

Chapter Two

Agon/Alea in The Knight's Tale

Less and less frequently do we encounter people with the ability to tell a tale properly. More and more often there is embarrassment all around when the wish to hear a story is expressed. It is as if something that seemed inalienable to us, the securest among our possessions, were taken from us: the ability to exchange experiences. (Walter Benjamin 83)

With consummate skill of story-telling, Chaucer frames stories within a big story, feasting our eyes with a fret of fabulously fabricated tapestry and satisfying his readers' desire to listen to a variety of splendid tales. Through the exchange of tales amidst the pilgrims, he indirectly depicts a vista of people from all walks of life in the Middle Ages, providing us with a panoptical vision of his era.

In this panoptical vision, many phenomena of social interaction are observed. One of the social interactions is agon, or, competition. Speaking of agon, we should not leave alea alone. They once in a while appear in company. As Caillois points out, "the nature of agon and alea is parallel and complementary" (Caillois 74) and "they are apt to unite their attractions" (Caillois 71). Structured as a game of agon and alea, the *Knight's Tale* encloses itself within *The Canterbury Tales*, a big game of agon and

alea. The *Knight's Tale* is a game in microcosm, whereas *The Canterbury Tales* as a whole is a game in macrocosm. The route to and fro Canterbury is a stage, where everyone displays his skill of tale-telling to vie with others. Besides, in this contest, no one can predict the outcome. The journey is thus replete with the atmosphere of competition and chance. By the same pattern, the *Knight's Tale* per se can be regarded as a tale of agon and alea. Two knights, Arcita and Palamon, are cousins; both of them are put in prison and fall in love with the same girl, Emily, at the same time. Situated in similar milieu, they compete with each other while depending upon chance as well. Agon and alea inevitably occupy important positions in this tale. This chapter aims to analyze the exercise of agon and alea in the *Knight's Tale*.

Before probing into the exercise of agon and alea, we may first try to dovetail the definition of the game to the *Knight's Tale* to justify the perspective of seeing the tale itself as a game in microcosm, compared with *The Canterbury Tales* as a game in macrocosm. First, when Arcita dares Palamon to a combat, Palamon is in fact free to refuse the battle waged upon him by Arcita. However, he chooses to accept the challenge. "I graunte it thee," was Palamon's response (I. 1620). Second, the rule is set: "And if so be that thou my lady wynne, / And sle me in this wode ther I am inne, / Thow mayst wel have thy lady as for me" (I. 1616-18). Third, the combat is to be held at separate time and space, even with an atmosphere of secrecy: "Have heer my trouthe; tomorwe I wol nat faille, / Withoute wityng of any oother wight, / That here I wol be founden as a knyght" (I. 1610-12). "And in the grove, at tyme and place yset, / This Arcite and this Palamon ben met" (I. 1635-36). Fourth, the result is uncertain. They are not sure who the winner would be. Even Emily's guardian angel, Diana,

could not predict: “Thou shalt ben wedded unto oon of tho / That han for thee so muchel care and wo, / But unto which of hem I may nat telle” (I. 2351-53). Fifth, the whole process is unproductive. The trophy, Emily, is not produced. She is originally there, only treated as a commodity for exchange. When it comes to the last definition of game, it seems that the “make-believe” quality is not suited for the situation in the *Knight’s Tale*. As for this paradox, Caillois comes up with one of his most distinguished complements for Huizinga: “Thus game are not ruled and make-believe. Rather, they are ruled *or* make-believe” (Caillois 9). Most of the time, “rule” and “make-believe” are in an either/or condition. For example, some games, like playing with dolls or toy soldiers, have no rule. Merely by replacing the “and” with an “or,” Caillois easily solves the bug left by Huizinga, we cannot deny Caillois’ intelligence.

Encountering Theseus, the two knights are interrupted by this king, who hosts another formal tournament for them. The new tournament is also eligible for the definition of the game. To begin with, instead of being forced, both knights are willing to partake of the “game”:

For every wight that lovede chivalrye
 And wolde, his thankes, han a passant name,
 Hath preyed that he myghte been of that game;
 And wel was hym that therto chosen was. (I. 2106-09; emphasis mine)

Moreover, the rule is set, coupled with the limit of time and space:

And this day fifty wykes, fer ne ner,
 Everich of you shal brynge an hundred knyghtes
 Armed for lystes up at alle rightes,

Al redy to darreyne hire by bataille. (I. 1850-53)

Their combat will be held in an amphitheater: “That swich a noble theatre as it was / I dar wel seyen in this world ther nas” (I. 1885-86). As for the other characteristics such as uncertain, unproductive, and make-believe, the situation is the same as the first combat. In a nutshell, it is no overestimation to say that the *Knight's Tale*, from start to finish, follows the pattern of a game.

As an expression puts it, “Diamond cut diamond,” only when two counterparts are on an equivalent level can the cutting-edge be ground and shown. Another expression seems to be an echo, “When Greek meets Greek, then comes the tug of war.” In the domain of agon, two competitors are not supposed to overweigh each other so as to engender a certain kind of tension, say, the pith and marrow of agon. If the discrepancy is too great between the two sides, agon cannot move on and hence loses its meaning.

In this tale, the tension between the two knights is extended in excellent balance. They both belong to the noble blood of the same lineage. “As they that weren of the blood roial / Of Thebes, and of sustren two yborn” (I. 1018-19). Upon seeing Emily's beauty, both of them suffer from lovesickness. “That, if that Palamon was wounded sore, / Arcita is hurt as much as he, or more” (I. 1115-16). Through the mouthpiece of his persona, the Knight, Chaucer serves as a ventriloquist, raising his own doubt, “Bothe of the lovere and the prisoner. / I noot which hath the wofuller mester” (I. 1339-40). Even as rivals, the two knights still recognize each other's ability and nobility. Their praises run parallel with each other. Arcita's admiration of Palamon emanates from the bottom of his heart:

For possible is, syn thou hast hire presence,
 And art a knight, a worthy and an able,
 That by som cas, syn Fortune is chaungeable,
 Thow maist to thy desir somtyme atteyne. (I. 1240-43)

Likewise, Palamon's homage to Arcita is wholeheartedly:

Thou mayst, syn thou hast wisdom and manhede,
 Assemblen alle the folk of oure kynrede,
 And make a were so sharp on this citee
 That by soma venture or some tretee
 Thow mayst have hire to lady and to wyf
 For whom that I moste nedes lese my lyf. (I. 1285-90)

The paradoxical symbiosis of two competitors is inexorable. The existence of one subject is assured by the other. One subject has to first externalize his conceptual ideal and project this ideal upon another subject, and then internalize this crystallized ideal. As a circle, the process of externalization and internalization completes the construction of subjectivity. The intersubjectivity is indispensable in the game of agon, as Sam Weber puts it in the afterword of *Just Gaming*, “[. . .] how the Greeks succeeded in recognizing their identity as players as the *effect of an irreducible otherness*” (Weber 107; italics original). It is an endemic contradiction that two competitors live on the grounds of interdependence: “[i]ts [competitive game] aim is the elimination of the other upon whom it nevertheless depends” (Weber 106). The intricate rapport between two equal rivals hence contributes to the depth of mental aspects in agon.

The description of two knights is symmetrical. Palamon is described as “a wood leon” (I. 1655) and Arcita as “a cruell tigre” (I. 1656). Bumped into by Theseus in the woods, they are in the same atrocious situation. Palamon, on behalf of Arcita, tells Theseus of the truth: “This is thy mortal foe, this is Arcite, / That fro thy lond is banysshed on his heed, / For which he hath deserved to be deed” (I. 1724-26). He himself also confesses to having committed the same crime, saying, “That I am thilke woful Palamoun / That hath thy prisoun broken wickedly. / I am thy mortal foe” (I. 1734-36). When they make an appeal for help in order to win the battle, each of them has a patron deity with the same prowess. Palamon appeals to Venus, while Arcita invokes Mars. In the arena, each of them is accompanied by one hundred lords and a great king. On one hand, Lycurgus backs Palamon up: “Ther maistow seen, comynge with Palamoun, / Lygurge himself, the grete kyng of Trace” (I. 2128-29); “Armed ful wel, with hertes stierne and stoute” (I. 2154). On the other hand, Emetrius sides with Arcita:

The grete Emetreus, the kyng of Inde,
 Upon a steede bay trapped in steel,
 Covered in clooth of gold, dyapred weel,
 Cam ridynge lyk the god of armes, Mars. (I. 2156-59)

In short, every detail is arranged in balanced symmetry to maintain a kind of tension. Charles Muscatine, a Chaucerian expert, argues that symmetry is supposed to be highly valued and noticed in the *Knight's Tale*:

When we look at the form in which these materials are organized, we find symmetry to be its most prominent feature. The unity of the poem is based

on an unusually regular ordering of elements. The character grouping is symmetrical. (Muscatine 15).

It is this sort of symmetrical balance that fosters the tension between polarized sides. Two knights, like sitting on a seesaw, achieve the point of poise in a subtle way. The advantage does not tilt toward either one. However, eternal balance is out of the question. Both of them leave no stones unturned to win the battle. As an old saying goes, “War does not determine who is right, but who is left.” One’s gain usually means another’s loss. A game of agon is usually a game of zero-sum: “Games typically are structured to be zero-sum—in other words, the victory of one side precludes the victory of that side’s opponents. Games typically have unequal outcomes for players” (Gary Fine 232). In spite of the unequal outcomes, people usually do their utmost to seek for fairness during the course of agon. The disparity between two sides, even to the smallest degree, is expected to be bridged.

The search for equality is so obviously essential to the rivalry that it is re-established by a handicap for players of different classes; that is, within the equality of chances originally established, a secondary inequality, proportionate to the relative powers of the participants, is dealt with.

(Caillois 14)

A handicap is put into practice in order to bridge the gap between the two rivals. In short, the outcome is unequal, while the process is equal, or at least quasi-equal. In the *Knight's Tale*, even Arcita and Palamon’s conditions are grounded on a similar level, there are still a scant of differences to be abridged. Insofar as Arcita leaves the prison ahead of Palamon by many years, by and large, he is in a better situation than

Palamon is. Consequently, when they make up their minds to claim a battle, Arcita behaves in a courtly manner and promises to give Palamon a handicap:

That here I wol be founden as a knight,
 And bryngen harneys right ynough for thee;
 And ches the beste, and leef the worste for me.
 And mete and drynke this nyght wol I brynge
 Ynough for thee, and clothes for thy beddynge. (I. 1612-16)

On the basis of reciprocity, Palamon also reacts to Arcita's good will: "Everich of hem help for to armen oother / As friendly as he were his owene brother" (I. 1651-52). One of the reasons why agon pursues fairness is that people seek for compensation for the frustration in real life; namely, it is a mechanism of compensation. Since the real life is unfair and imperfect, people tend to be in quest of a world that is fair and perfect. In this world of fiction, all the unfairness and injustices are put aside, and a new order is set. In the tale, Arcita and Palamon are of noble origin and thereby empowered. They are supposed to live carefree lives. Nevertheless, as life is full of vicissitudes, they are imprisoned by Theseus after a war. They fall from heaven to hell all of a sudden; it is not unnatural for them to repine of the real life and aspire for consolation in a surrogate world, where fairness and justice prevail. According to this ideal, they contrive to crystallize the spirit of equality in the "game" they invent. By a handicap, fairness is thus considered to be acquired. Complaint of and dissatisfaction with real life are released for a while.

Apart from tension, agon can be discussed from another perspective; that is, representation. As mentioned in the first chapter of this thesis, Huizinga regards the

function of play as “a contest for something or a representation of something” (Huizinga 13). Combining the two functions, he succinctly draws to a unity, namely “the representation of a contest” or “a contest for the representation of something” (Huizinga 13). To be more specific, he says, “Representation means display, and this may simply consist in the exhibition of something naturally given, before an audience” (Huizinga 13). Echoing Huizinga’s viewpoint, Hans-Georg Gadamer also airs his opinion on play: “First and foremost, play¹ is self-presentation” (Gadamer 108). “Openness toward the spectator is part of the closedness of the play” (Gadamer 109). By virtue of openness toward the spectator, “it [game] achieves its whole significance” (Gadamer 109). In the contest between Arcita and Palamon, the importance of openness is taken into consideration. The amphitheatre where they are going to fight is built in accordance with the principle of display. It is designed in the shape of a circle, and the spectators’ seats are ascended.

Round was the shap, in manere of compass,
 Ful of degrees, the heighte of sixty pas,
 That whan a man was set on o degree,
 He letted nat his felawe for to see. (I. 1889-92)

The round design is a means by which the gladiators at the center can bargain with people’s attention. It gathers spectators’ views and thus brings about the invisible yet powerful centripetal force. The rising of the spectators’ seats is another positive effect to help spectators focus on one point. The function of representation in a contest is

¹ Afraid of being mistaken, I have to emphasize that here play refers to game, not drama, in Gadamer’s discourse.

best embodied in the amphitheatre. The two knights find the best stage to perform on.

As a host and a referee of the game, Theseus plays a pivotal part. Not only does he do the justice but he also makes the contest more like a representation. For the contest, Theseus spares no effort to make it more splendid. Amphitheatre, altar, and temple, are all in the list of erection:

The theatre for to maken and devyse.
 And for to doon his ryte and sacrificise,
 He estward hath, upon the gate above,
 In worshipe of Venus, goddesse of love,
 Doon make an auter and an oratorie;
 And on the gate westward, in memorie
 Of Mars, he maked hath right swich another,
 That coste largely of gold a fother. (I. 1901-08)

The contest is treated as extravagance as extravagance can be. The grandiose pomp announces its nature as exhibition. In addition to time and money invested upon the hardware, Theseus labors to impress his guests:

He festeth hem, and dooth so greet labour
 To esen hem and doon hem al honour
 That yet men wenen that no mannes wit
 Of noon estaat ne koude amenden it. (I. 2193-96)

The function of the contest till this moment extends from self-representation to a full-scale representation. Besides, the funeral of Arcita is such a luxurious exhibition that the Knight who tells the tale, from a detached position, also sees it as a game:

The wake-pleyes; ne kepe I nat to seye
 Who wrastleth best naked with oille enoynt,
 Ne who that baar hym best, in no disjoint.
 I wol nat tellen eek how that they goon

Hoom til Atthenes, whan the pley is doon. (I. 2960-64; emphasis added)

Undoubtedly, at this moment, the representing function of the game obtains its most pregnant and ironic meaning in the most serious occasion, a funeral. Through the representation of contest, Theseus also displays national prestige and personal puissance. The interplay between the two knight's and Theseus is subtle. By means of a contest, they exercise self-representation, which draws spectators' attention. When people pay heed to the two knights' representation for the contest, Theseus' national prestige and personal puissance is displayed. The two knights' bodies serve as the vehicle for performing prowess, theirs and Theseus' alike. As Marshall McLuhan points out in one chapter discussing the game, "Games, like institutions, are extensions of social man and of the body politic, as technologies are extensions of the animal organism" (McLuhan 255). We may say that power refracts its presence through the prism of agon. And it is because of Theseus' arrangement that the two knights' representation can be held. This, from an alternative viewpoint, could be regarded as the exchange of interest in disguise. If we adjust this viewpoint to Caillois' modification of Huizinga's notion, we may find the reason why Caillois does not exclude profit and interest from the domain of game. To be cynical, we could argue that Theseus capitalizes upon the two knights, though he seems to overplay.

It is notable that the spirit of agon indeed does not reside in doing detriment to

rivals, but in proving one's eminence and prowess. At most, one wants to show his superiority over the other. For this view, Caillois makes a good footnote as follows:

In medieval Christendom, tournaments fulfilled the same function. The goal was not victory at any price, but prowess exhibited under conditions of equality, against a competitor whom one esteems and assists when in need, and using only legitimate means agreed to in advance at a fixed place and time. (Caillois 109)

Ostensibly speaking, both Arcita and Palamon would devote themselves to Emily at any expense. Provided that we reconsider their attitude, we would find that the core of their competition is not Emily, but victory. "The lady in the *Knight's Tale* is merely a symbol of the noble man's desires" (Muscatine 23). Emily is solely their projection of desire. They even negotiate with each other about how to get Emily before asking for her agreement. By winning the lady, they just want to prove their superiority over the other. So, after Arcita wins the contest and is dying out of accident, he converts his attitude, giving up his right to claim Emily as his woman. His goal, to win the victory, has been achieved, so he can behave generously now. He does not really want to kill or do harm to Palamon. He just wants to show his superiority. "[. . .] the goal of the encounters is not for the antagonist to cause serious injury to his rival, but rather to demonstrate his own superiority" (Caillois 16). The true spirit of agon is laid bare in the interplay between the two knights.

Alea is another element operating in the *Knight's tale*. As mentioned before, alea and agon sometimes appear hand in hand. However, they do not always run in proper proportion. In this tale, agon and alea are interwoven with each other, but agon

preempts the major part and alea belongs to a subordinate position. The main difference between agon and alea, according to Caillois, inhabits in what a person depends on.

In the latter (agon), his only reliance is upon himself; in the former (alea), he counts on everything, even the vaguest sign, the slightest outside occurrence, which he immediately takes to be an omen or token—in short, he depends on everything except himself. (Caillois 17)

Sign, occurrence, coincidence, omen, token, to name a few, could be the source of alea. Individual ability is reduced to the minimum, while chance or fate is lifted to the maximum. “Agon is a vindication of personal responsibility; alea is a negation of the will, a surrender to destiny” (Caillois 18). In front of fate, even the king bows. The reason why alea comes into being mainly stems from two aspects. For the first reason, people want to seek for consolation. This reason generally goes in consistence with the reason why agon requires fairness. Facing the ruthlessness and frustration in real life, it is natural that people will find shelter under a temporal fictional world, where the rule is set according to one’s ideal. Likewise, confronted with the bad luck or injustice spreading in front, it is anticipatable that people will resort to anything except themselves. In agon, the ideal is achieved by asking for fairness in a game, and in alea, the situation is similar.

Agon and alea imply opposite and somewhat complementary attitudes, but they both obey the same law—the creation for the players of conditions of pure equality denied them in real life. [. . .] Play, whether agon or alea, is thus an attempt to substitute perfect situations for the normal confusion of

contemporary life. (Caillois 19)

Since reality bites, people turn to find relief. In other words, people seek for consolation in substitution for the unbearable heaviness in real life. If one person is born of a poor family and lives a dog's life, he may wish that he would turn into a well-off rich man overnight by gambling or winning the lottery. This kind of thinking is wishful, but it at least provides him with hope.

The second reason why alea thrives is that people come to realize human beings' limitations. Be he a king or a hero, one cannot overcome the limitation of human body and ability. A man could be wealthy as well as healthy but he could be killed by a zigzag of thunderbolt just in a blink. Man plans, but God decides all. As an old saying goes, "Man proposes, God disposes." To put this adage under the microscope of faultfinding, we find an omission of the coordinate conjunction. A coordinate conjunction, *and* or *but*, should connect the two sentences which are supposed to be equivalent. The omission may suggest that the two ends of the scales are not equivalent. Man is by no means a counterpart of God. Chances are that this faultfinding is a kind of over-interpretation. Anyway, it reveals a possible interpretation to a certain degree. Human beings, realizing their limitations, are humble in front of God. In realization of their weakness, people develop the game of alea, betting their luck on everything, like chance, omen, coincidence, or fate, except themselves.

Though the main spirit is dominated by agon in the *Knight's Tale*, the trace of alea still permeates. The two knights count on both competition and chance to win the battle. Chance, coincidence, omen, destiny, or fate, are usually considered to be

manipulated by ethereal power. In the tale, this power consists of two terrains: Greek gods and Christian God. Greek mythology and Christian discourse are blended into an amalgam of unique world. Greek mythology is a convention usually employed by poets since Homer and Virgil. Christian discourse is a newcomer but also popular in the Middle Ages.

The life of the mediaeval Christian, then, was framed by Creation and Doomsday, the covers for the *liber vitae* of mediaeval man. It should be no surprise to find that *The Canterbury Tales* is bound, metaphorically, in just that way. (Ralph Baldwin 20)

By the combination of two heterogeneous discourses, Chaucer endows the tale with a new dimension. Greek gods and Christian God appear alternately, and thus a dim ambience of *alea* clouds the whole tale, albeit the main theme is embodied by *agon*.

From the beginning, before the tale enters the main body, the mercilessness of fortune is suggested: “Thanked be Fortune and hire false wheel, / That noon estaat assureth to be weel” (I. 925-26). As the tale unfolds, the two knights are drawn to the center of stage. The origin of their later game is seemingly foreshadowed by fate.

And so bifel, by aventure or cas,
 That thurgh a window, thikke of many a barre
 Of iren greet and square as any sparre,
 He cast his eye upon Emelya. (I. 1074-77)

Fate plays a game with them, let Palamon see Emily. His seeing Emily sows the seeds of opposition between him and Arcita in the future. Both of them know very well about their abilities and eminence compared to common people, but they somehow

have no option but to admit the invisible power above. Being frustrated, they turn from self-reflection to complaining of the fate.

[. . .] Arcite ascribes the necessity of his and Palamon's imprisonment to the condition of the heavens at their birth. [. . .] Palamon also ascribes his imprisonment to Saturn, adding, however, a reference to the non-astrological figure of Juno as a kind of co-conspirator. (Chauncey Wood 70)

Feeling that life is miserable, they find no one to put the blame on, so they turn to ascribe their encounters to fate. By so doing, they can acquire a temporal consolation. Fate is lifted up to a certain height here. Chaucer's *Knight's Tale*, as we know, is not the original version. In Boccaccio's version, the significance of fate is not so much emphasized. Analyzing the transformation, Bernard F. Huppe points out, "Among the most striking and lengthy of these are Arcite's ruminations on fortune and felicity, lines 1251 ff.; Palamon's complaint about the gods and man's unhappy state, lines 1303 ff" (Huppe 50). Being of high birth, they still surrender to fate to a certain extent, knowing the limits of themselves. As V. A. Kolve argues, "A sense of human limitation, apprehended on many levels, is at the heart of the tale" (Kolve 86). Realizing that they are not able to rely on themselves totally, they turn to gods. Before their agon, they seek for alea. Before the formal competition, Palamon goes to Venus' temple to pray to the goddess for victory. Although he is confident in his strength, he still stakes his victory upon his patron deity. He worships Venus and promises that he will make sacrifices and lights up a flame ever after, as long as the goddess could help him win Emily. This part is coupled with some omens. The day Palamon sets out for

Venus's temple, he hears a lark singing: "Palamon the larke herde singe" (I. 2210). According to custom, the lark's singing is an auspicious sign foretelling good things. When he is leaving, the statue of Venus shakes and gives a sign, which "shewed a delay" (I. 2268), and as we know, at last, his marrying Emily is indeed put off. On the other side, Arcita also dedicates himself to Mars. He promises to honor the god's temple, to hang his banner in the god's fane, and to feed an eternal fire for the god. He also gets a ringing sign made by the statue of Mars which murmurs, "victory." Not knowing what to do, Emily also asks help from her guardian angel, Diana, "Or if my destiny be shapen so / That I shal nedes have oon of hem two, / As sende me hym that moost desireth me" (I. 2323-25). She does not perform free will because she does not ask for the one she desires most, but the one who desires her most. It seems that she treats her marriage as a gamble, just leaving everything to fortune.

When the tale is drawn to an end, the air is replete with Christian discourse. After Arcita's funeral is held, Chaucer draws upon Christian discourse to explain that everything is ordained according to God's Providence; therefore, death is only mortal corruption. Besides, at Palamon and Emily's wedding, the blessing of God is stressed again. The shadow of fortune is ubiquitous in the tale, from the beginning through the competition to the funeral and till the wedding.

We cannot always count on ourselves to compete with others, nor can we depend on chance to struggle against fate all the time. Sometimes it seems that we are masters of ourselves, but sometimes it seems that we are dancers of life directed by the choreographer whose name is fate. Competition and chance are usually interwoven with each other. They usually appear either together or in turn, permeating through

our lives. In the *Knight's Tale*, two ways of game, agon and alea, epitomize this kind of interweaving exercise of two forces in a chivalric society. Through a game, we see the earnest part of life.