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Christina Ann Tsaturyan
Brigham Young University - Provo

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Sport as Art: The Female Athlete in French Literature

Christina A. Tsaturyan

A thesis submitted to the faculty of
Brigham Young University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

Corry L. Cropper. Chair

Robert J. Hudson

Anca Sprenger

Department of French and Italian

Brigham Young University

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ABSTRACT

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Christina Tsaturyan

Department of French and Italian

Master of Arts

The modern conception of organized, codified sport originated in Europe during the 19th century. At this time, instructors began to institute the practice of certain physical activities at school as a means of teaching morals, forming character, and initiating social exchange.

Sport is particularly appropriate for forming men because of its public, physical nature. The values it instills—courage, strength, leadership—are also decidedly masculine. What, then, is made of the female athlete? Are the noble qualities that sports affirm inapplicable to women? In this thesis, I argue that female participation in sports often leads to masculinization, unless the sport is transformed into a type of “art” or otherwise feminized by focusing on its ability to enhance feminine roles (e.g. mother). This aestheticization/feminization renders female participation acceptable and allows women to receive their own “formation,” increase their aristocratic elegance, and participate in important social exchange. Sometimes these results come at a cost, such as marginalization or sexualization, but there are far fewer examples of such in the works of female authors. Society generally renounced physicality during the 17th and 18th centuries, and “sport” was an exclusively noble activity, so I will look predominantly at works from the 19th century—the period in which sport became codified, and consequently, “masculinized.” Because the 19th century is often considered a “Renaissance of the Renaissance,” I will also reference the 16th century to set the stage.

Keywords: [France, female, gender, sport, 19th century]

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Sports and Theory

Background

In his article, “Sport and Social Class,” Pierre Bourdieu explains that “sport” as we know it (organized, codified) originated in the English school systems during the 19th century. According to Bourdieu, “Sport [was] conceived as a training in courage and manliness” (824). Among the nobility it also instilled a “‘will to win’ which is the mark of a true leader, but a will to win within the rules. This is ‘fair play,’ conceived as an aristocratic disposition utterly opposed to the plebeian pursuit of victory at all costs” (824-25). Toward the end of the century, sport and sportive values began spreading to France thanks to a certain *anglomanie* that was in vogue. Octave Uzanne, a French author and bibliophile from the late 19th and early 20th centuries, explains that in sportive matters, “les Anglais sont nos maîtres sans conteste;” however, “les mœurs anglaises...s’infiltrèrent progressivement dans notre aristocratie sociale” (320). The French definition of sport was also slightly broader than the English definition, encompassing activities that could be considered more as “games” (e.g. *trictrac*) than true sport.

Sport as a disinterested practice is similar to the notion of “art for art,” but it is more appropriate than art for forming men. After all, “there is always something residually feminine about art: consider the piano and watercolours of genteel young ladies in the same period” (Bourdieu 824). The values of sport—like the development of “physical manhood” and the transformation of boys into “all-round men”—are certainly considered masculine (Pope 441). What, then, is made of the female athlete? Are the noble qualities that sports affirm inapplicable to women? In this thesis, I argue that female participation in sports often leads to masculinization, unless the sport is transformed into a type of “art” or otherwise feminized by

focusing on its ability to enhance feminine roles (e.g. mother). This aestheticization/ feminization renders female participation acceptable and allows women to receive their own “formation,” increase their aristocratic elegance, and participate in important social exchange. Sometimes these results come at a cost, such as objectification or marginalization, but there are far fewer examples of such in the works of female authors. I will look predominantly at works from the 19th century—the period in which sport became codified, and consequently “masculinized”—but will occasionally mention earlier works to set the stage.

Sport—Bastion of Masculinity

Bourdieu elaborates the sexual division in sports in this way: “When one remembers that the dominant fractions of the dominant class always tend to conceive their relation to the dominated fraction—‘intellectuals,’ ‘artists,’ ‘professors’—in terms of the opposition between the male and the female, the virile and the effeminate...one understands one of the most important implications of the exaltation of sport and especially of ‘manly’ sports like rugby, and it can be seen that sport, like any other practice, is an object of struggles between the fractions of the dominant class and also between the social classes” (826). Sport, then, is not only a practice that separates the classes, but also a practice that separates the *sexes*.

It is very obvious that up until recently, sports have been a bit taboo for women—references to female athletes are few and far between. Pierre de Coubertin, founder of the modern Olympics, was considerably opposed to women’s involvement in the games. In 1902, he claimed that female sports might be against the “Laws of Nature” (Simri 5)—but what exactly are these “laws of nature?” They are the natural gender stratifications that occur in nearly every culture.

According to the anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss, men and women inherently form boundaries and stratifications in their minds, using them to organize thoughts and ideas. Such stratifications may include notions of honor/shame, pollution/purity, nature/culture, public/private, etc. Some of these dichotomies—these ideologies—are pulled directly from the body, for, as Louis Althusser says, although “they [ideologies] constitute an illusion, we admit that they do make allusion to reality” (162). In this case, “reality” is the human anatomy, and it is alluded to because the body serves as a model of the social system.

Naturally, as male and female bodies are different, these dichotomies also have gendered nuances (i.e. concepts that are honorable or pure may be associated with one particular gender, whereas concepts that are shameful or polluted may be associated with the other). If one looks at the values and characteristics that sports are said to affirm—courage, physical strength, and a “will to win”—one sees decidedly “masculine” traits. Men are physically stronger than women, so have historically assumed the role of provider and protector—responsibilities which require the aforementioned characteristics. The nature of sports is also very “public,” and is therefore very masculine, considering that women have traditionally occupied the “private” sphere.

The Incompatibility of Sports and the Female Body

Oftentimes the body is the basis for gendered ideology that perpetuates sexual divisions in sports, but sometimes the body itself is the sole reason behind such divisions. This was the case in the 19th century, but the “body as barrier” phenomenon certainly existed before then. Bettina Bildhauer remarks that, in the Middle Ages, “men’s blood [was] highly valued as the blood of lineages, of sacrifices and covenants, of public rituals and controlled displays” (340). It also had the undeniably honorable association with Christ’s crucifixion. Women’s blood, on the other hand, “[was] imagined primarily as menstrual blood, often as impure and

uncontrollable, as significant only for the body and in the private sphere” (Bildhauer 340). If a woman were to somehow bleed in public, as was very common in medieval sports, it would not bring about the honor that was associated with the bloody violence of tournaments, which were in full swing. These events were the ultimate showcases of masculinity, and oftentimes, the bloodier, the better.¹

During this time female asceticism was also a common trend because the female body was seen as a carnal barrier to spirituality. While stories of male saints tended to fit into a diverse array of models, illness was often the main factor in a woman’s reputation for sanctity. Medieval women aimed to put mind over matter and *overcome* their bodies, not strengthen or showcase them through sport.

In the Renaissance, the human body tended to be glorified rather than suppressed. However, women still found themselves at a disadvantage. When her brother Francois I went to war, Marguerite de Navarre “bemoan[ed] her fragile feminine body that prevent[ed] her from standing with the other combatants” (Cholakian 2).

The notion that a woman’s body is “weak” persisted in the 19th century. Stephanie Twinn has asserted that, during this time, there seems to have been a “cult of ill health in which women proved their femininity with invalidism” (Guttmann *Women’s Sports* 83). Doctors discouraged women from participating in sporting activities on the grounds that they might be

¹ There are rare cases of physically strong, brave, medieval women—Joan of Arc is one of them. She has been accepted and admired despite her involvement in dangerous physical activities, and one could argue that it is due to her masculinization. Her personal valet, Jean d’Aulon, commented that “she never suffered from the secret illness of women [menstruation] and that no one could ever notice or learn anything of it from her clothes or in any other way” (McCracken 31). Her supposed lack of a menstrual period allowed her blood to undergo a transformation from something that was polluted and dishonorable to something pure and honorable.

Incidentally, many female athletes throughout the ages have experienced amenorrhea as a consequence of extreme exertion on the body. If one were to look at modern, non-menstruating sportswomen, it may be an anachronization to claim that they are de-feminized and therefore more acceptable as athletes, but it is interesting nonetheless that their bodies naturally rid themselves of this “shameful” process and render them more fit for athletics, at least by medieval standards.

harmful to their fragile health. More often than not, what they really meant was that they might be harmful to their *reproductive* health. If a woman was unable to bear a child, she was unable to perform her most important function in life. As a physician explained in 1870, it was “as if the Almighty, in creating the female sex, had taken the uterus and built up a woman around it” (Rosenberg and Smith-Rosenberg 335). This metaphor illustrates the centrality of female reproduction in the 19th century.

This emphasis caused the safety of cycling to be questioned during the late 19th and early 20th centuries. “Les médecins n’ont pu encore déterminer de quelle façon la pédale accélérée agissait sur les sens féminins en vertu de l’axiome célèbre: *Tota mulier in utero* [woman is a womb]” (Uzanne 332). Other sports underwent similar questioning. Kathryn E. McCrone gave an account of Donald Walker’s *Exercises for Ladies* (1836):

Owing to the “excessive shocks” running and leaping communicated, and the one-sidedness” produced by archery, these Walker discouraged, while horseback riding in particular he considered anathema because it coarsened the voice and complexion, twisted the body, bestowed a masculine air and “produced an unnatural consolidation of the bones of the lower part of the body, ensuring a frightful impediment of future function, which need not be dwelt on” (Guttman *Women’s Sports* 90).

The body has historically been a barrier to a woman’s sporting activities, but as Althusser has remarked, physical “reality” often perpetuates other ideologies about the “feminine” and “masculine,” as we shall see in the next section.

Sports Enthusiasm: For Men Only

In the 19th century, if a woman were even to speak of sports, she would be considered unfeminine. In *Manuel de l'homme et de la femme comme il faut* (1855), Eugène Chapus explains that one's speech reveals much about his/her character: "Donnez-m'en un de la conversation d'un homme, et je vous dirai son rang, son instruction, son savoir-vivre. Si c'est une femme, je vous dirai même son âge!" (92). Necessarily, one must pay attention to what one says in order to appear cultivated. For example, according to Chapus, a refined man must never employ technical speech (too "working-class"), except for those terms that have to do with war, racing, and hunting (102). The limitation of technical terms to war and sports reaffirms their affinity with nobility. However, this genre of language does not produce positive results for a woman, regardless of her class. "Pour qu'une femme soit réellement aimable, il est à peu près démontré qu'il faut qu'elle soit livrée à son instinct de femme, c'est-à-dire aux lumières de son cœur. L'instruction qu'on leur donne dessèche leur sève naturelle" (97).

If women were discouraged from speaking of sports, female spectatorship would obviously be very slim at sporting events. In *Les Courses de Taureaux*, Mérimée explains that there were "beaucoup moins de femmes que d'hommes" at combats, and those who attended were usually *grisettes* (81). Since modern sports were developed as a means of forming the character of young, elite *men*, modern spectators were also predominantly male. The spectators underwent social conditioning as much as the athletes did—the "civilizing" effects of modern sports were felt all around the field, park, or stadium. It was not appropriate to applaud the error of an opponent, for example (Guttman *Sports Spectators* 88).

One might assume that the role of spectator would be less gender-specific than the role of athlete. After all, the spectator does not physically participate in the competition, and is

therefore not subject to the “masculine” effects of physical exertion on the body. Nevertheless, the masculine reputation of sport tends to extend into all roles of the game—player, captain, and spectator. In “Quatre cents mètres,” Raymond Boisset indicates that a crowd of spectators reacts “comme si son être physique voulait lui aussi participer à cette fête” (Frayssinet 50). If merely watching sports incites a desire to participate, then spectatorship would be a “danger” to women, and the rarity of female spectators is more fully explained. Indeed, Montague Shearman, a sports historian, estimated that only five percent of the audience at the 1886 London AC track-and-field competition was female (Guttman *Sports Spectators* 89).

Lower-class women in particular often found it difficult to attend the sporting events that were befitting to their rank because violent hooliganism was often a part of the game. As was true of medieval tournaments, violence is often associated with masculinity. The owners of some less-popular horseracing tracks wanted to remove themselves from the rough image and encourage men that it was safe to bring their sisters and wives to the events. Some tracks, like the Union Course in New Orleans, resorted to sexual segregation to make for a safe environment (Guttman *Sports Spectators* 99). Others raised admission prices and essentially became aristocratic venues, but that was obviously still a bar to the lower-class woman.

Female Interference in a Man’s Game

We have seen that if a woman participates in or speaks of sports, she faces negative consequences; however, her meddling in sports also has the tendency to spoil them for men. When a man gets married, for example, he often must give up his sportive activities. As Bourdieu elaborates, at least among the working classes, “the abandonment of sport, an activity whose play-like character seems to make it particularly appropriate to adolescence, often coincides with marriage and entry into the serious responsibilities of adulthood” (823).

In *La Vénus d'Ille* (1837) by Mérimée, M. Alphonse decides to play in a tennis match shortly before his marriage. He misses the first ball, and blames his incompetence on his wedding ring. After he removes it, he plays well and wins the match. This gesture (the removal of his ring) is perhaps representative of the effect of marriage on sports. As soon as M. Alphonse rids himself of the symbol of his imminent marriage, his athletic abilities are no longer impeded. Coubertin would be of the same opinion, for at the celebration of the 40th anniversary of the modern Olympics, he warned the male athlete that, “contact with feminine athletics is bad for him” (Simri 6).

Sport as Art: Women Find a Way

It seems as if there is an impenetrable barrier between women and any aspect of athletics. After all, if they are discouraged from even speaking of sports, how can they get a foot in the door? Chapus instructs them to only concern themselves with their “art,” as indicated in his paraphrase of the *Illiad*: “Quand la femme d’Hector...vient discourir avec son mari les plans et l’opportunité de la bataille qui est à la veille de livrer sous les murs de Troie, le héros supplie Andromaque de laisser là ce sujet de conversation et l’engage à se rendre auprès de ses femmes et à s’occuper de son rouet!” (98). The *rouet*, of course, is the tool with which Andromache practices her “art”—weaving.

Chapus was perhaps unaware that art, a feminine pastime, is also the means through which women may gain access to masculine activities—namely, sports. In this case, a woman’s body becomes her tool. However, she must be careful to practice only those sports that are artistic and “aesthetic,” like running, swimming, and gymnastics. Like the “elite” male athletes, a woman plays these sports for their own sake, not for victory or money. However, she also has another goal in mind: the perfection and aestheticization of her body. Bourdieu says, “the

health-giving functions [of these sports] are always more or less strongly associated with what might be called aesthetic functions (especially, other things being equal, in women, who are more imperatively required to submit to the norms of defining what the body ought to be, not only in its perceptible configuration but also in its motion, its gait, etc.)” (839). Indeed, society in general seems to tacitly disapprove of unaesthetic female athletes. In a recent article from *Le Point*, Patrick Besson comments on the spectators’ reaction to a match between Ana Ivanovic (a tennis player “*trop jolie*”) and another player at the Roland-Garros French Open: “Il y en a qui ne tournent même pas la tête vers l’autre joueuse: leur regard reste sur Ana, comme si elle était la seule à jouer” (No. 1968).

Giuliano de’ Medici said of the sportswoman: “...not only would I not have her engage in such robust and strenuous manly exercises, but even those that are becoming to a woman would I have her practice in a measured way and with that gentle delicacy that befits her” (Guttman *Women’s Sports* 57). Coubertin was also quite direct in his opinions—he pronounced himself against the luge for women and called it, “the most inesthetic [sic] sight human eyes could contemplate” (Simri 5).

So, if a woman renders her sport artistic, she is socially accepted and the original goals of sport (to refine, to teach values) are achievable. Guttman would probably be opposed to the notion that sport can be art, on the grounds that art requires communication with an audience, whereas sport does not (*Ritual to Record* 11). However, there are certainly cases of artists creating art simply for art’s sake. Is that not the essence of the expression *l’art pour l’art*? Pierre Frayssinet argues for the classification of sport as art in his book *Le sport parmi les beaux-arts* and remarks, “Nous étions frappé par une certaine parenté entre ces activités, due d’abord au fait qu’elles étaient, à elles-mêmes leur propre fin et se passaient pour l’essentiel de

justification extérieure” (avant-propos). Moreover, since many female sports are individualistic, pushing the athletes to perhaps compete more against themselves than their opponents, they could be categorized a bit lower on the “play” scale. Guttmann says that “the movement from play through games and contests to sports involves an increasing degree of spatial-temporal separateness” (*Ritual to Record* 14), so the nature of female sports allows female athletes to participate in a sort of physical contest/art hybrid.

In 1910, Octave Uzanne published a book on Parisian women. It was perhaps intended to be a type of socio-cultural study, but by today’s standards it almost has the air of a field guide, providing instruction on how to recognize the characteristics and curiosities of the female sex. He dedicates an entire chapter to “les femmes de sport et les gynandres.” The fact that he juxtaposes sportswomen with “masculine women” is a very telling piece of evidence regarding early 20th century attitudes toward female athletes, but it is something that will be discussed in an upcoming section. For now, we will focus on the sportswomen.

It is not surprising that Uzanne lists swimming, water sports, hunting, skating, and horse riding as sports that are appropriate for a woman because they “mett[ent] en valeur sa sveltesse, ses coquetteries, ses charmes ondoyants et ses cambrures exquises” (322). In other words, they are the most aesthetic and do the most for increasing the aesthetics of the woman. Uzanne elaborates on each particular sport and athlete and describes them so artistically that it is almost as if one is reading poetry. He constantly remarks on the sportswomen’s beautiful costumes, the grace with which they practice their sport, and their artistic beauty. In fact, Uzanne references a journalist from *Le Figaro* who figuratively paints a scene of female mail-coach riders, “une vraie aquarelle de Debucourt: [...] Les femmes, avec leurs grands chapeaux, leurs tailles fines et leurs jupes plates, rappellent les portraits de Reynolds. Le mail-coach, tout à fait vieux style,

très britannique, a une caisse bleu de ciel...” (328). The relationship between athlete and artist could not be made any clearer in this metaphor. In addition, the beauty of the athlete is transferred over to her equipment, in this case the blue riding-coach.

It is natural to extend the athlete’s beauty to her sports equipment; after all, her props almost become extensions of her body—à la Marshall McLuhan. However, it is easier to aestheticize accessories that are naturally artistic. Cars, for example, are often designed with function *and* beauty in mind. They are coveted, collected, sold as luxury items, etc. Horses—the “equipment,” so to speak, for equestriennes—are also beautiful creatures, serving as subjects in paintings and so forth. Clubs, racquets, and balls do not usually fit into the same category. The difficulty involved with aestheticizing these items is perhaps another reason why women participate most often in individual sports. There is less equipment to take away from the beauty of the woman—the focus is on her body rather than the intricacies of the game.



Equestrienne, Jean Louis Forain, 1862-1931

Archery is a sport in which the equipment contributes to the grace of the woman—she is required to maintain good posture and form. It also has “classical associations” (Reekie 112) and has become disconnected from any martial associations (violence has always been associated with masculinity). Nineteenth century matches were often more for show than for the sport itself. “The women who participated in the extravagantly anachronistic ‘medieval’

dress-up tournament at Eglinton in 1839 were said to be ‘a society probably more elegant in costume than proficient in archery’” (Guttman *Women’s Sports* 80).²



Madame de Pompadour as Diana
Jean-Marc Nattier, 1752

The Class Effect

Archery was typically an upper-class sport. Similarly, Uzanne’s descriptions of the *femmes de sport* were most certainly focused on aristocratic sportswomen. However, during the 19th century, France went through many regimes and republics on its course to democracy. As the country became more “progressive,” so, too, did its stance on women’s sports. Strong female figures like *La Justice* and Marianne began replacing male iconic figures. After the Franco-Prussian defeat, gymnastic societies were established to create strong young men, but this desire for strength was extended to girls, as well. Some women began participating in organizations like the *Fédération Sportive et Gymnastique du Travail*. Of course, aesthetics still played a large role in lower-class female athletics. Victorian conservatives disapproved of the women in commercial bike races and asked, “Can we admire a girl, however beautiful she may

² Renaissance women certainly participated in archery for its artistic value and took many of their cues from depictions of ancient sportswomen like Diana. Diane de Poitiers, mistress of Henri II, often posed with a bow and arrow to make allusion to “the ancient goddess whose name she bore” (Guttman *Women’s Sports* 59). The *grandes dames* of France often carried “little crossbows especially made for them” (Guttman *Women’s Sports* 61), solidifying the notion that women can be associated with sport (hunting) if they go about it *artistically*. Women from Flanders also enrolled in archery guilds and occasionally participated in matches. However, these matches were not just contests, but huge festivals that incorporated aspects of pageantry, theatre, etc.—art.

be, whose face is as red as a lobster, and streaming with perspiration, whose hair is hanging in a mop about her ears, whose hairpins are strewn along the race-course, and whose general appearance is dusty, untidy, and unwomanly?" (cited in Guttmann *Women's Sports* 101). The journal *Sport* (published by the *Fédération Sportive et Gymnastique du Travail*) often accused the commercial press of featuring women's athletics for the sole purpose of advertising facial creams and other cosmetics (Guttmann *Women's Sports* 162).

This emphasis on aesthetics continued into the early 20th century. In 1925, Marthe Bertheaume, doctor and president of the *Ruche Sportive Féminine*, wrote of the women in her organization: "Aux accords d'un orchestre de la garde républicaine, les sportives s'avançaient en rangs...elles offraient en hommage aux dieux de sports leurs corps perfectionnés...si noble était [leur] démarche" (Association 91).

One immediately notices the mention of the women's perfected bodies. In fact, in another portion of Bertheaume's excerpt, the bodies are again emphasized, this time in detail: "...les Anglaises hardies, aux jambes effilées...les Tchéco-slovaques, courtes et replètes, mais bien entraînées. Derrière les Américaines, aux formes solides, aux larges épaules, aux bustes raidis, marchaient les Amazones..." (Association 91). The women are aesthetically pleasing, but the definition of beauty has slightly changed from that of the 19th century, or perhaps from that of the upper class. The women are hardy, well-trained, solid...characteristics that almost seem more masculine than feminine. Nevertheless, as with aristocratic sportswomen, the focus is still on their bodies and they are almost rendered superhuman by their association with the "gods" of sport. Like the statues of ancient Greek athletes, many of whom were also praised as heroes or Gods, they are admired for their perfected physiques.

Another intriguing aspect of the description is the “noble” nature of the athletes’ march, despite the fact that it was performed to the music of the Republican guard. In the context of this excerpt, “noble” does not necessarily mean “aristocratic,” but it is still interesting that the term is used in connection with the *République*. While speaking of the practice of sport, President Jacques Chirac has said, “Autrefois réservée à une élite, elle est devenue un phénomène de société...le sport renforce les valeurs et les principes qui sont, hélas, trop souvent battus en brèche dans notre société et qui sont pourtant essentiels à la cohésion nationale” (Association 147). Thus, sport’s power to reinforce important values must be accessible to the entire Republic; it goes without saying that women (of all classes) are included.

What Can Sport Do For a Woman?

The Female Athlete

The interesting thing about rendering a sport artistic is that it not only allows for female participation, but if performed well, it can actually be beneficial for women. Some of the most obvious benefits are physical in nature. In the mid-1700s Théodore Tronchin stressed the importance of fresh air and exercise, and popularized the “promenade de santé.” Walking in the brisk air was thought to invigorate the senses and fortify the fibers of the body. The same effect could be achieved on horseback. Montesquieu related: “Il n’y a point d’allure meilleure pour la santé que celle du cheval. Chaque pas fait une pulsation au diaphragme, et dans une lieue il y a environ quatre mille pulsations de plus qu’on n’aurait eu” (Vigarello 164). For this reason, many aristocratic women engaged in “exercise” to improve their health. In *Physiologie des exercices du corps* (1896), Dr. Lagrange remarks that “le travail des muscles est utile à la femme aussi bien qu’à l’homme” (Uzanne 323). Women were careful to not overstrain themselves, since there was still thought to be a negative correlation between reproductive

health and strenuous activity, but as time wore on, even that taboo began to disintegrate. Some believe this is due to the doctors' economic interests. Patricia Vertinsky asserts that "medical explanations initially supported the idea that women were naturally small, frail and weak until physicians found it expedient...to join forces with moral physiologists and support female physical education and other health reforms which fortified the female frame," all in the interest of "generat[ing] good business" (Guttman *Women's Sports* 88). There is a difference between exercise and sport, however, and it was still rare to see women physically *competing*. Furthermore, the line between health and physical strength (a masculine trait) is very fine; women were still encouraged to maintain femininity.

Was it only possible for *aristocratic* women to benefit from sports? As the 19th century drew to a close, the social divisions restricting middle- and lower-class women from sports began to disintegrate. Alice Milliat, founder of the *Fédération sportive féminine Internationale* explains that athletics are important for even the everyday woman:

Le sport féminin [...] a sa place dans la vie sociale au même titre que le sport masculin. Il devrait même passer au premier plan des préoccupations du gouvernement; je n'exagère pas. Si l'on considère le sport comme un moyen de perfectionnement de la race, n'est-ce pas à la femme d'abord qu'on doit le faire pratiquer? Soyons logique: au lieu de "rééduquer" un enfant de quinze ans malingre et chétif par un judicieux entraînement à la culture physique, ne vaut-il pas mieux prendre le mal à la racine et rendre la femme capable d'avoir des enfants solides? (Leclercq 85)

Indeed, it was a trend among Orthodox physicians to "renovate the female body and fortify a lady's will to be a good mother" (Guttman *Women's Sports* 88).

The benefits of sport, of course, are more than just physical. According to Lucien Dubech, sport develops qualities and virtues that are “non seulement individuelles...[mais] sociales” (Charreton 14). As Bourdieu argued, this was certainly true for elite men, who were required to participate in character-building sports at their elite schools, but it is harder to accept that the same could be true for women. However, Uzanne shows us that certain sports were actually so “in” that they almost became a requirement for any female aristocrat:

Il n'est point de femme associée à la vie élégante, désireuse d'y tenir son rang avec correction, soucieuse d'être remarquée, qui, aujourd'hui, ne doive tour à tour savoir conduire avec grâce et sûreté, voiture ou auto...et bientôt aéroplane, monter un cheval avec science, bicycliser avec agilité, patiner comme une Polonaise, chasser avec des ardeurs de Diane, s'escrimer avec des souplesses italiennes et cultiver la marche selon les principes austères des vigoureux *pedestrians* (Uzanne 320).

Of course, for the sports to work their magic, the woman must be careful to perform them with the utmost agility, suppleness, austerity: all characteristics of her femininity.

It appears that for the middle-class woman, sports have a rather functional appeal: to ensure the bearing of strong children. Aristocratic sports are ultimately performed for the sake of appearance and have strong social implications. However, it is important to remember that for the middle-class woman, child rearing had important social implications, too. It was often considered her number one function: “Motherhood was woman's normal destiny, and those females who thwarted the promise immanent in their body's design must expect to suffer” (Rosenberg and Smith-Rosenberg 336). Even if the reasons for participating in sport differed,

there is one ultimate similarity—women of all classes used it to play up some aspect of their femininity: beauty, grace, fertility, or motherhood.

The Female Spectator

Participating in a sport was not the only way a woman could benefit. Watching them could be just as effective, if the conditions were right. Certain sports had greater female attendance than others. The sport with perhaps the greatest female spectatorship was horseracing. Epsom and Ascot, the largest events, were especially attractive to women, most likely because they were extremely social in nature. Spectators came not only to cheer on their favorites and enjoy the intricacies of the competition, but also to mingle with one another and increase their social standing. Mary Russell Mitford wrote an account of a particular Ascot race and remarked that it “celebrated [a] union of sport and fashion” (Guttman *Sports Spectators* 67). It is safe to assume, then, that female spectators—along with female athletes—were also concerned with aesthetics. Much of their spectatorship was done for the sake of appearance. One is reminded of *My Fair Lady*'s Eliza Doolittle, who is invited to the Ascot by Professor Higgins so she can prove just how fashionable she is. She is instructed on the conversation topics she should stick to (*à la* Eugène Chapus)—the weather and everyone's health. In the end she is disgraced by becoming too involved in the game—for victory's sake—and screaming for her horse to move its “bloomin' ass.”

Women from England were not the only ones attending sporting events. The aristocratic *Françaises* were enjoying the tracks at Longchamp and *Le Jockey Club* around the turn of the 20th century.

Female spectatorship was large at the Ascot and Epsom horse races and *jeu de paume* matches because they were “elite” sports and the venues were appropriate for (appropriate)

social exchange. Country clubs, like the All-England Croquet and Lawn-Tennis Club at Wimbledon, provided similar security and also encouraged female spectatorship. An article from 1905 explained this phenomenon: “only when ‘rougher elements’ are barred from entry can respectable women feel at ease” (Guttman *Sports Spectators* 97). The title of the article sums it up: “The Country Club...Where Woman is Really Free” (Dunn 1).

The Challenges of Female Athletes

Marginalization

The obvious downfall to focusing on the aesthetics of a sport is getting *too* caught up in appearance. Sidonie-Gabrielle Colette, in an article entitled, “Le Martyrologe,” (late 19th century) pokes fun at the sportswoman too focused on her looks. She performs a fictional diagnostic on a certain Mlle C.:

Affirme son gout pour la marche à pied: rassemble chez elle les exemplaires les plus variés de chaussures à la mode, à l’aide desquelles elle prétend marcher [...]
Ses chaussures sont armées, les unes (spéciales pour le footing) de talons de huit centimètres; les autres (pour l’après-midi et le soir) de neuf à douze centimètres.
Le sujet se plaint de douleurs dans les pieds, les genoux, le ventre et les reins
(cited in Charreton 146).

It is interesting indeed that society’s concerns about the effects of sports on a woman’s health are substantiated—but only *because* she performs in a “feminine” way.

Colette seemed to blame women themselves for conforming to harmful fashion trends and expectations, but others blame society for *creating* such expectations. Jennifer Hargreaves argues that society “trivialize[s] female sports, using them simply as channels for the commodification of the female body: the marketing of the female body through sports is

extremely profitable” (167). Sportswomen are sometimes considered to be no more than a pretty face. This has resulted in a shortening of their “life spans,” figuratively speaking—as soon as youth flees, so does their fame. While some male athletes like Jack Nicklaus, George Foreman, and Roger Clemens receive acclaim in their 40s and beyond, it is rare for women to experience the same phenomenon, currently or historically. The following quote seems to be applicable to men more than women: “The ‘bourgeois’ sports, mainly practised for their functions of physical maintenance and for the social profit they bring, have in common the fact that their age-limit lies far beyond youth and perhaps comes correspondingly later the more prestigious and exclusive they are (e.g. golf)” (Bourdieu 837).

Oftentimes when women are involved in sports, they are not even the participant, but the reward. At fifteenth century tournaments, women often played the roles of “damsels in distress” whose job was to be saved by the powerful knights (Guttmann *Women’s Sports* 45). There is specific evidence from a tournament held in Merseburg in 1226, in which a *puellam decoram valde* (“nicely dressed young girl”) was the prize (Guttmann *Erotic in Sports* 39). Such obvious objectification has become less apparent in modern days, but it still exists. Take, for example, the practice of cheerleading. Although it is considered a sport of its own, cheerleaders are usually nothing more than accessories at the more “important” sporting events.

The terminology of certain sports and games literally objectifies women. In the game of *tricotrac*, which bears similarities to backgammon (not a physical contest, but a contest nonetheless), the checkers are called *dames* (women). Euverte de Jollivet, author of *L’excellent jeu du triquetrac* (1634), remarks: “If one uses modesty and gentleness with wooden checkers [*dames*], which are insensitive, one will by nature or by habit speak, treat, and conduct oneself

modestly with people and living women [*dames*] who only require love and gentleness in their friendships” (Cropper 69).

Sexualization

The line between marginalization and sexualization—especially when it involves women—can be very thin. The “swimsuit issue” of *Sports Illustrated* is often cited as an example of female sexualization in sports. Some of the models are not athletes, per se, but their juxtaposition with male athletics seems odd indeed. Sportswomen themselves are also victims of voyeurism, of course. Because feminine athletics are so focused on the body, and since the body is undeniably associated with sexuality, the result of sexualization is highly probable.

“Pedestrianism” (the footrace) has been popular for a very long time, and women have often participated. In the 18th century, “smock races” were especially popular, in which women would run for the prize of a smock. The competitors were often encouraged to come “lightly clad” (Guttman *Sports Spectators* 63). In one particular race, the *Weekly Journal* noted that a crowd gathered in expectation of seeing two girls run naked on Barnet Common. The spectators were disappointed because the women wore clothing (Guttman *Sports Spectators* 64). In 1711, a correspondent to *The Spectator* remarked that, “nothing is more usual than for a nimble-footed Wench to get a Husband at the same time she wins a Smock” (Guttman *Erotic in Sports* 54).

Some modern spectators also receive sexual gratification by watching attractive female athletes. In his article on the Roland-Garros Open, Besson describes Ana Ivanovic in a tantalizing manner: “Elle enlève son blouson blanc, apparaissant dans une courte robe rouge qui laisse ses épaules nues. Rondes comme les petits pains serbes.” He explicitly remarks that “beautiful” athletes are often the victims of voyeurism: “Leurs coups sont moins jugés que leur

cou est jaugé. Quand elles se baissent pour rattraper une balle, les hommes ne regardent plus la balle” (No. 1968).

While in some instances current sportswomen are the passive victims of sexual exploitation, they may also fit the image of being active sexual beings. The gendered dichotomy of (masculine) strength/(feminine) weakness is becoming less defined since physical strength is more and more synonymous with *sexual* strength. Women are often encouraged to exercise in order to be active and confident lovers. Jennifer Hargreaves argues that “in some contexts, the recent combination in sports of fashionableness with sexiness, self-consciousness, youthfulness and fighting fitness produces a radical and powerful image of aggressive femininity which is influencing the production of feminine identities in sports” (168).

Masculinization

In the first paragraph of Uzanne’s chapter on sportswomen, he marvels at the increasing number of these “masculine women,” who seem to cry out, “Je me suis fait homme!” (319). Indeed, if a woman is not careful to emphasize her femininity while practicing her sport, she is in danger of harsh criticism. “L’image que donne généralement de la femme la littérature sportive, tend, au point de vue plastique, à la rapprocher de l’homme, et à la limite, à l’assimiler à lui dans une sorte d’idéal qui serait d’un sexe unique, l’antique androgyne” (Charreton 149). Female bodybuilders practice a sport that can be particularly destructive to their physical femininity. The measures they take to obtain muscle definition decrease breast tissue, so they often get implants to restore lost femininity. They also wear makeup, nail polish, and skimpy bikinis while competing. Even the International Federation warns of too much masculinization: “The judge must bear in mind that he or she is judging a woman’s bodybuilding competition and is looking for the ideal *feminine* shape” (Hargreaves 169).

Allen Guttman remarks on the masculine reaction to female athletes: “As more and more women have refused to be content with conventionally feminine sports (like tennis) and have ‘intruded’ into traditionally male sports (like rugby), male resentment has taken the form of...hostility (female athletes are said to be lesbians)” (*Sports and Politics* 370).³

A sportswoman who is energetic and tough (physically and emotionally) is not necessarily condemned to a “masculine” classification. Sometimes these traits are actually admired. The difference between women and men in this case is that women must only display such boldness in contexts of social equality—in other words, while she is playing with or interacting with other women. Her odds of being characterized as “masculine” are much higher if she is playing sports *with* men or attempting to compete on their level. During the late 19th century, male students at Oxford and Cambridge seemed to be accepting of female athleticism because it was “...completely separate from and no challenge to men’s sport” (Guttman *Women’s Sports* 109).

³ The poetess Louise Labé participated in athletic activity: “She was skilled in military exercises and games as her brothers were, and rode with such daring that friends, in fun and admiration, called her Captaine Loys” (Cook). It is possible that her athleticism contributes to another hypothesis: that Labé was a lesbian. Julie d’Aubigny, a 17th century swordswoman and opera singer (talk about a juxtaposition of sport and art!) also had quite the reputation of being a bisexual.

Sports and “the Arts”

Female Athletes in Fine Art

Some ancient vases and mosaics depict women engaging in sport, but practically nothing of its kind shows up again until the eighteenth century. In the 1700s it is possible to find paintings, etchings, or lithographs of noblewomen engaging in activities like hunting or equestrianism. These sports, like the ones described in Uzanne’s *Parisiennes*, serve to boost the social prestige of their female practitioners. More often than not, though, women are depicted merely as spectators, as in *Le jeu de longue paume* (below). Peasant sportswomen are almost nonexistent in art because they typically did not participate in such activities and wealthy aristocrats often commissioned the works.



The Ladies Shooting Poney
John Collet, 1780



Le jeu de longue paume, Anon., 1802

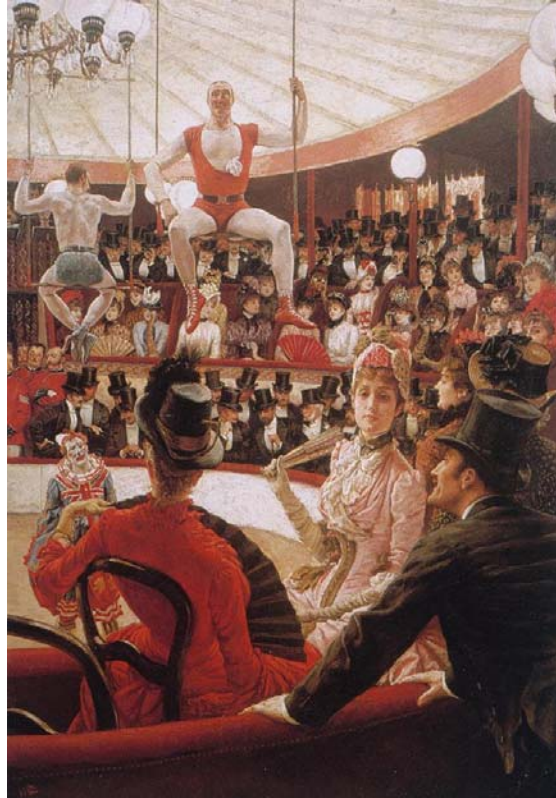
Sport paintings become more common in the nineteenth century, as sport itself becomes more institutionalized. However, as in earlier depictions, nineteenth-century sportswomen are rarely shown *engaging* in their sport. In the following painting by James Jacques Joseph Tissot, a woman stands *contrapposto*, resulting in a relaxed, passive appearance; it also makes her more visually interesting. She limply holds her mallet behind her back, suggesting that she is taking a break from the game. Two other women relax on the grass in the background but do not appear

to see or pay heed to the viewer as the main woman does. Although the painting is entitled *Croquet*, its subject is obviously the woman, not the sport.



Croquet, James Jacques Joseph Tissot, 1878

The female subject of another Tissot painting, *Sportswomen*, is similarly displayed. She is a spectator, but like the croquet player, is disinterested in the activity around her. She locks eyes with the viewer, like the woman in *Croquet*, which immediately makes her the focal point of the painting. Instead of a mallet, she limply holds her fan. It is a natural gesture, but contrived just enough to render it pose-like. A man in the foreground actively watches the show. He serves as a counterpart to her feminine passivity. The other female spectators are slightly less numerous than the male spectators, and they are also seated in a separate section. This literal segregation allows the women to maintain their femininity, whereas their interspersed amongst the men would threaten it.



Sportswomen, James Jacques Joseph Tissot, 1883-85

Active athletes are occasionally depicted in paintings, but artists still aim to make them visually pleasing, if not emphasize some aspect of their womanhood. Edgar Degas is well known for his paintings of ballerinas, many of whom are obviously beautiful, graceful, and feminine. However, in *Spartan Girls Provoking the Boys*, he conveys a rather modern representation (one could even say reversal) of sex roles. Four aggressive, scantily clad young women challenge five naked boys to a wrestling match. One girl extends her arm, suggesting action, while the boys remain passive—one crouches on all fours and two others seem to back away. Given Sparta's military preeminence, there is no doubt that the girls are presented as strong and athletic. However, there is also no doubt that the painting is highly erotic. The girls could be challenging the boys to a sexual exploit just as well as they could to a wrestling match. Another interesting aspect of the painting is the image of mothers and babies in the background. Plutarch wrote that Lycurgus, the legislator of ancient Sparta, ordered Spartan girls to “exercise

themselves in running, wrestling, and throwing quoits and darts; that their bodies being strong and vigorous, the children afterwards produced from them might be the same” (Langhorne 48-9). The mothers in the background are perhaps a reference to this decree, and a reminder of one of the roles of sport in a woman’s life.



Spartan Girls Provoking Boys, Edgar Degas, 1860-62

Yasuo Kuniyoshi’s painting of a French circus woman from over half a decade later also juxtaposes the role of mother/sportswoman:



Strong Woman and Child, Yasuo Kuniyoshi, 1925

The paradox between traditional masculine and feminine characteristics is also evident in Honoré Daumier's lithograph *My Bicycle* (1868). A female personification of "peace" sits atop a bicycle made from a cannon. Not only is the phallic imagery extremely apparent, but the cannon also represents militarism and violence—activities associated with masculinity and incompatible with "peace."⁴ Daumier's lithograph was most likely not a direct satire of gender roles, but of the impossibility for peace to be achieved via militaristic means. However, the scene is meant to appear ridiculous due to common perceptions of women as frail or physically inept. Also, when the image was printed, the first bicycle race was being held at Parc de Saint-Cloud in Paris, so the fact that the woman is riding a bicycle is also likely meant to seem "out of place."



My Bicycle, Honoré Daumier, 1868

Art frequently depicts sportswomen as passive creatures whose sports are merely afterthoughts to their physical appearance. When they *are* actively engaged in sport or

⁴ Two other "paradoxical" women, although not pure "athletes," are Marianne from Eugène Delacroix's *Liberté Menant le Peuple* and Mary Read in Alexandre Debelle's lithograph *Famous Pirate Mary Read* for Christian Pitois' book *Histoire des pirates et corsaires* (1846). Marianne is strong and violent, as she holds a bayonet and stands upon a mound of corpses; however, she is partially erotic and also maternal, as she is a symbol of the *République*. Mary Read holds a gun as a male enemy lies bleeding on the ground. She pulls her shirt aside to reveal her bare breast, as if to say, "I am a woman!"

otherwise displaying physical bravery, the depictions either seem unnatural and odd, or the artists eroticize them or show them fulfilling their feminine role of mother to temper the masculinizing effects of the activity.

Female Athletes in Literature

The fictional element of literature makes it quite conducive to the portrayal of sportswomen, since they are almost non-existent in reality. Writing is also a marvelous medium through which one may examine the metaphor of the female athlete; and, as it is an “art,” it is even more appropriate for the portrayal of sportswomen.

Beautiful Sportswomen

In the Middle Ages, female sportive literature is particularly slim. Some works⁵ mention female crusaders, but these were most likely satirical poems whose goal was to shame men into participating in the crusades. Works produced during the Renaissance—a period of humanism—had a few more references to sportswomen. Rabelais’ *Gargantua* (1534), for example, mentions that women in the Abbé de Thélème (a “monastery” whose principles actually stand in stark contrast to the traditional monastic code and underline the ability of man to govern himself) went hawking and hunting. These ladies “mounted upon dainty well-paced nags, seated in a stately palfrey saddle, carried on their lovely fists, miniardly begloved every one of them, either a sparrowhawk or a laneret or a marlin, and the young gallants carried the other kinds of hawks” (Ch. 58). The women carry different species of birds than the men, and they maintain a “dainty,” “lovely” femininity. Nineteenth century sportswomen follow the same trend.

⁵ *Tournoiement des Dames* by Huon d’Oisi and the *Tournoiement as Dames de Paris* by Pierre Gencien

In 1911, the author Valery-Nicolas Larbaud wrote *Fermina Marquez*, a novel in which a young Colombian boy moves to France to attend an all-boys' school. His family is allowed to visit him for a period of time until he becomes acclimated. His sisters, especially the eldest, Fermina, obviously attract much attention. At one point Fermina begins a game of tennis with another girl. According to the narrator, "c'était un jeu de filles, que nous méprisions, un 'jeu de yankees.'" As discussed in the theory section, by the early 20th century tennis had gained in popularity amongst female spectators, but not necessarily female *players*. Nevertheless, the beautiful Fermina intrigues the schoolboys. She aestheticizes the game with her graceful movements: "[Elle] s'animait beaucoup en jouant; sa force et son agilité étaient admirables; en même temps elle savait garder une noblesse et une majesté d'allure que les mouvements les plus rapides ne troublaient pas" (Association 320). Fermina is obviously quite talented, but she maintains composure, as any high-class young woman should. In fact, the narrator describes her with the term "noblesse," indicating that she was indeed a step above the typical young lady.

Thomas Bauer, instructor at *l'Institut National des Sports et de l'Education Physique*, is the author of the poem *Au petit matin* (2005), which also emphasizes the graceful body of a female athlete:

Au petit matin...

Qu'elle est belle !

Elle court, jeune et gracieuse...

Elle court, Aurore lumineuse...

Comme un faon sorti de son repaire,
Elle agite ses fines pattes
Sur les feuilles humides et printanières
Au petit matin, à la hâte.

Des larmes de soleil sur ses mollets
Coulent des bijoux d'or.
C'est un vrai feu follet

Qui s'anime, encore et encore.

Ces gestes d'athlète, ô combien raffinés,
Enflamment les passants,
Dont le regard médusé
Erre dans les couloirs du temps.

Qu'elle est belle !
Celle qui court, jeune et gracieuse
Atalante lumineuse...
(L'Association 80)

It is interesting that the runner's beauty is the first characteristic the poet chooses to emphasize. The exclamatory statement "qu'elle est belle!" sets the tone for the rest of the poem: the focus is the runner's appearance, not necessarily her performance. Bauer continues to speak of her corporality by mentioning her *pattes* and *mollets*. Moreover, he renders her almost inhuman by comparing her to a fawn and to the Greek athlete Atalanta. This woman seduces the spectators; in fact, she "inflames" and "dumbfounds" them. The poem ends as it began—with another reminder that "elle est belle!"

Another interesting aspect of the poem is the use of the word *raffiné* to describe the athlete's gestures. Her movements are "refined" in the sense of perfection and beauty. However, one is also reminded of Chapus' *Manuel de l'homme et de la femme comme il faut*, which essentially provides instruction on how to become "refined," that is, less vulgar. Because this runner is described as a beautiful object in this artistic rendition, the sport is aestheticized and feminized, and is no longer a dishonorable pastime for a woman. The reference to "golden jewels" is perhaps another indication that the sport has been "elevated."

Like this runner, Mila from *Les Natchez* (1826) is praised for the artistic fashion in which she practices sport. There is a scene in which she and Outougamiz are swimming. Mila is described very artistically: "Tantôt elle se balançoit lentement le visage tourné vers le ciel;

vous eussiez cru qu'elle dormoit sur les vagues...quelquefois ses bras écartoient l'onde avec grâce...son sein, légèrement enflé à l'œil, sous le voile liquide paroissoit enfermé dans un globe de cristal; elle traçoit, par ses mouvements, une multitude de cercles qui, se poussant les un les autres, s'étendoient au loin: Mila s'ébattoit au milieu de ces ondulations brillantes, comme un cygne qui baigne son cou et ses ailes" (Chateaubriand 98). For Mila, swimming is an art; she performs it with grace. She is described with poetic (artistic) language, as she bathes "*comme un cygne*". Her body and its movements are the central subject. Even her breast—a part that does not really contribute to the performance of the sport—is mentioned.

Artistic presentation is also important for Hauteclaira from "Bonheur dans le crime" of *Les Diaboliques* (1874). She is an exceptional fencer who takes over her father's fencing school when he passes away. Although fencing is typically a masculine pastime, it is probably better suited for women than other sports. After all, for the inhabitants of V. (the village in "Bonheur dans le Crime"), "il ne leur suffisait pas de tuer leur homme; ils voulaient le tuer savamment et *artistement*, par principe. Il fallait, avant tout, pour eux, qu'un homme fut beau sous les armes..." (Barbey D'Aurevilly 118, italics added). Fencing was a hybrid between violence and art, much like the hybrid of female sports.⁶

When the Comte de Savigny goes to Hauteclaira's school, he finds her to be "une admirable jeune fille, piquante et provocante en diable dans ses chausses de soie tricotées, qui mettaient en relief ses formes de Pallas de Velletri, et dans son corsage de maroquin noir, qui pinçait en craquant, sa taille robuste et découpée..." (Barbey D'Aurevilly 124). She is provokingly attractive, and is not only aestheticized but sexualized. Later on, the Comte succeeds in having an affair with Hauteclaira, and their amorous activities begin with a game of

⁶ Another interesting hybrid in fencing is the male/female symbolism. While the fencing foil is undoubtedly phallic in nature, female fencers also wear a rigid chest plate, which greatly enhances their feminine physique.

fencing. Doctor Torty manages to spy them, and he jokingly remarks, “voilà donc toujours leur manière de faire l’amour!” (Barbey D’Aureville 145). Hauteclaira not only brought feminine sexuality to sport, she brought *sport* to sexuality.

When Hauteclaira is first introduced to the reader, she is looking at a black panther at some zoological gardens, and the creature seems to submit to her gaze. Doctor Torty, who is narrating, remarks: “Eh! Eh! Panthère contre panthère!...mais le satin est plus fort que le velours” The “satin” is Hauteclaira, and the main narrator continues, “noire, souple, d’articulation aussi puissante, aussi royale d’attitude...la femme, l’inconnue, était comme une panthère humaine” (Barbey D’Aureville 113). Not only is Hauteclaira’s beauty emphasized; her animal-like qualities are also brought to the forefront. This animalization does two things: (1) renders the athlete more “poetic” or “artistic” (aesthetic) through metaphor and (2) renders her less human. In the practice of sport, “humanity” is often synonymous with “masculinity” (one thinks of sweat, brutality, etc.).

Female athletes are quite often animalized. The runner in Bauer’s poem is compared to a fawn, while Mila from *Les Natchez* is compared to a swan. Another example of this phenomenon is found in Uzanne’s book on Parisian women. When speaking of the female ice skater, he says: “On la voit filer ainsi qu’une hirondelle fendent l’air...” (326). The swallow metaphor is a case of rendering more feminine. Not only is *hirondelle* literally a feminine word in French; it is a creature that is dainty and pretty—perfectly feminine.

One final case of animalization is found in the novel *Carmen* (1845), the namesake of its main female character. Don Jose accuses Carmen of cheating on him with a Picador. He cries for her to stay with him, and she emphatically refuses while stamping her foot on the ground. The imagery is perhaps subtle, but Carmen seems to resemble an angry, snorting bull. The

imagery is reinforced when Don Jose recounts: “I struck her twice...she fell at the second stroke, without a sound” (Merimée 97). Her death greatly resembles that of a bull during a bullfight. In this case, the woman being animalized is not necessarily a “sportswoman,” but she is caught up in some sportive affairs, and one could argue that she is compared to a “sportive” animal.

Strong Sportswomen

In *La Première Olympique: Mademoiselle de Plémeur* (1924) by Henry de Montherlant, Montherlant mentions the platonic notion of the impossibility of loving ugly things—for him, he is incapable of loving that which is *weak*. Therefore, he had never found the female sex particularly attractive. However, his opinion changes when he observes Mademoiselle de Plémeur—a female runner. She has the body of a Greek statue, which he finds irresistible (Guttman *Erotic in Sports* 93). He remarks, “Quelle révélation! Comme celle d'un nouveau sexe. Je compris alors que le corps de la femme pouvait être beau, s'il était exercé” (Montherlant 279). He finds this woman seductive because of her strength.

De Montherlant was rumored to be homosexual, so his ideas of feminine beauty may differ from those of the heterosexual male. Nevertheless, the female body itself has a universally erotic appeal, and the fact that it is on display is what really matters. Homosexuals and heterosexuals alike may all find a certain attraction to the female athlete because she embodies a slew of contradictory characteristics. She is often strong and muscled, but in comparison to her male counterpart she is undeniably female. Her body is also very much on display, as she wears lighter clothing to permit greater movement and efficiency. She is usually highly aesthetic from many different viewpoints.

Madeleine from *Mademoiselle de Maupin* (1835) is a character based on the real-life Julie d'Aubigny (previously mentioned) who also attracts both genders. She dresses in men's clothing, goes by the pseudonym Théodore, and seduces the widow Rosette *and* Rosette's previous lover—D'Albert. At one point D'Albert remarks, "What pity it is that he is a man, or rather that I am not a woman!" (Gautier 115). As a man, of course, she has access to all the *other* sports from which she was previously restricted. She states: "If I had not taken this resolution...and renounced the garments of a sex which is mine only materially and accidentally, I should have been very unhappy: I like horses, fencing, and all violent exercises; I take pleasure in climbing and running about like a youth..." (Gautier 272).

When Rosette's brother discovers her in "Théodore's" bed, he is outraged and challenges "Théodore" to a duel. S/he accepts, and Rosette promptly faints. Since women and violence are incompatible, she behaves appropriately for her sex. Because Madeleine is under the guise of a man, she also behaves appropriately. During the course of the duel she refrains from harming the brother because he is dear to Rosette, but after a close call she becomes angry and injures him. She is very surprised at the sight of blood: "The unheard-of thing was not, as it appeared to me, that blood should have flown from a wound, but that the wound should have been given by me, and that a young girl of my age (I was going to write 'young man,' so well have I entered into the spirit of my part) should have laid low a vigorous captain so well trained in the art of fence as Alcibiades" (Gautier 321). The allusion to the famously bisexual Alcibiades only serves to strengthen her own bisexuality. She leaves, swooning. It seems as if her repressed femininity almost makes her shy away from the violence of which she was a part, but once she gets outside the air restores her to her senses. She then saddles and bridles a horse herself and rides off into the night—just like a true "man."

Another fictional woman partially involved in violent affairs is la Dame des Belles-Cousines from *L'Hystoire et plaisante cronicque du petit Jehan de Saintré et de la jeune dame des Belles-Cousines sans autre nom nommer* by Antoine de la Sale (1456). Although la Dame des Belles-Cousines represents a time period drastically different from the 19th century, she, like Hauteclaire, is also an instructress to a male student. At one point she teaches Jehan that he must “sauver son corps (par) le métier des armes” (74) and she has him engage in physical and combative exercises. Although she orchestrates much of his training, her role in its execution is fairly limited. Later in the story she becomes her student’s mistress (also like Hauteclaire). However, she eventually cheats on him with an abbot. Perhaps this is a satire of courtly love; perhaps it is an indication that Jehan must learn to protect himself from coquetry just as much as from the enemy. Whatever the case, her hypocritical action undermines any sort of ideal set forth by her previous position as instructor of arms and combat.

The Challenges of *Literary Female Athletes*

Marginalization

Oftentimes female characters are flat, only serving as catalysts to further the storyline for the main male characters. Laura Mulvey is a theorist who comments on film, but her ideas can certainly be transferred to literature. Quoting Boetticher, she remarks that “what counts is what the heroine provokes, or rather what she represents. She is the one, or rather the love or fear she inspires in the hero, or else the concern he feels for her, who makes him act the way he does. In herself the woman has not the slightest importance” (837). We certainly see this to be the case in some of the stories we have analyzed. For example, La Dame des Belles-Cousines is not even named (*sans aultre nom nommer*).

The techniques whereby this depersonalization occurs are not just specific to film, either. One such technique is fragmentation: “one part of a fragmented body destroys the Renaissance space, the illusion of depth demanded by the narrative, it gives flatness, the quality of a cut-out or icon rather than verisimilitude to the screen” (Mulvey 838). Many times, women’s bodies are “cut” in film. In other words, one only sees a shot of legs, a face, breasts, etc. This visual fragmentation takes away any sort of depth from the woman and eroticizes her. We no longer see her as a person, but as an object. Similarly, some literary accounts “cut” female characters. Bauer’s poem brings attention to the (unnamed) female runner’s feet and calves, and Chateaubriand chooses to describe Mila by emphasizing one body part at a time (face, arms, breast) rather than giving a complete picture.

Oftentimes the role of literary women in sports is the same as that of their realistic counterparts: reward. In *Les Deux Amants* (12th century) by Marie de France, the King only agrees to marry off his daughter to whoever is strong enough to carry her up a steep mountain; thus, she becomes the prize for the strongest “mountaineer.” Not only is she the end reward, she is a passive “accessory” to the dozens of suitors that attempt to take her to the top. When a certain squire catches her eye, the girl secures a magic potion to strengthen him during his ascent. She also tries to lighten his load by fasting. Although her attempted weight loss does not necessarily bare any parallels to the current female obsession with thinness (within and outside of sports), it is still a type of bodily manipulation and can therefore be read as an effect of objectification.

In *W, ou le souvenir d'enfance* (1975), Georges Perec recounts childhood memories of his life as an evacuee during World War II. He intersperses these chapters with fictional narrative about an island whose inhabitants are obsessed with sport and competition. Life on

the island is a metaphor of life in the World War II concentration camps. During one of the fictional chapters, naked, fertile women are released onto a track and are chased by male athletes—once they are caught, they are raped. This is a disturbing scene, yet once again indicative of the objectification women undergo in sport literature. The female runners serve only as “prizes” for the fastest male runners. Their own athletic performance merits no reward.

Sexualization

Not only are the women from *W* marginalized; they are obviously sexualized. According to Ann-Kailani Jones, writers use female athletes as “‘sexual titillation’—an extension of their role of adjunct to men” (Sandoz 32). In this case, the female runners serve to highlight the masculinity and virility of the male runners. Perec probably did not actually mean to marginalize women in such a cruel way; rather, he was using metaphor to allude to a certain historical reality.

Most examples of female objectification are also examples of sexualization. The runner in Bauer’s poem is said to “inflare” the spectators, and Hauteclair’s body is described as being “provocative.” Quite a lot of literature treats the *male* athlete’s body, yes, but very rarely does it sexualize it.

Earlier we noted how Fermina of *Fermina Marquez* was able to aestheticize the game of tennis and therefore remove some of the stigma that was associated with female players. Nevertheless, the result came at a cost. During the course of the game her sleeve keeps slipping until it is well above her elbow. The narrator remarks, “Je m’étonne encore qu’elle ne sentit pas tous nos regards curieux et avides collés pour ainsi dire à son bras nu” (Association 320). The male spectators almost become voyeuristic. Here is yet another example of “sexual titillation”—Fermina’s body is highlighted in a way that elicits a response from the male

spectators; her character is not necessarily important in and of itself. According to Luce Irigaray, “The exchanges upon which patriarchal societies are based take place exclusively among men. Women, signs, commodities, and currency always pass from one man to another... Thus the labor force and its products, including those of mother earth, are the object of transactions among men and men alone” (192). Gautier’s story can be said to be “homosocial,” as it is written from the viewpoint of a male student and focuses almost exclusively on the interactions of his fellow male students. The all-boys school setting only heightens the male-centricity. Fermina is a catalyst in the story. Laura Mulvey’s theories on the relative “unimportance” of female characters also give credence to Irigaray’s assertion, and are certainly applicable to Fermina and her male spectators. Fermina is simply the passive, *sexualized* object that causes the boys to act, sexually.

Masculinization

Since sports are universally seen as more “masculine” than “feminine,” homosexual male athletes do not pose much of a threat to society’s view of the sexual orientation of other male athletes. However, lesbian athletes *do* threaten society’s view of other sportswomen since they cannot rely on the heterosexuality-boosting potential of sports as men can. Female athletes whose femininity is not emphasized face the likelihood of being classified as lesbians, or at the very least, “masculine.” Madeleine from *Mademoiselle de Maupin* is one example of a typical “strong” sportswoman whose femininity is not emphasized—she is a bisexual. This is why many 19th century men found it distasteful for women to engage in sports. Uzanne remarks (in a mocking tone) that before sports became fashionable and feminine, small groups of women “avait besoin de montrer des attitudes ‘à la Maupin’” (319-20). It is rare to find a strong, unsexualized, “unaesthetic,” *heterosexual* female athlete in literature. Usually strong sportswomen

must be involved in some sort of heterosexual love affair. *La Dame des Belles-Cousines*, for example, becomes the mistress of Jehan. Hauteclaira also becomes involved in a love affair with the Comte de Savigny. Even Madeleine de Maupin seduces D'Albert; the fact that she is also involved with a woman, however, counteracts the feminizing effects of the previous relation.

Although Hauteclaira exudes an alluring sexuality in "Bonheur dans le crime," the state of her femininity is sometimes precarious. Her name itself has a fairly masculine connotation, as it is the name of the famed warrior Olivier's sword in *La Chanson de Roland*. Since the sword is associated with violence (i.e. masculinity), it is interesting that Hauteclaira's father would have chosen it for her name.⁷ The narrator also seems to question Hauteclaira's femininity (or perhaps her *humanity*) while she is at the zoological gardens looking at the panther: "Mais la femme—si c'en etait une..." (Barbey D'Aureville 113)

The femininity of Mlle. de Plémeur, the runner in Montherlant's *Première Olympique*, also faces some negative consequences when her career in running ends. She is quasi-masculinized because she is unable to fulfill the traditional feminine roles of wife and mother. Montherlant writes: "Personne ne l'a revue au club. Le sport était l'unique hausse-col de Mademoiselle de Plémeur, son armature, son couvent. Qu'est-elle devenue, si l'on se souvient que par là-dessus elle n'avait pas le sou ? Les jeunes gens de ma génération n'épousent que leurs maîtresses. Mademoiselle de Plémeur a-t-elle enfin 'compris?'" (288). Female sport, which focuses on the body and aesthetics, ends just as soon as youth flees. One is certainly reminded of Ronsard's ode, « Mignonne, allons voir si la rose... » in which he warns Cassandra :

⁷ Incidentally, this connection might also serve as an example of objectification—naming a woman after an object.

Cueillez, cueillez votre jeunesse :
Comme à cette fleur, la vieillesse
Fera tenir votre beauté

After beauty is “taken,” it is often too late for marriage, so there is nowhere else for women to find a place. Men, on the other hand, often have quite a bit of potential left even as they age. As was mentioned earlier, bourgeois sports have an extremely high age-limit for men (Bourdieu 837). If men *choose* to abandon their sports, marriage is still a very attainable goal. Actually, for lower-class men, marriage actually *coincides* with the abandonment of sport (Bourdieu 823).

Female Sport Authors—the “Art” of Writing Sport

We have seen how writing, due to its creative nature, is a medium through which women may gain access to the world of sport. However, we have also seen how these literary sportswomen are often insignificant or flat. Even developed female characters face certain challenges like sexualization or masculinization. To combat this, some female authors have attempted to write their own sport literature. As H el ene Cixous has said, “By writing herself, woman will return to that body which has been more than confiscated from her...In censuring the body, one censures at the same time breathing and speech” (880). Luce Irigaray, a contemporary of Cixous, also mentions the importance of writing, which allows for the creation of a female voice and language: “If we don’t invent a language, if we don’t find our body’s language, it will have too few gestures to accompany our story. We shall tire of the same ones, and leave our desires unexpressed, unrealized. Asleep again, unsatisfied, we shall fall back on the words of men” (214).

Christine de Pizan, although writing during an earlier period, succeeds in depicting proactive and aggressive women. At the beginning of *Le livre de la cit e des dames* she is

disheartened because she cannot understand why so many learned men have depicted women to be stupid and wicked creatures. Three female personifications—Reason, Rectitude, and Justice—visit her and help her gain understanding. Together, they build a “city of ladies” and fill it with some of the most noble and accomplished women from history. In chapter sixteen, the Amazons of Scythia arm themselves and seek vengeance for their dead husbands. They “lay waste” to the lands of their enemies and shed much blood. Their depiction is quite more vivid and complex than that of Aude—from *La Chanson de Roland*—who dies just upon hearing that her fiancé was killed in battle.

De Pizan *did* succeed in depicting physically strong, active women without resorting to objectification or sexualization, but one could argue that her characters still tended to be a bit masculine—after all, they cut off their breasts to facilitate easier fighting. Scholars have found this breast-cutting myth to be just that—a myth based on a mistranslation; however, because De Pizan believed it and chose to mention it, her views of strong women seem to be masculine. It is possible that De Pizan’s Amazons had purely functional motives in severing their breasts, yet one cannot deny the metaphor. Reminiscent of castration, it seems to symbolize a renunciation of femininity. De Pizan was so desirous to make women equal to men that she almost turned them *into* men. According to De Beauvoir, “One is not born a woman, but rather becomes, a woman” (301). In other words, man is the primary sex and woman is culturally constructed in opposition to him. Since women have historically been classified as the “weaker” sex, both physically and mentally, many have attempted to fix that image by proving that women are capable of “masculine” types of activities. In *Ce sexe qui n’est pas un*, Luce Irigaray critiques this binary system. According to her, man cannot serve as the ideal reference. If woman is

always “other,” or even “one of two,” she can never succeed. She needs to find her own meaning independently—not based on men.

Indiana, from George Sand’s (*Amantine Aurore Lucile Dupin’s*) novel by the same name (1832), enjoys hunting. The pleasure she takes from this sport is personal; she has nothing to prove. At one point she goes hunting with Ralph, her cousin, and Raymon, a man who is trying to seduce her. As soon as the hounds were away, “ses yeux et ses joues s’animèrent; le gonflement de ses narines trahit je ne sais quel sentiment de terreur ou de plaisir, et tout à coup, quittant son côté et pressant avec ardeur les flancs de son cheval, elle s’élança sur les traces de Ralph” (162). This is a rare occasion in which we have a description of a sportswoman’s love of the game. Like *Mademoiselle de Maupin*, she expresses an interest in her sport, but, unlike *Mademoiselle de Maupin*, she is not masculinized. She is not simply a passive object, like *Fermina Marquez*, nor is she a sexual object. In fact, unlike *Hauteclair* or *La Dame des Belles-Cousines*, she remains virginal throughout the entire novel. The narrator explains what is going through Raymon’s mind when he sees her behave as thus:

Il ne se doutait pas...que, dans cette femme si frêle et en apparence si timide, résidât un courage plus que masculin, cette sorte d'intrépidité délirante qui se manifeste parfois comme une crise nerveuse chez les êtres les plus faibles. Les femmes ont rarement le courage physique qui consiste à lutter d'inertie contre la douleur ou le danger; mais elles ont souvent le courage moral qui s'exalte avec le péril ou la souffrance. Les fibres délicates d'Indiana appelaient surtout les bruits, le mouvement rapide et l'émotion de la chasse, cette image abrégée de la guerre avec ses fatigues, ses ruses, ses calculs, ses combats et ses chances. Sa vie morne et rongée d'ennuis avait besoin de ces excitations; alors elle semblait se réveiller

d'une léthargie et dépenser en un jour toute l'énergie inutile qu'elle avait, depuis un an, laissée fermenter dans son sang (Sand 162).

Raymon remarks on her physical feminine weakness, which is a fact of life, but her “frailty” does not prevent her from performing her sport (from later comments it is clear that he is not necessarily remarking solely on her [lack of] strength, but her strength compared with that of men). The real question is, “is she masculinized?” Raymon remarks on her “more-than-masculine” courage, but Raymon is also the antagonist, a representation of the type of man Sand is trying to combat. Later the narrator makes another comment about these type of men: “Tant de résolution l'effraya et faillit le dégoûter de madame Delmare. Les hommes, et les amants surtout, ont la fatuité innocente de vouloir protéger la faiblesse plutôt que d'admirer le courage chez les femmes. L'avouerais-je? Raymon se sentit épouvanté de tout ce qu'un esprit si intrépide promettait de hardiesse et de ténacité en amour” (Sand 162). Such a remark is most certainly a criticism of Raymon, since Sand's book upholds many other feministic ideals (namely the fact that Indiana is one of the first female Romantic heroes). Further, Indiana never gives any indication of being bisexual or homosexual, as other “masculinized” women like Mademoiselle de Maupin do.

In her memoir *La Force de l'âge*, Simone De Beauvoir also writes of a time in her life when she begins to experience “sport for sport.” She explores her environment with great enthusiasm and hikes all through the countryside. She relates: “Je n'avais jamais pratiqué de sport; je prenais d'autant plus de plaisir à utiliser mon corps, jusqu'aux limites de ses forces...chaque promenade était un objet d'art” (L'Association 82). Up until that point, De Beauvoir did not participate in “sports” because she considered herself to be unathletic. However, she found so much pleasure using her body that she began a sort of self-competition,

pushing herself further and harder each time. Her goal became artistic. She walked and hiked in the interest of “sport for sport” and “art for art.”

De Beauvoir remarks on the pubescence of a girl: “For the future, her muscular power, endurance, and agility will be inferior to those qualities in a man.” Suddenly, because of the transformation of her body, the girl finds herself inferior and unequal to man. De Beauvoir continues, “This awkward, painful existence of the body is not relieved by a game of soccer or a swim in the pool” (369). These activities, although potentially empowering, only serve to remind the girl of her inferiority in comparison to men.

However, as the girl grows up, and as she considers herself independently, without comparing herself to men, she can find liberation through sport. “It is precisely the female athletes who, being positively interested in their own game, feel themselves least handicapped in comparison to the male. It remains true that her physical weakness does not permit woman to learn the lessons of violence: but if she could assert herself through her body and face the world in some other fashion, this deficiency would be easily compensated for. Let her swim, climb mountain peaks, pilot an airplane, battle against the elements, take risks, go out for adventure, and she will not feel before the world that timidity which I have referred to” (373). De Beauvoir remarks that physical weakness renders women less capable of competition than men.

Nevertheless, a woman can find satisfaction in individual sports. In the passage from *La Force de l'âge*, which was cited earlier, De Beauvoir speaks of her own experience with this genre of sports. Now the reason for which she chose them is even clearer. Sport is not a competition; it is for oneself. It is not even a “disinterested practice;” the interest is found in the potential to discover and develop oneself as a woman.

Conclusion

Men and women have always engaged in ludic activities, but the modern conception of “sport” originated in the 19th century when some of these games became codified and moralistic. Sport was developed as “a training in courage and manliness” (Bourdieu 824) and the values it affirmed were decidedly masculine. Its nature was also extremely public—incompatible, perhaps, with the “private” nature of women.

Anatomical differences are often the bases for these gendered ideologies. The female body is weak in comparison to the male body; by extension, so are many of her capabilities. Submission, passivity, and shame—qualities unsuited for sporting activities—have traditionally been used to classify the female sex; the other halves of the dichotomies typify men. In addition, a woman’s reproductive function often puts her at odds with athletics. Female spectatorship is also taboo because of sport’s masculine connotations.

However, women have used art as a doorway into this traditionally masculine domain. When they render sport artistic, focusing more on the perfection and aestheticization of their bodies than the outcome of the game, the original goals of sport (to refine, train, establish social exchange) are achievable. This focus on aesthetic femininity (grace, lightness, daintiness) also allows women to reap physical benefits while avoiding the stigma of endangering their reproductive health. Individual sports are more appropriate for women, as they are typically more “aesthetic:” swimming, archery, ice-skating, and horseback riding are some examples. Female spectatorship was also encouraged at “fashionable” social events, like horse races.

These sports and sporting events were also often associated with aristocratic women, as they had the time and money to practice them. However, toward the end of the 19th century, lower-class women began accessing sports through organizations like *La Ruche Sportive*

Féminine. Thus, their approach was more team-oriented than that of the aristocrats. Their model of femininity was also a bit different; for example, the pursuit of strength was not as taboo for them as it was for the upper class. Strong bodies were associated with strong children, and many believe that it was in the government's best interest to encourage sport programs for women. However, many conservatives were opposed to such ideas: "la confusion des sexes est la Grande Peur de l'homme de l'an 1880" (Dumons, Pollet, and Berjat 186).

Because sportswomen focused heavily on aesthetics, they also faced other challenges, like marginalization. Sports became more about appearance than anything else, and spectators often became voyeurs. Because, at times, the nature of sports can be erotic, this often led to another challenge: sexualization. If a woman did not give heed to aesthetics or try to boost her femininity while practicing sport, she also faced the challenge of masculinization.

Artistic depictions of sportswomen and literary sportswomen faced similar challenges. Fermina Marquez's tennis match provides an opportunity for her to become the subject of her male spectators' fantasies. Madeleine de Maupin, while strong, is barely a woman at all—she dresses in men's clothing. There are many other examples of this nature, and many examples of flat athletic characters. Female authors tend to depict sportswomen in a more balanced light. Indiana, from George Sand's novel by the same name, enjoys hunting for its own sake, not for its appearance. She is skilled, yet maintains her femininity. And she is certainly not sexualized—she remains virginal throughout the entire novel. She is an interesting, well-rounded character—the main character, in fact.

Simone de Beauvoir has remarked that female athletes who are interested in their own game rather than its social implications "feel themselves least handicapped in comparison to the male" (373). Indeed, they can reap all the benefits originally set forth by the organizers of

“sport.” However, society in general must also do its part. Allen Guttmann sums it up nicely: “If...the institutionalized values [of sport] are thought of as human rather than masculine, the prospect for women’s sports is considerably less gloomy” (*Women’s Sports* 1).

The 21st century opens up many new avenues of research for the topic of women in sports. As gender roles and sexual identity become less defined, one must perhaps ask the question, “What is a woman?” in order to understand her roles and expectations as an athlete. Looking at the 19th century sportswoman provides an important key for understanding the origins and evolution of women in sports, but there is still work to be done in order to understand their future.

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