

Chapter Five

Conclusion

In retrospect, we have justified *The Canterbury Tales* itself as a big game and chosen three tales for analysis. The pilgrimage to Canterbury matches the definition of a game. First, every pilgrim is free to accept the idea proposed by the Host. Second, the rule is set: anyone who tells the tale best shall have a dinner paid by all the other pilgrims; anyone who disputes what the Host says must pay all the expenses on the way. Third, the pilgrimage is separated within certain space and time: to and fro Canterbury. Fourth, the process and result are both uncertain, including the sequence of telling tales, the interplay between pilgrims, the style of tales, and so forth. Fifth, the process and the result are unproductive. The tales they tell are not created by them. They just “exchange” the tales they heard from others. Sixth, every pilgrim is in a situation of make-believe. They are temporarily circumscribed within a magic square outside ordinary life. In other words, they are momentarily situated in the second-reality in contrast to reality.

When it comes to the three tales chosen for analysis, I have to emphasize that the three tales are not chosen under the bias toward each social class in the pilgrimage group. In a social ranking list given by Carl Lindahl according to “title, economic status, education, and behavior” (Lindahl 21), the Knight, the Pardoner, and the Nun’s Priest are located in the high, low, and middle class respectively. Therefore, the samples that this thesis adopts are nearly unbiased. In other words, this thesis tries to validate the analysis of game in all classes of the pilgrimage group. All the four

categories of game are appropriated to the analysis of the three tales so as to analyze the topic as complete as possible.

Basically speaking, I mostly adopt Caillois' modification of Huizinga's idea as the main discourse. There are mainly six differences between Caillois and Huizinga. First, Huizinga claims that game is older than culture. However, Caillois thinks it would be rash to say that game is older than culture. In Caillois' view, game goes parallel to culture. Game and culture permeate with each other. In this thesis, I have no inclination to say that game goes before culture. I just want to emphasize that game does not serve for any branch of culture, like art. Game is not subordinate to art. The truth is, I believe, it becomes art itself. Second, for Huizinga, only games of competition can be seen as game, because games of competition are constricted by rules and can be controlled by the players' wills. Rule and will can improve the formation of civilization. Games of simulation have no value; games of chance will destroy minds, not to mention games of vertigo. However, Caillois is more open-minded. He thinks that game has nothing to do with moral or value. In short, game is amoral. I adopt his viewpoint so as to make my analysis more comprehensive and unbiased. Third, since Huizinga only focuses on games of competition, it is natural that he regards the function of game as the "representation of a contest." However, Caillois thinks the social function of game is "communion," which makes people get together. I think it is only a matter of perspective because Huizinga focuses on games of competition while Caillois focuses on games of all categories. I partly adopt Huizinga's viewpoint in chapter two, but, by and large, I adopt Caillois' view since the Canterbury game assembles the pilgrims to play together. Fourth, for

Huizinga, two of the characteristics of game are “rule” and “make-believe.” For Caillois, they are rule *or* make-believe. I adopt Caillois’ viewpoint because these two characteristics are really incompatible sometimes. There is no “make-believe” in the Knights’ agon/alea, and no “rule” in the Pardoner’s mimicry as well as the Nun’s Priest’s ilinx. Fifth, since Huizinga sees game with the glasses of morality, he of course sees game as non-profit. However, in Caillois’ opinion, sometimes game could be profitable, like lottery, gambling, or bet. Game is unproductive rather than non-profit. It produces no substantial things. I adopt Caillois’ point of view; otherwise, the game of chance would be unexplainable. Last but not least, Huizinga thinks that game is mysterious, whereas Caillois regards game as a process of disenchantment. I think both of them are right. In the beginning, game is associated with the primitive ritual, so it is mysterious. With the lapse of time, the mysteriousness game is gradually disenchanted. I adopt both the two viewpoints to illustrate the Pardoner’s mimicry.

In chapter two, we elaborate agon from various aspects: tension, intersubjectivity, symmetry, handicap, representation, and spirit. In the *Knight’s Tale*, the two knights are not supposed to outshine each other too much; otherwise, the tension will loosen, and agon will thus lose its meaning. The tension between the two knights is maintained in subtle balance. Their conditions are almost leveled at the same horizon. Their pedigrees, prowess, state of mind, and so forth, are arranged point to point. However, they also depend upon each other almost to the degree of symbiosis. Arcita’s existence is assured by Palamon, and vice versa. There are conceptual ideals existing in their minds respectively. They have to externalize their ideals, project their

ideals upon each other, and then internalize the crystallized ideals. It is the process of externalization and internalization that constructs their subjectivity/intersubjectivity.

The almost equivalent descriptions of the two knights achieve symmetry, which can be viewed as sub-tension. The description of them is linked to the equal ferocious beasts. Their encountering Theseus brings them to the same atrocious situations.

Having recourse to the god in order to win the victory, each of them has a patron deity with the same prowess. In the arena, both of them are accompanied by a great king as well as one hundred lords. Every detail is arranged in parallel symmetry so as to maintain the tension. However, absolute balance is impossible. There is still subtle discrepancy between the two knights. For example, insofar as Arcita leaves the prison ahead of Palamon by a few years, generally speaking, he is in a better situation. This kind of discrepancy in agon is to be bridged. As a result, handicap comes into existence. Arcita promises to bring Palamon food, drink, and bedding. Besides, he also promises to leave the better arm for Palamon. By a handicap, fairness, or, quasi-fairness, is considered to be achieved.

Agon also bears another significant dimension; that is, representation. Agon can be seen as “the representation of a contest” or “a contest for the representation of something.” In the contest between Arcita and Palamon, “openness toward spectators” is taken into account. The amphitheatre in which they fight is built according to the principle of display. It is designed in the shape of a circle, and the spectator’s seats are ascended. The circle design is a means to bargain with spectator’s attention. The rising seat is another way to reinforce the centripetal force resulted in by the circle design. The representation in a contest is epitomized in the amphitheatre. Furthermore,

the representation of a contest is lifted from self-display to the display of national prestige. The two knights' bodies serve as the vehicle for displaying prowess, theirs and Theseus' alike. Power, as far as this aspect is concerned, refracts its presence through the prism of agon.

The true spirit of agon is not to injure the rivals, but to prove one's superiority over the others. The core of the two knights' competition is not Emily, but victory. Emily is just their projection of desire. Accordingly, after Arcita wins the contest and is dying out of accident, he changes his attitude and gives up his right to claim Emily as his woman. The true spirit of agon is laid bare here.

In chapter two, we also analyze the exercise of alea in the *Knight's Tale*. As Caillois observes, the four categories of game can sometimes combine with each other. Agon and alea are mutually compatible. For example, bridge is a game of agon as well as alea. Bridge requires skill, ability to judge, strategy, and so on; it also relies on chance and timing. In the *Knight's Tale*, Arcita and Palamon depend a lot upon their own capacities to win the victory, but they also believe in omen, complain of fate, surrender to destiny, count on coincidence, and resort to gods.

The reason why the game of alea exists comes mainly from two aspects. First, people long for consolation and compensation. Second, people come to the realization of human limitation. Owing to the two reasons, when people develop the game of alea, they stake their luck upon everything, like omen, chance, coincidence, or fate, except themselves. In the *Knight's Tale*, the two knights sometimes show extraordinary wills, whereas sometimes they ascribe their mischief to fate. Realizing that they cannot depend upon themselves altogether, they have recourse to gods. Palamon resorts to

Venus while Arcita has recourse to Mars; even Emily asks for help from Diana. We may see that the blend of *agon* and *alea* is best epitomized in this tale.

In chapter three, first we trace the origin of mimicry back to the mask worn by the shamans in the primitive ritual, and then elaborate that the function of mask is to make believe and to inspire fear in other people. The custom of mimicry is thereafter transformed into all kinds of performance and presentation. Insofar as performance and presentation can be put under the category of mimicry, this chapter partly borrows Erving Goffman's theory of performance and presentation to analyze the *Pardoner's Tale*.

Goffman employs the metaphor of theatrical performance to analyze the interplay between people. In a sense, people are always feigning, just like a performer. In Goffman's term, when a person *gives* his expression, it means that he uses flexible verbal signs as vehicles to carry the message. When a person *gives off* his expression, it follows that he tries to influence others' impression of him through his manners, gestures, behavior, facial expressions, dressing, and so on, all of which can be called *front*. The expression one person *gives* or *gives off* can both be manipulated with skill. Besides, settings, or props available can be useful in bettering a person's self-presentation. Through all of these, we effectively define the situation; that is, we draw the bottom line to let other people know to what degree we anticipate them to look upon us, and vice versa. Furthermore, there is a kind of tacit agreement between the performer and the audience, which is termed *working consensus*. When a person is performing, be he on the stage or in the ordinary day, he is making believe and thus creating a second reality. The moment someone tactlessly points out the fictiveness,

the game is over: welcome back to reality.

So far as vocation is concerned, the Pardoner can be seen as a medieval version of the primitive shaman. The license that the Pardoner shows off is a medieval embodiment of the shaman's mask. The shaman makes believe that he becomes other being when he wears a mask conjuring the spirits, whereas the Pardoner makes believe that he is the spokesman of God when he shows off his license delivering a sermon. The Pardoner uses the license as a prop to make believe that he is authoritative and to inspire awe in his audiences. The Pardoner is notorious for being greedy. Since he cannot win respect in the ordinary days, he can temporarily do so when delivering a radical sermon to his audiences with his license shown.

Through dramatic lines and personal front, the Pardoner makes his sermon and tale a performance, which fits Goffman's theory. In order to define the situation, he has to let others know his bottom line. When the Host asks him to tell an entertaining tale, he replies in the affirmative but with a proviso. Likewise, when the other pilgrims ask him to tell some moral lesson, he also reacts to the requirement with a premise. The drink and cake are the settings to better his self-presentation. Not until he finishes his drink and cake will he walk to his position and begin his performance. In addition, he gives his expression as an oration that conceptualizes each individual as an abstract unit, and this tactic is convenient for the instilling of ideology. He plays more than one roles during his performance. He plays the role of a salesman advertising his sacred water, as a pardoner selling his pardon; as a magician "honestly" deceiving his audience, and as a story-teller competing with other pilgrims. The professional performance he does brings him a kind of spiritual aggression over

his audience.

Through his cynical behavior, radical sermon, and ironical tale, he expresses spiritual aggression, which mainly springs from three aspects: perverted state of mind, sense of inferiority, and situation of isolation. First, his mindset is perverted. He in fact identifies with a moral ideal that he cannot achieve. Therefore, he acts in a cynical and exaggerative way as the mechanism of compensation. Second, he has the sense of inferiority due to his low social position and deficiency in masculinity. He “makes a deliberate show of meeting his enemy” to prove that “he is perfectly capable of playing the pilgrimage game” (Traversi 167). It is widely held that the effeminate are natural-born performers, whose manners, gestures, voices, and body languages are more dramatic. The Pardoner turns his disadvantage into advantage, giving off the expression that fits the stereotyped impression. Third, he is portrayed as a marginal figure peerless in the company. Owing to a long-term isolation from others, his desire to perform is not difficult to comprehend.

We also justify the tale that the Pardoner tells as a game of mimicry. The three rogues' quest of Death matches with the definition of game. Moreover, their encountering Death is filled with the air of mimicry. Death gives his expression as a meek old man to deceive them. He also gives off the expression of a mysterious figure to maintain his authority. He defines the situation to let them know his bottom line when they behave impolitely. The three rogues' death can be seen as a punishment for their violating the working consensus since one of them tries to disclose Death's true identity. The three rogues also make a show of self-presentation. They pretend to be brave enough to challenge Death as well as loyal enough to embosom one another.

Eventually, all of them die for one another's pretending fidelity and sincerity.

The Pardoner breaks the rule of the tale-telling contest when he continues to promote his pardon after his show time is supposed to be over. He also blurs the boundary between reality and fiction by claiming the Host's sin outside the game. Once the boundary between reality and fiction is blurred, a game is on the edge of collapse. Not until the Knight interferes and readjusts the situation can the game go on again.

In chapter four, we examine *ilinx* in the *Nun's Priest's Tale*. An *ilinx* is an activity that leads to the instability of perception and euphoria of dizziness for a period. In a word, it is based upon the pursuit of vertigo. Caillois also links vertigo to the desire for disorder and destruction, a drive repressed in the ordinary days. In that this viewpoint runs parallel with Bakhtin's notion of carnivalization, this chapter thus has recourse to Bakhtinian theory incorporated with *ilinx* to analyze the *Nun's Priest's Tale*. The analysis is in three aspects: genre, the Nun's Priest himself, and the tale itself.

Speaking of genre, the *Nun's Priest's Tale* is a parody of the epic. Using carnivalistic laughter as its weapon, parody seems to be able to resist epic. By taking trivial things seriously, parody expands the disparity between the grand style and the low style, and thus brings about the effect of playfulness. The rooster strikes an epic figure from top to toe; the milieu shifts from the battlefield to the barnyard. The debasement of epic turns the hierarchy of genre upside down. This tale also mocks renowned allusions and crucial events in history. Analogically speaking, a parody is like an individual in pursuit of temporary disorder. However, order always recovers at

last. After finishing his mock-heroic tale, the Nun's Priest readjusts his tone back to a sermonic exhortation. Everything that decenters must be drawn back to center again.

The Nun's Priest himself also embodies the inclination toward decentering. He digresses three times when telling his tale. He is aware of his digression but cannot help deviating at irregular intervals. There seems to be a certain kind of repressed desire to escape from the center in his mind. Nonetheless, he eventually repositions his tale to where it is supposed to be. The tale returns to a state of order again. We may surmise that it is not the first time he tells the tale. He probably feels drilled to repeat the same plot. Therefore, he makes some insignificant changes, which composes the digressive parts. It is also this kind of repetition with difference that reinforces the playfulness.

The tale itself is carnivalistic. Animals occupy the main stage that belongs to human beings. The official voice represented by the human society is sidetracked to the margin, while the unofficial voices represented by the animals sound aloud. In the barnyard, the rooster, Chantecleer, and his wife, Pertelote, do everything that human beings do, like speaking, dressing, dreaming, and taking medicine. In short, they live lives atypical of their positions as animals. The barnyard, in a word, is a topsy-turvy world in which animals mimic human behavior and in a sense try to escape human order.

Chauntecleer's tendency toward ilinx can be observed in many descriptions. He flies up and down the perch at least four times. The image of up-and-down not only reminds us of his unsteady mindset, but also echoes the spirit of carnival, upside-down. Falling from the tree leads to the sense of dizziness, or, the illusion of

tortuous pleasure. He seems to be in pursuit of the pleasure of vertigo. He also prefers tiptoeing to standing upright. Tiptoeing is instable compared with sheer walking. His tendency toward instability is disclosed through the subtle gestures.

Chautecleer, strictly speaking, is a dual character. On one hand, he represents the unofficial voice unconcerned about, not interrupted by, uncensored, and unprogrammed by human society. On the other, he still takes the official voice as the criteria for his thought. Arguing with his wife over the issue of dream, he resorts to man of authority who represents official ideology. Besides, the stories that he takes as examples also seem to emphasize the importance of order and center.

The preposterous scene that a row of animals chasing the fox is characteristic of carnivalization. However, it is also the last time when animals occupy the stage. After the chaos, the barnyard moves “from a world upside-down to a restoration of social order at the end” (Perfetti 39), just like a game, which is always a momentary respite from reality; that is, a temporary second reality.

The Canterbury Tales as a story-telling contest can be seen as a game. However, can *The Canterbury Tales* as a literary text be viewed as a game? Some people say literature is one thing, and game is another; literature is serious, and game is not. However, I would rather believe the Freudian view that the opposite of game is not seriousness, but reality. Literature and game are not incompatible. As long as the authors are not compelled by economic pressure, most of them create their works out of free will. Speaking of rule, R. Rawdon Wilson mentions the analogy between “rules in games and conventions in literary texts” (Wilson 22). No matter how creative or imaginative the authors are, they are framed in literary conventions.

Besides, the creating process and result are uncertain. Sometimes the characters would get rid of the reign imposed upon them by the authors. The original plan is not always within the authors' control. When creating, the authors totally indulge themselves in the work and alienate themselves from the outer world. They are separated within an autistic world. Moreover, the works are fictive. Even if the works are claimed to be realistic, they are still mingled with the authors' mis-implantation of memories, subjective emotion, or refilling of imagination. They just try to represent the unrepresentable. Last but also the most controversial, is literature unproductive? It is imaginable that many people would argue that literature is by no means unproductive. Nevertheless, there may be room for bargain in terms of intertextuality. "It is possible to consider extended intertextual relations as modes of play or as being, in some inescapable manner, the 'game' of literature itself" (Wilson 21). If we see literature from the extreme perspective of intertextuality, we may hold that literature is unproductive since every word is just borrowed from other precursors.

However, this kind of intertextuality is an optimistic one. We may in turn compare games to texts to explain: "Like texts, games invisibly recall other games, replicate them (often unconsciously), and build upon them in such matters as improving skills, developing better strategies, and creating more sophisticated play" (Wilson 5). Standing upon the shoulder of precursors, the authors may better their works through repetition with difference. Wilson also tells us that "games may be invented by one person but played by others; that is, a structure in the mind of one person can be absorbed, digested, and become the temporary structure of another's mind" (Wilson 5). The tales in *The Canterbury Tales*, as we know, are not original.

Almost all of them can take their derivations from credible sources. Chaucer absorbs and digests these nutrient sources from other “gamewrights” and then makes up his own game, the improved one.

If literature can be regarded as a game, the literary text can be seen as the playing field where the author plays with readers. “Human play requires a playing field. Setting off the playing field—just like setting off sacred precincts, as Huizinga rightly points out—sets off the sphere of play as a closed world” (Gadamer 107). In this closed world, readers “may transform texts into private games, reading in hopscotch fashion or inventing alternative fictional worlds, and there would seem to be nothing, either in the author’s expectations or in the text itself, to prevent their doing so” (Wilson 18). As Gadamer states, “There is an ultimate sense in which you cannot have a game by yourself” (Gadamer 105). When a person plays, it is necessary that someone or something else “responds to his move with a countermove” (Gadamer 106). For instance, even if a person plays yo-yo alone, it is only because the yo-yo responds to his move with a countermove that the game is made possible. Likewise, when the author/gamewright welcomes readers to the game/text, it is necessary that readers respond to the game/text with a countermove. Readers may fill in the fissures automatically, resonate with the author, or read dialectically. Anyway, they will be pulled into the game unconsciously and respond to the game, since “games are, or can be, absorbing; that is, they pull the minds of the players into them and function preemptively and exclusively” (Wilson 5).

Setting off *The Canterbury Tales* as a game, Chaucer lets his pilgrims and his readers play in the game. However, Gadamer reminds us that “[t]he real subject of the

game is not the player but instead the game itself” (Gadamer 106). What he means is that the game has its own life but can acquire meaning only through the players: “The players are not the subjects of play; instead play merely reaches presentation through the players” (Gadamer 103). Were it not for the pilgrims’ interactive enactment, the game cannot achieve presentation. Without readers’ interpretation over and over again, the game cannot acquire fresh meaning. As Rosemarie P. McGerr points out the overtone of the ending passage in *The Canterbury Tales*: “[. . .] by encouraging us to review the text, reconsidering it in terms of its end, the passage encourages us to view our experience of the text as an *ongoing* one of rereading or reinterpretation” (McGerr 132; emphasis added).

It is controversial whether Chaucer has finished *The Canterbury Tales* or not. Since the tales told are far from the original numbers the Host requires, it seems that Chaucer has not completed the text. Nonetheless, in the last tale, the *Parson’s Tale*, the Host also says that this is the last tale to fulfill his plan:

Lordynges everichoon,
 Now lakketh us no tales mo than oon.
 Fulfilled is my sentence and my decree;
 I trowe that we han herd of ech degree;
 Almoost fulfilled is al myn ordinaunce.
 I pray to God, so yeve hym right good chaunce,
 That telleth this tale to us lustily. (X. 15-21)

The two facts seem to go at odds with each other. However, I would hold that Chaucer leaves the contradiction on purpose. Gadamer tells us that game is “to-and-fro

movement that is not tied to any goal that would bring it to an end” (Gadamer 103). The to-and-fro movement makes a pin-pong game; otherwise, it is only pin, or, pong. Insofar as Chaucer sets off *The Canterbury Tales* as a game to and fro Canterbury, we cannot say that the game is over when the pilgrims just finish one fourth of the tales. Chaucer may want to tell us that as long as the to-and-fro movement is not completed, the game can keep going. *The Canterbury Tales* “addresses a new audience of readers, whose interaction with the text is neither determined by temporal linearity nor ended with the text’s last word” (McGerr 131). As long as the game is not over, readers as the players can keep playing, rereading, and reinterpreting. The statement that readers can reinterpret *The Canterbury Tales* is not special in the ordinary condition, but it is meaningful and persuasive when based upon the premise that the text itself is a game, which is an “ongoing” activity unless the to-and-fro process is accomplished.

“In the Schillerian view, play is a sublime form of sour grapes” (Wilson 10). Out of the ordinary life, agon seeks fairness, alea seeks compensation, mimicry seeks a new identity, and vertigo seeks release in the second reality. Similarly, literature, just like the sublime form of sour grapes, makes up fiction that cannot be achieved in reality. In *The Canterbury Tales* we see the sublimation of game into art. As Gadamer indicates, “[. . .] human play comes to its true consummation in being art” (Gadamer 110). *The Canterbury Tales* reaches the peak of art, and art is for art’s own sake, so is play.