

Martin Kuester

More or Less Educational

Literary Godgames in Anglophone Literature
from Chaucer to Atwood

Katharina Rennhak, Heinz Rölleke, Michael Scheffel (Hg.)

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0. Preface

[...] might we not be part of a game that someone in another adjacent cosmos is playing with us?

(Greeley 33)

This volume brings together thoughts and ideas about “godgames” that I have gathered over many years and in various educational and academic contexts as both student and university teacher of literatures in English, whether they be of British, Canadian or American origin or persuasion. I first hit upon the concept of godgames writing my German teaching degree (Staatsexamen) thesis on the Canadian novelist Robert Kroetsch at the University of Trier in the early 1980s under the guidance of the late Walter Pache, who was not only an inspiring Shakespeare and eighteenth-century literature scholar but also one of the leading and earliest European specialists in the study of Canada and especially Canadian literature. I discovered the term *godgame* in the inspiring book-length discussion *Labyrinths of Voice*, in which Robert Kroetsch discusses his writing and teaching practice with his fellow scholars Shirley Neuman and Robert Wilson.

This intriguing conversation between Neuman, Wilson and Kroetsch offered a treasure of suggestions for a young student of literature who was still very much under the influence of the structuralist theories that he had been exposed to in the linguistics classes that were and still are a constituent part of the German curriculum for future teachers of English. So, for my teaching degree thesis, I was bent on analyzing the narrative structure of Kroetsch’s writing, seeing his novels as literary models offering themselves up to a mainly structuralist analysis. I was then, and still am, heavily biased towards binary structures – Saussurean (sign) and Barthesian (myth) – and what Kroetsch and other poststructuralists and postmodernists did to or with them.

As fate (and more or less god-like funding agencies such as the German Academic Exchange Service and the International Council for Canadian Studies, to both of whom I owe great thanks) would have it, I ended up first as an undergraduate German exchange student at the University of British Columbia (where I had inspired and inspiring professors such as Diana Brydon, Peter Quartermain and Jerry Wasserman) and then as a doctoral student of Robert Kroetsch’s at the University of Manitoba, where in addition to writing a thesis on parodic structures in Canadian historical fiction, I was also “encouraged” – by a very god-like

committee – to take graduate classes on several of the authors who now appear in these pages. And for some reason, the concept of godgames that I had learned about while writing my German thesis raised its head not only, although most vividly, in David Williams’s class on Milton and Melville but also in Robert Finnegan’s Chaucer class, in Robin Hoople’s class on the American Renaissance (exposing me to Melville’s *Confidence-Man*) and in Herb Weil’s Shakespeare class. All these graduate classes and the insights they provided inspired me throughout my teaching career, and I was happy to see that the term godgame also made it into one of the footnotes of David Williams’s brilliant work on John Milton’s indebtedness to the seventeenth-century Levellers (Williams, *Milton’s Leveller God* 433).

Back in Germany, teaching as Walter Pache’s assistant at the University of Augsburg while finishing my University of Manitoba dissertation on Canadian historical novels – which turned out to be rather uncontaminated by the godgame concept (although not by professors transatlantically applying godgame-like methods) – I then had to work through my Milton “complex,” for which I largely hold my dear friend, the novelist, literary scholar and admirable teacher David Williams responsible, by writing my German *habilitation* thesis (with, of course, a chapter on godgames). The godgame “obsession” also continued in several undergraduate and graduate classes that I came to teach at the German universities of Augsburg and Marburg, in several Staatsexamen theses I directed and in quite a few – some colleagues would probably say, too many – godgame papers I have been invited to present at conferences on both sides of the Atlantic Ocean.

I would like to thank all those who have taught me about and through godgames in literature and in teaching and those whom I have attempted to teach about godgames, hopefully without playing too many games with them. Thanks are also due to my late Marburg colleague Claus Uhlig, who for many years kept asking me when my godgame book would finally be finished. If such a work can ever be finished is another question, and what I can offer here is now only seeing the light of day after my retirement. I also owe immense gratitude to those who published earlier versions of the papers on which some of the chapters of this book are based. I furthermore would like to thank Wolfram R. Keller, a former student and now a friend and colleague, for adding a lecture on Ben Jonson’s godgames to my Marburg Godgames lecture series in January 2018, and to Hartmut Lutz for giving a lively and fascinating talk on Greifswald and Stephen Scobie in my Canadian Novel seminar in the 2017/2018 winter semester. Final-