Introduction

This cultural study of court societies, adventure, and love in the European Middle Ages shows that in twelfth and thirteenth century Europe, a society based on a culture of sacrifice becomes a society based on investments and wagers, what I call the “Medieval Risk-Reward Society.” Important sources demonstrating the cultural transition to a society based on risk and reward are the narrative and lyric poetry in the French and German vernacular languages, particularly the romance poetry of authors such as Marie de France, Chrétien de Troyes, Wolfram von Eschenbach, and Gottfried von Strassburg. The frame of reference in which I place my scrutiny of this poetry is informed by research in anthropology, sociology, theology, philosophy, and literary studies. With the help of antique sources including Homer’s *Iliad*, Genesis, Joshua, Virgil’s *Aeneid*, St. Paul’s Epistles, Plotinus’s *Enneads*, and St. Augustine’s *City of God against the Pagans*, this study sets forth criteria that enable an appreciation of the distinctive contributions made in antiquity and the European Middle Ages towards the development of a society based on risk and reward.

In the first two chapters, “Describing the Cultural Action” and “The Medieval Self as Bankroll,” I develop and elaborate my approach to cultural production as structured competitions involving the element of chance. Emulating the analytical posture of systematic studies of the dynamics of games and athletic contests, I take a descriptive approach to the competitions in religion, politics, and poetry that are constitutive of medieval culture. In my consideration of the “cultural action,” I undertake descriptions of “cultural indeterminacy,” based on the assumptions that culture is always happening, that it happens as competitions for rewards, and that indeterminacy is a describable aspect of cultural competitions, as it is of any kind of competition in which the action is ongoing and outcomes are not final (analogous to the action in extended games).

In these initial chapters, I approach cultural action in terms of different dispositions of self, which in turn are exemplary of broader historical dispositions of cultural resources, whether spiritual, intellectual, or physical-material. The cultural action of pagan peoples in antiquity and the Middle Ages is shaped by sacrificial practices in discrete cultural domains over which local deities and spirits preside. People seek optimal outcomes with sacrifices according to the local logics of these discrete cultural domains. In this pagan sacrificial cultural action, outcomes are local and immediate, and the statuses of selves and of cultural resources are relatively fixed or determinate, having been decided at higher levels by fate and capricious deities. By contrast, the longer-term, “global” cultural action of Christianity as defined by Paul and elaborated and given imperial Roman dimensions by Augustine, articulates cultural domains universally in the name of Christ, and in competition with the cultural action as viewed by Pagan and Jewish rivals. Freed by Christ’s sacrifice from the relatively limited sacrificial practices of discrete cultural
domains, as well as from the Laws of the Israelites (though emerging competitively from these), the Christian self disposes of resources universally or “globally” in a cultural action of greater indeterminacy. Based largely on Augustine’s *City of God*, we observe that cultural moves of the self need only be made in a Christian sense. As long as the self loves God and neighbor, as long as it manages cultural resources globally in dying to the world in emulation of Christ as it makes its way towards its heavenly reward, the widest latitude remains for exploiting cultural resources in the interest of growth. This is what happens in the Middle Ages, particularly in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, for which reason I suggest the view of the medieval self as a “bankroll.”

In my third chapter, “Rules of the House,” I regard competitions among the households of secular and ecclesiastical princes as constitutive of medieval court societies, and as setting an imperial tone for the cultural action at courts, from the highest *principes* to the lowest squires and servants. A global, imperial view of the competitive action at and among medieval courts, corresponding to the observations about cultural action made in previous chapters, is consistent with Jürgen Habermas’s understanding of the structural transformation of the public sphere (*Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit*), according to which a representative public domain is characteristic of the Middle Ages. In the courtly cultural action of the High Middle Ages, in which there is as yet no private sphere juxtaposed to a public one, everything is “on the table.” Following through with my global and imperial view of the medieval cultural action, in a manner consistent with Habermas’s understanding of medieval society as thoroughly based on representation, I describe some of the main competitions establishing the relative stature of princes and their courts. These range from the sponsorship and production of poetry to warfare and feuds, from the rivalries of ambitious courtiers to the plays made by emperors and popes for an ascendancy of imperial dimensions.

My fourth chapter, “The Poetic Action,” brings us closer to the medieval romances by focusing on the literary performances of poets as competitors. The competition in poetry is consistent with the dynamics of rivalries among princes and their respective households (as seen in the previous chapter), and with competitions visible in other domains of courtly culture, such as tournaments. Based on passages in the court poetry that underscore it as competitive effort, we observe that the value of a poetic performance has to do with rendering things better than one’s competitors, past and present. Finding the competitive edge vis-à-vis one’s rivals drives the innovation characteristic of poetic developments, including tapping the potential of the vernacular languages. In the poetic action, poet-performers make their best moves before critical audiences that deal out praise and shame, decide winners and losers. In the poetic action, as in the political competition among princes, the global action of Christianity outlined in the initial chapters, and the action involving adventure and love to be surveyed in the following chapters, joy or pain is at stake – a growth or diminishment of self that is experienced individually and collectively.

Adventure and love are surveyed in the fifth and sixth chapters respectively as related “cultural wagers.” In these chapters, I describe the competitions in which courtiers are involved in the interest of increased stature in the eyes of their peers (honor), and in the interest of absolute stature in the heart of a single other mortal self (love), as these competitions are rendered in the imaginary action of the courtly romances. The imaginary action is *real*, as I observe with the help of recent fMRI-based research into brain responses to fictional narratives, which demonstrates the neurological simulations of narrative events and suggests these simulations rehearse different kinds of social experience. In the imaginary competitive action involving adventure and love, the Christian self that is described in the initial chapters of this
study as globally mobilized in the interest of its heavenly prize, puts itself into play *again*, in a specifically medieval and European way. In an expanded and increasingly indeterminate cultural action, the courtly-chivalric self speculates it will experience growth by investing itself absolutely in the temporal, perishable goods associated with love and adventure, without foregoing the play for its timeless heavenly reward. In this medieval poetic reiteration of the absolute investment of self, but now in the interest of temporal, perishable goods, we observe a culture of wagers and investments emerge from and begin to replace a culture of sacrifice. Correspondingly, the examples from the romances surveyed in these chapters show the competitive action of adventure and love to be rendered as games, particularly games of chance (hence the chapter headings of this study), in which ladies and knight put themselves into play absolutely. The imaginary moves of knights and ladies in romance poetry and the outcomes of these moves—which creatively build upon and vary the moves visible in patristic literature and saints lives—are concretely demonstrative of the cultural innovation and growth occurring in the European High Middle Ages.

My final chapter, “The Modern Self in Play,” considers some of the ways in which the modern individual self displaces the imperial parameters of the medieval *ecclesia* as the principal locus of indeterminacy in the European cultural action. After I look at some of the early writings of Martin Luther that clearly set forth this displacement, the focus of this chapter is first on a few significant cultural moves in the European action between the Reformation and Enlightenment, including Gottfried Leibniz’s Christian cosmological understanding of binary arithmetic, and Immanuel Kant’s dualistic and identifiably Lutheran conception of Enlightenment in his famous definitive essay of this movement (*An answer to the Question: What is Enlightenment?*). I then survey the imaginary cultural action depicted in Mark Twain’s *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur’s Court*, which brings us back to courts, adventure, and love, and widens the focus to include Europe and North America, the industrial revolution, and totalitarianism in the nineteenth and twentieth century. With the help of Twain, Hannah Arendt (*The Origins of Totalitarianism, The Human Condition*) and others, I conclude with the observation that modernity is not so much a break with the Middle Ages, as an expansion and acceleration of the cultural action.
Table of Contents

The Risk-Reward Society.

Courts, Adventure, and Love

in the European Middle Ages.

1. Describing the Cultural Action.

2. The Medieval Self as Bankroll.


4. The Poetic Action.

5. Adventure as a Cultural Wager.


(The completed manuscript will be about three hundred-seventy pages typescript including bibliography.)