

## V

## PLAY AND WAR

EVER since words existed for fighting and playing, men have been wont to call war a game. We have already posed the question whether this is to be regarded only as a metaphor, and come to a negative conclusion. Language everywhere must have expressed matters in that way from the moment words for combat and play existed.

The two ideas often seem to blend absolutely in the archaic mind. Indeed, all fighting that is bound by rules bears the formal characteristics of play by that very limitation. We can call it the most intense, the most energetic form of play and at the same time the most palpable and primitive. Young dogs and small boys fight "for fun", with rules limiting the degree of violence; nevertheless the limits of licit violence do not necessarily stop at the spilling of blood or even at killing. The mediaeval tournament was always regarded as a sham-fight, hence as play, but in its earliest forms it is reasonably certain that the joustings were held in deadly earnest and fought out to the death, like the "playing" of the young men before Abner and Joab. As a striking instance of the play-element in fighting taken from a not too remote period of history, we would refer to the famous "Combat des Trente" fought in Brittany in 1351. I have not found it expressly styled as "play" in the sources, but the whole performance has the features of a game. So has the equally famous "Disfida di Barletta" of the year 1503, where thirteen Italian knights met thirteen French knights.<sup>1</sup> Fighting, as a cultural function, always presupposes limiting rules, and it requires, to a certain extent anyway, the recognition of its play-quality. We can only speak of war as a cultural function so long as it is waged within a sphere whose members regard each other as equals or antagonists with equal rights; in other words its cultural function depends on its play-quality. This condition changes as soon as war is waged outside the sphere of equals, against groups not recognized as human

<sup>1</sup>See my *Herbst des Mittelalters (The Waning of the Middle Ages)*, 4th edition, Stuttgart, 1938, p. 141.

beings and thus deprived of human rights—barbarians, devils, heathens, heretics and “lesser breeds without the law”. In such circumstances war loses its play-quality altogether and can only remain within the bounds of civilization in so far as the parties to it accept certain limitations for the sake of their own honour. Until recently the “law of nations” was generally held to constitute such a system of limitation, recognizing as it did the ideal of a community of mankind with rights and claims for all, and expressly separating the state of war—by declaring it—from peace on the one hand and criminal violence on the other. It remained for the theory of “total war” to banish war’s cultural function and extinguish the last vestige of the play-element.

If we are right in considering the ludic function to be inherent in the agon, the question now arises how far war (in our view, a development of the agon) can be called an agonistic function of society? Several forms of combat at once suggest themselves as being non-agonistic: the surprise, the ambush, the raid, the punitive expedition and wholesale extermination cannot be described as agonistic forms of warfare, though they may be subservient to an agonistic war. Moreover the political objectives of war also lie outside the immediate sphere of contest: conquest, subjection or domination of another people. The agonistic element only becomes operative when the war-making parties regard themselves and each other as *antagonists* contending for something to which they feel they have a right. This feeling is almost always present, though it is often exploited only as a pretext. Even when sheer hunger moves to war—a comparatively rare phenomenon—the aggressors will interpret it, and perhaps sincerely feel it, as a holy war, a war of honour, divine retribution and what not. History and sociology tend to exaggerate the part played in the origin of wars, ancient or modern, by immediate material interests and the lust for power. Though the statesmen who plan the war may themselves regard it as a question of power-politics, in the great majority of cases the real motives are to be found less in the “necessities” of economic expansion, etc., than in pride and vain-glory, the desire for prestige and all the pomps of superiority. The great wars of aggression from antiquity down to our own times all find a far more essential explanation in the idea of glory, which everybody understands, than in any rational and intellectualist theory of economic forces and political dynamisms. The modern outbursts of glorifying war, so lamentably familiar to us, carry us

Huizinga, J.. HOMO LUDENS: A Study of the Play-Element in Culture.  
Florence, KY: Routledge, 2000. p 90.

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back to the Babylonian and Assyrian conception of war as a divine injunction to exterminate foreign peoples to the greater glory of God.

In certain archaic forms of warfare the play-element finds immediate and, comparatively speaking, more pleasant expression. We are once more dealing with that same sphere of archaic thought in which chance, fate, judgement, contest and play lie side by side as so many holy things. It is only natural that war too should fall under this head. One wages war in order to obtain a decision of holy validity. The test of the will of the gods is victory or defeat. So that instead of trying out your strength in a contest, or throwing dice, or consulting the oracle, or disputing by fierce words—all of which may equally well serve to elicit the divine decision—you can resort to war. As we have seen, the connection between decision and Deity is explicit in the German word for ordeal—"Gottesurteil", though fundamentally the ordeal is simply judgement, any judgement whatsoever. Every decision acquired by the ritually correct forms is a "judgement of God". It is only secondarily that the technical idea of the ordeal is associated with definite proofs of miraculous power. In order to understand these associations we have to look beyond our customary division between the juridical, the religious, and the political. What we call "right" can equally well, archaically speaking, be "might"—in the sense of "the will of the gods" or "manifest superiority". Hence an armed conflict is as much a mode of justice as divination or a legal proceeding. Finally, since a holy significance attaches to every decision, war itself might conceivably be regarded as a form of divination.<sup>1</sup>

The inextricable complex of ideas covering anything from the game of chance to the lawsuit can be seen most strikingly at work in the "single combat" in archaic culture. The single combat serves various purposes; it may be a demonstration of personal *aristeia*, or it may be the prelude to a general conflict, or it may go on during the battle as episodes of it. Poets and chroniclers glorify it in the history and literature of all ages, and it is known in all parts of the world. A very characteristic instance of this is

<sup>1</sup>The origin of the curious Dutch word for war, *oorlog*, is not altogether clear, but at any rate it belongs to the sacred or ritual sphere. The meaning of the Old Germanic words that correspond to it fluctuates between "conflict", "fate", and a condition of no longer being bound by an oath. But it is not certain that exactly the same word is being dealt with in all cases. Huizinga's own English MS. replaces this third factor by "the cessation of normal social conditions". Trans.

Wakidi's description of the Battle of Badr, where Mohammed defeated the Koraishites. Three of Mohammed's warriors challenged a like number of heroes in the enemy ranks; they introduce themselves with due form and hail each other as worthy adversaries.<sup>1</sup> The First World War witnessed a revival of *aristeia* in the dropping of challenges by airmen. The single combat can also serve as an augury of battle, in which form it is known to both Chinese and Old Germanic literature. Before the battle begins the bravest men challenge their opposite numbers on each side. "Battle is a testing of fate. The first encounters are weighty presages."<sup>2</sup> The single combat, however, can also take the place of the battle itself. When the Vandals were at war with the Alemans in Spain the hostile parties decided to have their conflict settled by a single combat.<sup>3</sup> We must not regard this as having provided an omen or as being an humanitarian measure designed to avoid the spilling of blood, but simply as an appropriate substitute for war, a concise proof, in agonistic form, of the superiority of one of the parties: victory proves that the cause of the victors is favoured by the gods, is therefore a "just" cause. Needless to say, this archaic conception of war is soon vitiated by specifically Christian arguments advocating single combat as a means of avoiding unnecessary bloodshed. Even very early on, as in the case of the Merovingian king Theoderich at Quierzy on the Oise, the warriors say: "Better for one to fall than the whole army".<sup>4</sup> In the later Middle Ages it was quite customary for kings or princes at war to set about staging a single combat between themselves and so to end their "querelle". The preparations for it were made with great solemnity and in elaborate detail, the express motive always being "pour éviter effusion de sang chrestien et la destruction du peuple".<sup>5</sup> But, however pompously announced, the battle royal never came off. It had long been an international comedy, a piece of empty ceremonial between royal houses. Nevertheless the tenacity with which monarchs clung to this ancient custom and the mock-seriousness with which it was kept up betray its origin in the sphere of ritual. The archaic conception of a legal proceeding which gave a legitimate and even sacred

<sup>1</sup>Wakidi, ed. Wellhausen, p. 53.

<sup>2</sup>Granet, *Chinese Civilization*, p. 266; cf. J. de Vries, *Altgerman. Religionsg.* i, Berlin, 1934, p. 258.

<sup>3</sup>Gregory of Tours, ii, 2.

<sup>4</sup>Fredegar, *op. cit.* iv, 27.

<sup>5</sup>Cf. my *Herbst des Mittelalters*, p. 134 sq.

decision in this way, was still operative. The Emperor Charles V twice challenged François I to a single combat with due ceremony, and this case was by no means the last.<sup>1</sup>

Single combat as a substitute for battle is of course quite different from "trial by battle" in the strict sense of the words, as a legal means to the settlement of a dispute. The important place held by the "judicial duel" in Mediaeval law is well known. It is a moot point whether it is to be regarded as an "ordeal" or not. H. Brunner<sup>2</sup> and others consider it in this light, while R. Schröder<sup>3</sup> holds that it is simply a form of trial like any other. The fact that trial by battle is not to be found in the Anglo-Saxon laws and was only introduced by the Normans, points rather to the conclusion that it was not, subsequently, on the same footing as the ordeal, which was very common in England. The whole issue loses much of its importance if we view the judicial duel properly as a sacred agon, which of its own nature shows which side is right and where the favour of the gods lies. Hence a conscious appeal to heaven, as in the later forms of the ordeal, is not the primary meaning.

Though sometimes fought to the bitter end the judicial duel shows a tendency to assume the features of play. A certain formality is essential to it. The fact that it can be executed by hired fighters is itself an indication of its ritual character, for a ritual act will allow of performance by a substitute. Such professional fighters are, for instance, the *kempa* of the Old Frisian lawsuit. Also, the regulations concerning the choice of weapons and the peculiar handicaps designed to give equal chances to unequal antagonists—as when a man fighting a woman has to stand in a pit up to his waist—are the regulations and handicaps appropriate to armed play. In the later Middle Ages, it would seem, the judicial duel generally ended without much harm done. It remains an open question whether this play-quality is to be regarded as a sign of decadence or whether it is to be attributed to the nature of the custom itself, which did not, however, preclude deadly earnest.

The last "trial by battle" in a civil suit before the Court of Common Pleas was held in the year 1571 on Tothill Fields at Westminster, on a battle-ground sixty feet square specially marked off for the purpose. The combat was permitted to last from sunrise

<sup>1</sup>Erasmus, *Opus epistolarum* vii, No. 2024, 38 sq., 2059, 9.

<sup>2</sup>*Op. cit.* p. 555.

<sup>3</sup>*Lehrbuch der deutschen Religionsg.* Leipzig, 1907, p. 89.

“until the stars grow visible”, or until one of the combatants—each armed with buckler and staff as prescribed in the Carolingian capitulars—should utter “the dreadful word” *craven*, thereby avowing himself beaten. The whole “ceremony”, as Blackstone calls it,<sup>1</sup> much resembled certain athletic entertainments at a village sports.

If a strong element of play is proper to both the judicial duel and the wholly fictitious royal duel, it is small wonder that the ordinary duel as found among many European peoples to this day should have the same ludic character. The private duel avenges outraged honour. Both ideas—honour that can be outraged and the need to avenge it—belong to the archaic sphere, notwithstanding their undiminished psychological and social significance in modern society. A person’s honourable qualities must be manifest to all and, if their recognition is endangered, must be asserted and vindicated by agonistic action in public. Where recognition of personal honour is concerned the point is not whether honour is founded on righteousness, truthfulness or any other ethical principle. What is at stake is social appreciation as such. Nor is it of great importance to show that the private duel derives from the judicial duel. Essentially they are the same: the continual struggle for prestige, which is a fundamental value comprising both right and might. Vengeance is the satisfaction of the sense of honour, and honour will be satisfied no matter how perverse, criminal or morbid. In Greek iconography “Diké” (justice) frequently blends with the figure of Nemesis (vengeance) just as she does with “Tyché” (fortune).<sup>2</sup> The duel also reveals its deep-seated identity with the judicial decision in the fact that, like the judicial duel itself, it hands no blood-feud on to those who lose a kinsman by it—provided, of course, that the duel was fought in due form.

In periods that bear the stamp of a powerful military nobility the private duel may take on extremely sanguinary forms. The principals and their seconds may indulge in a group-fight on horseback with pistols—a regular cavalry engagement. Such were the proportions to which the duel had grown in France during the 16th century. A trifling difference of words between two noblemen might well involve six or even eight persons in a deadly encounter. Honour forbade refusal as a second. Montaigne speaks of such a duel between three of Henri’s mignons and three noble-

<sup>1</sup>*Op. cit.* p. 337 sq.

<sup>2</sup>Harrison, *Themis*, p. 258.