast crowd the young man refuses to stop but manages nevertheless to reach the summit, his true love in his arms. The effort proves too much, however, as the young man’s heart bursts, and he dies at the finish line. The princess, as true lovers are wont to do, dies beside him, overcome with grief.

On a basic level this *lai* embodies the ideals of courtly love: the young man and woman sacrifice everything for their love and for each other, and their love carries them above the crowd. The overly controlling king is punished for interfering with love: he loses his beloved daughter and plunges the country into a crisis

of succession since he no longer has an heir. The mountain symbolizes the difficulty love presents to the suitor who would prove himself worthy of his lady's affection.

On another level, important for this book, the *lai* points out the importance of sporting events and their direct connection with the political arena. The winner of the race would not only be allowed to marry the princess but would also be in line for the throne. To this end all means are permissible—from recourse to performance-enhancing herbs (the first case of doping in French athletics) to a physical training regimen (the daughter's fasting) to a vast publicity campaign to bring in hordes of spectators. By organizing an entertaining public game the king, reminiscent of Roman emperors, successfully distracts his subjects from a scandalous crisis (incest). For the king it is important that the game be seen as a legitimate contest attracting the most worthy suitors for his daughter. The princess and her young lover (who suggests bypassing the challenge by eloping) certainly see the game as an unjust abuse of royal power. However, respectful of the feudal system—and standing to gain by its safeguarding—they choose to accept the king's contest. From this very early literary example it is clear that sports and games are used for political ends and that their presentation is crucial in forming and maintaining a cultural and political power structure.<sup>2</sup>

In *Homo Ludens* Huizinga argues that play is “a stepping out of ‘real’ life,”<sup>3</sup> but as the above example shows, play can also be an integral, life-and-death part of “real” life. I agree with Norbert Elias, who contends that “knowledge about sport [is] knowledge about society” and that sport and society mirror each other in a very real sense.<sup>4</sup> Like literature, sports and games are symbolic

representations of cultural values, and in the case of “Les deux amants” courtly love, the feudal system, sexuality, gender roles, and medicine are all reflected in the king’s game.

I have used this twelfth-century example to demonstrate the extent to which sports or games—*playing*—are enmeshed with political agendas as far back as France’s literary tradition goes. In addition, “Les deux amants” demonstrates the tight connection between the monarchy and sporting competitions: the king establishes the rules, designates the participants, invites the spectators, and determines the prize. The link between sports and the nobility continues for the life of the *ancien régime*. Following the Revolution, however, the notion of noble privilege is challenged, traditional symbols of social class are put up for grabs, and leisure activities spread to all levels of society. In the chapters that follow I look at the broad role that sports and games occupy in a changing culture, how sport operates as a “civilizing agent” (Elias), how leisure creates a privileged space for the exchange of “social capital” (Bourdieu), and how representations of sports and games are manipulated by various groups seeking to establish themselves as the dominant class. I examine, further, how sports and games become the symbolic battlefield for the culture wars of an emerging modern state.

The nineteenth-century *Manuel de l’homme et de la femme comme il faut* (Manual of the Elegant Man and Woman) (published in the 1850s) teaches its readers how to behave in polite society, how to dress, what topics of conversation are appropriate, and how best to discuss such topics.<sup>5</sup> The manual is divided into three sections: “The Theory of Elegance,” “The Theory of Conversation,” and “The Theory of Fine Manners.” At first glance

the book would hardly seem out of place in a twenty-first-century bookstore, whose customers have been force-fed how-to manuals and self-help books since adolescence. But upon closer examination the reader discovers, behind the cover emblazoned with a heraldic crown, that the viscount de Marennes's objective is to teach his readers to act as if they belong to the nobility: "In the old France of quality elegance was less rare than it is in our day. We know the traditional elegance of courtiers. The reason for this is that each period had its character. Society was divided into compartments, and each had its particular cachet; no one dared step outside of the customs and habits that appertained to his class. A social class was an outfit into which one could not enter if one did not possess the size, the line, the spirit, and the character of this outfit."<sup>6</sup> In "old France," the France of the *ancien régime*, a surplus of elegance emanated from the courtiers—that is, from the nobility—and entrance into their circle was absolutely limited. But by the 1850s, when the first edition of the viscount's text appeared, France's monarchy had been largely marginalized, social distinctions had become blurred, and social classes appeared flexible. For one franc de Marennes's readers could learn how to become a member of the elite, belong to the *noblesse*, to be *comme il faut* (as one should be).<sup>7</sup> They could take advantage of the social confusion of the nineteenth century, follow the text's step-by-step instructions, distinguish themselves from their peers and become a part of "elegant" society.

The book, it seemed, had it all: a viscount for an author with his seal on the cover, a wealth of information regarding the nobility's conduct, and guidelines for how to imitate it. De Marennes points out, for example, that "everywhere, the man of quality dif-

ferentiates himself from those of a lower sphere by the refinement, the arrangement, and the wealth of his dress.”<sup>8</sup> And here was a way, available to anyone with the ability to read and one franc to spare, to crack the code of noble distinction and become noble. What was distinction, after all? The text asks and answers this very question: “What is distinction?—the appearance [parure] of respectable people.”<sup>9</sup> Distinction, then, is based on appearance, outward signs. And certainly these could be imitated. This manual, ironically, offers everyone access to exclusivity.

The book, naturally, is itself merely an appearance, a fraud. The crown emblazoned on its cover is a fake herald, and the viscount de Marennes is really Eugène Chapus, a bourgeois himself, out to make a buck (or a franc) by selling his book. We are far from the playful *supercherie littéraire* of nineteenth-century authors who hid behind pseudonyms to avoid censorship. While Napoleon III’s government did condemn several books for *outrage à la morale publique*, a book on elegance would hardly have attracted a censor’s first glance, let alone a second. Instead Chapus hid behind a noble name in order to give the cachet of authority and authenticity to his instructions and, ultimately, to sell more books. Chapus explains: “The work was destined for a particularly defined class of readers; to assure it as much success as possible among this group, the author, in agreement with the publisher, thought to place the book under the reputation of a pseudonym. Its cover was illustrated with a crowned herald and bore the name of the author: *the viscount de Marennes*.”<sup>10</sup> The *Manuel de l’homme et de la femme comme il faut* (originally entitled *Théorie de l’élégance*, a likely reference to Balzac’s *Traité de la vie élégante*) would know five editions and multiple reprintings from 1844 until 1877 (the

year Chapus died).<sup>11</sup> Only in the fifth edition did the author reveal that the viscount de Marennes did not exist (explaining, perhaps, why there was no sixth edition and why the fourth edition was the one selected for reprinting). The key to the work's success was its appearance (it appeared to be a work by a noble), and appearance was what it taught (appear noble, and you can gain access into the *grand monde*). And the key to appearing noble, after dressing a certain way (or covering one's book with a heraldic crown), was—according to Chapus—to use the language of the nobility.

Rule number one: appear to know nothing of your profession, and avoid technical terms at all times: “There are technical words that imply, when used, the knowledge of a profession. One must take great care to avoid them.”<sup>12</sup> Technical terms are appropriate only when discussing several very select topics: “Elegant conversation rigorously requires the use of technical words exclusively when discussing *war*, *horse racing*, and *hunting*, especially hunting.”<sup>13</sup> Knowledge of war and horses is acceptable, but knowledge of hunting, it would seem, is an absolute requirement if one is to pass as a member of the nobility: Chapus explains that imprecise hunting terminology (saying *horns* instead of *antlers*, for example) exposes the speaker as inelegant, as a fraudulent *homme comme il faut*.<sup>14</sup> In other words, to appear noble the bourgeois must pretend to know nothing of work (which he spends his life doing) and everything about hunting (about which he knows nothing).<sup>15</sup> To appear noble one must know the language of leisure.

After having published several short stories and novels in the 1830s (none of which was reedited), Chapus had his first real success with a book about the hunts of Charles X, released in 1837, with a second edition published in 1838. This book is really a novel

about Charles X and his hunts, frequently relating in direct discourse the conversations of a king whom Chapus had never met. In the introduction Chapus writes, “This work will be a veritable initiation into the details, the mores, and the habits of the monarchy that is disappearing in the prosaic and utilitarian France of today.”<sup>16</sup> The book functions as a point of entry into the practices of a decaying monarchy that is being swept away by the utilitarian spirit of capitalism. For the bourgeois to understand the monarchy, he must first understand the language of leisure and be steeped in the most important ritual of the *ancien régime*: the hunt.

Yes, birth, land, and connections made the noble noble. But these could be neither easily learned nor easily imitated. Hunting and other leisure activities were, in the collective imagination of the lower classes, the primary symbols of noble supremacy. Nobles alone would have the time to devote an entire day to playing a game of *paume* or tracking down a single stag. Only a noble would have the space to devote an entire room to a billiard table or the money to purchase an ivory-inlaid trictrac table. The bourgeois would have pressing business matters to keep him from the *paume* court, he would employ his space for more useful things than a billiard table, and he would spend his time studying accounts instead of the odds of winning a *jan* at trictrac. Chapus argues that in order for the bourgeoisie to become the dominant class, they must learn to favor the useless and graft their present onto the past of the nobility—even if this means adopting a fictional past such as Chapus himself would invent. Like the Romans, who, to prove their dominance, adopted the gods of the Greeks, the nineteenth-century bourgeoisie must adopt the gods of the monarchy: hunting, trictrac, and *paume*.

As the examples from Chapus's texts demonstrate, after the Revolution, whenever aristocratic games were played, whenever they were evoked, they carried with them the symbolic weight of the old nobility. As leisure activity evolved—from a noble privilege to a bourgeois commodity to a spectacle for the masses—artists, authors, journalists, practitioners, and promoters struggled against or took advantage of the symbolic momentum that sports had accumulated before the Revolution. This is the essence of what I will examine in the chapters that follow: the way in which the sports and games of nineteenth-century France are used and manipulated as markers of social and political status and as means of political commentary.

Historians have increasingly turned their attention to sports in France, most notably in a series published by L'Harmattan entitled, "Espaces et temps du sport." The books in L'Harmattan's series tend to focus on the end of the nineteenth century and the twentieth century (the so-called modern era of sport). And of course many historians have examined the leisure practices of the *ancien régime*.<sup>17</sup> Those who do study the nineteenth century have primarily examined either the origins of working-class sports (and their corollary, gymnastics), sports and the education system, or the rise of sporting associations, again with an emphasis on the late nineteenth century (i.e., after the advent of the Third Republic, when organizing formal groups became much easier legally).<sup>18</sup> This book is primarily focused on the period between the *ancien régime* and the modern era and on the way in which the sports of the old nobility were either nostalgically defended by the aristocracy or appropriated by other social classes. I note here that I will make no statistical analyses of ties between salaries and

leisure activities, since I maintain that social class is as much (or more) about perception than it is about reality.

While this book concentrates on the way authors use sports and games as metaphoric vehicles for political and class competition, there are of course many other ways sports and games came to shape life and class hierarchy in nineteenth-century France, specifically via representation and manipulation of the body and via the construction of gender identities. Thierry Terret explains that the eighteenth century transformed perceptions of the body, which up to that point had largely been seen as “too easily overtaken by the devil or by disease.”<sup>19</sup> Religious notions of the corrupt body gradually gave way to military and industrial imperatives, and the body was trained to meet utilitarian ends. Physical exercise, in the form of gymnastics for the working class, became a “tool used to control behavior” and a means to check the body’s energies and deviancies.<sup>20</sup> However, in some instances members of the lower nobility or the middle class were depicted as honing their bodies into sculpted perfection through their regular engagement in sport and thus attracting the gaze of those higher up the social ladder. (I am thinking specifically both of the fencer Hauteclair in Barbey’s “Le bonheur dans le crime” and of the tennis player Alphonse in Prosper Mérimée’s “La Vénus d’Ille,” whose prowess on the court wins him the affections of a bronze goddess.) The use of sports as a means of social climbing is a theme I will discuss throughout the book.<sup>21</sup>

Similarly, while the concept of masculinity is not a central theme to this book, it nevertheless bears mentioning here that sports, over the course of the nineteenth century in particular, played a significant role in shaping masculine identity. Allen

Guttmann theorizes that many American middle-class men felt emasculated by working in professions that did not require brute strength and that could be performed equally well by women.<sup>22</sup> He continues, “For men too committed to domesticity and urban life to join the army or to seek adventure on the American frontier or in the Australian outback, sports ‘offered the potential of an invigorated manhood.’”<sup>23</sup> The same could be said of nineteenth-century French bourgeois men and their aristocratic counterparts. The wars, duels, and “virile games” (as Pierre de Coubertin called them) of the *ancien régime* fell out of favor, and men were drawn to sport as a means to reaffirm their masculinity.<sup>24</sup>

Since I use the word *sport* in my title, I would like to comment on it briefly. When the word is used today it generally signifies a broad spectrum of potentially competitive physical activities. We would not, as a general rule, call backgammon or chess a sport, and the French did not even have the word *sport* in their language until it was imported from the English in the second half of the nineteenth century. In his decidedly nationalist 1901 treatise on French sports, J. J. Jusserand argues that the word *sport* is originally French. According to Jusserand, the word began as the medieval *desport*, was exported to England, and finally “returned to its birth country, slightly changed by travels and by absence.”<sup>25</sup> Whatever the word’s origins, it was not widely used in France until a Parisian weekly entitled *Le Sport* first appeared in 1854. This paper was edited by none other than Eugène Chapus, and as the subjects it treated testify, the French notion of sport was very different from the English term suggesting activities such as rugby, rowing, and track and field. Chapus’s weekly covered horse races, hunts, shooting competitions, chess matches, balls (the dancing

variety), beauty pageants, banquets, regattas, and dog races. So while I refer to sports and games throughout the book, I recognize that the word *sport* is anachronistic, and for this reason the book's title begins with the more generic word *playing*.

Finally, I should point out that the word *metaphor* in the title points to an a priori conviction that sport serves as a vehicle for broad cultural and political values and movements. I agree with Eugen Weber, who asserts that “physical exercise and the role that men attribute to it, that society envisages for it, can document times and mentalities as suggestively as can their industrial enterprises.”<sup>26</sup> The word *metaphor* additionally implies a literary approach to my subject. In the pretelevision, pre-Internet era, literature is a primary generator of symbols, and fiction offers a glimpse into the way these symbols are interpreted in their cultural context. Therefore, in the first three chapters in particular I emphasize the fictional works of authors who treat games as a significant organizing principle: novels by Balzac and Stendhal, short stories by Mérimée and Maupassant, and so forth. Indeed, one of my objectives in writing this book is to offer new readings of significant literary works by approaching them from the cultural and historical perspectives that sports and games provide. I also examine the representation of sports and games in newspapers, historical studies, game manuals, pamphlets, and brochures. Throughout the book I suggest how representations of play in all types of literature mirror the most important social and political rifts in the struggle for social dominance in post-Revolutionary France.

The examples I analyze can generally be divided into three broad categories, though the chapters will reveal that these cat-

egories are far from definitive or clear-cut. In the first part of the book I look at cases in which aspiring members of the bourgeoisie and certain *hobereaux de campagne* (the lowest of rural nobles) engage in leisure practices of the upper nobility. A close reading of the descriptions of these parvenus reveals that they lack the elegance and disinterested demeanor requisite for “noble” play. In attempting to infiltrate the nobility they expose themselves as nouveaux riches and are ridiculed or worse. In a second category of representation, members of the bourgeoisie learn the linguistic, moral, and behavioral codes of the nobility and graft their own leisure activities onto the leisure activities of the *ancien régime*, depicting themselves as the legitimate successors of the nobility, the new ruling class. The third category presents situations (notably in representations of hunting and fencing and in the conceptualization of Olympic restoration) in which members of the nobility are described as resisting the *embourgeoisement* of noble values or where their texts theorize a return to noble exclusivity and offer a reassertion of distinction via the world of sports and games.