Anyone who aspires to understand the spirit of the Renaissance must be prepared to hear “the laughter of Rabelais behind a portrait by Holbein or Moro”. With these words the Dutch historian Johan Huizinga (1872–1945) winds up his discussion of “the problem of the Renaissance” in a long essay from 1920 with the same title. The “problem” refers to the difficulty of defining the character of the Renaissance. After having reviewed several such attempts, most prominently Jacob Burckhardt’s, Huizinga concludes that we should not try to describe the Renaissance or “Renaissance Man” in general. It is a period of transition, characterized by multiformity, complexity, and contradictions. It is therefore better, he advises, to study individual aspects of the Renaissance — its ambition and sense of irony (as Burckhardt had done so brilliantly), “its sense of style, pride, enthusiasm, critical awareness” — rather than try to capture the essence of the Renaissance. Being first and foremost a historian of mentalities, Huizinga was obviously interested in such themes. What is surprising, however, is that he immediately adds something that looks like a characterization of the Renaissance in general: the Renaissance was “one of the triumphs of the Latin spirit (Romaanschen geest)”, and everyone who wants to understand the Renaissance “must be susceptible to the union of Stoic earnest and firm will…and of lighthearted, happy gaiety.

1. “Het Probleem der Renaissance”, in JOHAN HUIZINGA, Verzamelde Werken, 9 vols., Haarlem 1948–53 (hereafter VW), IV , p. 275. All English translations from VW are mine. Volume and page numbers refer to this publication.
with delightful, expansive good humor and naive irresponsibility”. This is difficult for “us northerners”, he adds, for to appreciate this union of play and earnest in the Renaissance we must resist the temptation to seek our own self (as the brooding Romantic northern spirit is inclined to do), so that we can indulge ourselves in “the things themselves”, “in their intense and direct interest in the things themselves, and enjoy the essences of things in their beautiful form”. We must be able to hear the laughter of Rabelais behind a serious portrait by Holbein.

What exactly did Huizinga mean? How should we interpret this union of play and earnest, of laughter and gravity, of form and content? In this brief contribution I would like to answer this question by looking at Huizinga’s notion of the element of play in culture. It is a theme that runs throughout his oeuvre, and as such offers a key to understanding the mind of a man who is widely considered to be one of the most important historians of the twentieth century. Huizinga used this fusion of play and earnest to characterize many different periods in history as well as cultural and literary phenomena. In the case of the Renaissance, however, his description seems to go against his own view that this fusion is characteristic especially of Europe’s Celtic-German past, not for its ‘Latin’ past. The flexibility with which Huizinga used the notion of play tells us something about the importance he attached to it. For him it had a significance that went far beyond the historical: in the blending of play and earnest, culture originated and developed. Whenever the two spheres became separate, play was no longer a force that helped to shape a culture. Here the historian Huizinga, as we will see below, became a critic of modern culture. As Norman Cantor wrote: “the great medievalists…like all creative thinkers and artists, fashioned their interpretations of the Middle Ages out of the emotional wellsprings of their lives, and their lives were in turn

2. Ibid., p. 275; italics are Huizinga’s own.
conditioned by the vast social and political upheavals of the twentieth century, especially during the dark times from 1914 to 1945”.  

From an early age Huizinga was much interested in play as a determinant of culture: it is “an attractive but difficult subject”, he wrote in reviews of books devoted to humor and parody in the Middle Ages and Renaissance. In 1933, in a lecture at the University of Leiden, he first treated the subject in a systematic way. This lecture developed into his monograph, Homo Ludens, published five years later. Huizinga’s leading conviction is that play lies at the root of culture. Culture begins in play and develops as play. To show this he distinguishes two basic functions of play: (1) play as a contest for something, and (2) play as a representation of something. Both aspects are illustrated by a wide array of examples from different periods, cultures, and disciplines based on his vast reading in literature, history, and anthropology. In discussing the second aspect, Huizinga focuses in particular on the primordial relationship between play and culture. In archaic societies the earnest nature of sacred rituals and the playful character of their performances were still fused in the mind of primitive man. In more advanced times and societies the two spheres became gradually separate, but in certain cultural phenomena and literary works their common origin in a primordial unity of spheres could still be felt. At the beginning of time poetry, for example, was intimately connected with sacred rituals. Later, when ‘living myth’ became

4. Norman Cantor, Inventing the Middle Ages: The Lives, Works, and Ideas of the Great Medievalists of the Twentieth Century, New York 1991, pp. 42–43. The interaction between the historian’s experience of life and his or her view of the past is well summed up by Hugh Trevor-Roper (“History and imagination”, in Hugh Lloyd-Jones et al., History and Imagination: Essays in Honour of H. R. Trevor-Roper, London 1981, p. 356): “Our views on history come from the impact of experience upon reading and of reading upon experience; and both reading and experience are personal. Objective science has its place in historical study, but it is a subordinate place: the heart of the subject is not in the method but in the motor, not in the technique but in the historian”. This is much in line with Huizinga’s own definition of history: “every person renders account of the past according to the norms and values of his/her own time and world view”; “Over een definitie van het begrip geschiedenis”, in VW, VII, pp. 100 and 102. 


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mythology, it lost something of this organic function, which it had fulfilled in primitive societies. The make-believe or playfulness of its literary form was now something of which the poet was fully conscious. But even then literary genres such as mythology and allegory were not always considered as mere fiction. In the Icelandic saga, for example, the tone of “half-belief” – “midway between play and earnest” – can still be heard.7 For Huizinga the inseparability of play and earnest, or the fusion of the spheres of the sacred and the playful – and the primitive mentality of which it is a sign – thus became a litmus test for the vitality of culture. The twelfth-century Renaissance, for instance, showed traces of such a primitive mentality – “a childish innocence” in which the elements of play and earnest could not yet be disentangled. The poetry of Alain de Lille (d. 1202) “hovers in a sphere of half-belief, between conviction and fancy, between play and earnest”.8 Abelard’s love for Heloise is still untainted by the ideals of courtly love and recalls Icelandic sagas: “it is non-Latin [onlatijnsch]”.9 The twelfth-century debating culture in schools reminds us of contests in primitive societies.10 John of Salisbury (d. 1180) is called “the man with the serious smile”, with a style that is grave, yet light-hearted and full of humour”.11 More generally, “only where medieval culture was not rooted in antiquity, not fed by the ecclesiastical or Greco-Roman spirit, was there room for the play-factor to ‘play’ and create something entirely new”.12 And that was the case, he continues, “wherever medieval civilization built directly on its Celtic-Germanic past or even earlier indigenous layers”. In the fusion of word and image, the blending of the holy and the profane, in the agonistic culture of medieval disputations, but also in chivalry, feudalism, and the guild system, we see medieval culture “harking back beyond the classical to a purely archaic past”. In Dante’s poetry, too, Huizinga writes, we still feel the immediacy that images and words must have carried in primitive societies when the poet was seer, prophet, philosopher, and storyteller at

10. Ibid., p. 116.
one and the same time.\textsuperscript{13} In general, however, many late medieval forms of life and thought, as portrayed in Huizinga’s \textit{Waning of the Middle Ages} (tournaments, courtly love, chivalry, and symbolic and allegorical ways of thinking) were all accompanied by an overkill of rules, rituals, conventions, and excessive stylization. In them play had lost its formative, cultural force. It had become mere play, while the earnest sphere of the sacred had turned into total gravity.\textsuperscript{14} This does not mean, however, that in this or later periods the separation was definitive and complete. In \textit{Homo Ludens}, Huizinga characterizes the Renaissance, for instance, as a period in which “the mentality” is full of play, while at the same time one of utter seriousness: “play does not exclude earnest”.\textsuperscript{15} According to Huizinga, Erasmus, in his \textit{Praise of Folly}, is “walking a tightrope”: deep religious and pious truths are treated in a tone of gaiety and playfulness. It was a period in which the comical had not yet become banal, nor religious truth dogmatic, but when form and content could still constitute an unbreakable unity.\textsuperscript{16} And somewhat later in time he finds Shakespeare “still having kept something of the impetus of the archaic \textit{vates}”.\textsuperscript{17}

It is only in modern times, in particular from the eighteenth century onwards, that a radical disturbance of this fine balance occurred. The critic of culture in Huizinga detects a reversal of values: what he considers “banal amusement” began to present itself as completely serious activity (sports, games, and the like), while serious matters such as business, trade, and war began to be imbued with a playful, competitive spirit.\textsuperscript{18} To distinguish this coexistence of play and earnest from the culture-shaping force of its fusion in earlier times, Huizinga calls it “false play”. The last chapter of \textit{Homo Ludens} reads as an indictment of modern times.

With this all too brief sketch of Huizinga’s views, we can now understand what he meant when he spoke about the light-hearted laughter of Rabelais behind a grave portrait by Holbein. He often made a positive evaluation of

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\textsuperscript{13} “\textit{Dante}”, \textit{VW}, IV, p. 142.
\textsuperscript{15} \textit{Homo Ludens}, \textit{VW}, V, p. 212.
\textsuperscript{16} \textit{Erasmus}, \textit{VW}, VI, p. 72.
\textsuperscript{17} \textit{Homo Ludens}, \textit{VW}, V, p. 173.
\textsuperscript{18} \textit{Ibid.}, pp. 227–246.
\end{footnotes}
a culture or historical epoch in terms of the merging of play and earnest, the profane and the holy, the literary style and its content. Huizinga found something very valuable in this mood of jesting seriousness or serious playfulness (he often used these oxymorons.) What is strange, however, is that in the case of the Renaissance he explicitly ascribed this creative coexistence of seemingly contradictory behavior to “the Latin spirit”, whereas he usually associated it with Europe’s Celtic-Germanic past and with the tribal communities of primitive societies. Although ancient Greek culture itself was also full of play and was agonistic to the bone, Huizinga seemed to believe that the ensuing classical tradition, which he recognized as a major formative force in Europe’s history, led to forms of thought and writing that had lost their connection to life. The refinement and stylization of manners and literary forms had led to beautiful works of art, but they did not belong to the same category as the feasts, contests, and rituals that had shaped the cultures of archaic societies. To quote again his telling judgment: “only where medieval culture was not rooted in antiquity, not fed by the ecclesiastical or Greco-Roman spirit, was there room for the play-factor to ‘play’ and create something entirely new”.19

The explanatory value of play in Huizinga’s work is often not very great.20 Too many different phenomena from wholly different times and cultures are explained in terms of play and a primitive mentality in which play and earnest still cannot be separated. But as we have seen, play for Huizinga was not only a descriptive but also a normative notion. His interest in play and humor went back to his student days, but the vitally important function of play became clear to him especially in the early 1930s, when Nazi Germany began to cast its shadow over Europe: in play we make ourselves conform to self-imposed rules, in the process creating social bonds and shaping culture. It is therefore not surprising that Huizinga projected onto play everything that he felt was important for a creative but also decent society. It is an insight that has lost none of its relevance.

19. Ibid., p. 211.