

'Our Darker Purpose': The Calculus of Desire in *King Lear* – A Girardian Reading

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Abstract: *René Girard has always seen in Shakespeare's work a supreme example of his mimetic theory applied with genius in a dramatic context. He sees in King Lear a kind of summa which brings to 'a sharp focus . . . the mimetic vision.' Using key Girardian concepts like mimetic desire and rivalry, the crisis of Degree, sacred violence, and the victimage mechanism as hermeneutical tools, and applying them rigorously and systematically to the text may yield fresh and illuminating insights into one of the greatest tragedies of Shakespeare.*

Keywords: *René Girard, William Shakespeare, King Lear, mimetic theory, sacrificial crisis, victimage mechanism.*

Introduction

In the introduction to his wide ranging book on Shakespeare's drama, *A Theatre of Envy*, René Girard makes the arresting claim that: 'My work on Shakespeare is inextricably linked to everything I wrote . . .' He goes on to point out that this link is constituted by the fact that Shakespeare, like 'the tragic poets of Greece', discovered the 'fundamental source of human conflict – namely mimetic desire . . .'¹ In what he calls his 'neomimetic approach' to the Shakespearean texts, Girard summarizes the correspondence between his mimetic theory and the dramatist's mimetic vision as follows:

Shakespeare identifies the force that periodically destroys the differential system of culture and brings it back into being, namely the mimetic crisis, which he calls a crisis of Degree. He sees its resolution in the collective violence of scapegoating (for example, Julius Caesar). The omega of one cultural cycle is the alpha of another. It is unanimous victimage that transforms the disruptive force of mimetic rivalry into the constructive force of a sacrificial mimesis periodically re-enacting the original violence in order to prevent a return of the crisis.²

¹ R. Girard, *A Theatre of Envy*, Gracewing, 2000, pp. 3–4.

² *Ibid.*, p. 6.

Though he devotes fewer than four dense but luminous pages to the interpretation of *King Lear* from the perspective of his mimetic theory, Girard considers it as a kind of *summa* exemplifying the mimetic approach to Shakespeare:

... its plot brings the main features of Shakespeare's central vision into such sharp focus that it seems at times like a simplification, but most useful one for our present purpose, which is to gather together the main elements of our analysis and gain a general overview of the mimetic vision.³

The purpose of this paper is to attempt a more extensive and systematic interpretation of *King Lear* from a Girardian perspective, in an effort to see both what new light it might shed on the play's central issues and also the possible limitations of such an approach. To help in this endeavour, a preliminary but inevitably brief outline of Girard's theory of mimetic rivalry and sacred violence will be sketched.

Violence as the heart and secret soul of the sacred

For Girard, as for many modern cultural theorists, desire is a major constitutional element of the human being. The other basic human propensity which Girard focuses on is that pointed out by Aristotle in his *Poetics*: 'Man differs from other animals in his greater aptitude for imitation (mimesis)'.⁴ Combined together, human desire and imitation form the core of Girard's mimetic theory, which he first expounded in his book *Deceit, Desire and the Novel*. Girard distinguishes his concept of desire from basic biological needs or instincts such as thirst, hunger, sleep, whose objects are determined and easily identifiable. Desire, however, is culturally mediated and indefinite, its objects being potentially unlimited:

Once his basic needs are satisfied (indeed, sometimes even before), man is subject to intense desires, though he may not know precisely for what. The reason is that he desires being, something he himself lacks and which some other person seems to possess. The subject thus looks to that other person to inform him of what he should desire in order to acquire that being. If the model who is apparently already endowed with superior being, desires some object, that object must surely be capable of conferring an even greater plenitude of being.⁵

In other words, human desire is learned or imitated from others, not autogenous and self-driven, as the Romantics would have it. In what Girard calls this 'interindividual' psychology, desire has a triangular structure, with the subject desiring an object because it is desired by another subject who becomes his mediator of desire or imitated model. When subject and model desire the same object conflict is bound to arise,

³Ibid., p. 180.

⁴Aristotle, *Poetics*, 4. 2.

⁵R. Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, Baltimore, 1979, p. 146.

leading to an acquisitive mimesis: 'two desires converging on the same object are bound to clash'. The mediator, finding himself in a threatening competitive situation, starts in turn to model his desires on the subject, and they become mimetic rivals, driven by a *metaphysical desire* for each other's perceived self-sufficient being. In the process the original object of desire is often forgotten and drops out of sight. Now they are locked in what Girard calls a 'double bind':

Man cannot respond to that universal human injunction, 'Imitate me!' without almost immediately encountering an inexplicable counter order: 'Don't imitate me!' (which really means, 'Do not appropriate my object'). The second command fills man with despair and turns him into a slave of an involuntary tyrant. Man and his desires thus perpetually transmit contradictory signals to one another.⁶

The potential eruption of this rivalry into outright violence depends on the perceived social, ontological and historical differences between subject and model; in other words it depends on the physical and especially spiritual 'distance' separating them:

We shall speak of external mediation when the distance is sufficient to eliminate any contact between the two spheres of possibilities of which the mediator and the subject occupy the respective centres. We shall speak of internal mediation when the same distance is sufficiently reduced to allow these two spheres to penetrate each other more or less profoundly.⁷

In external mediation therefore, the differences between them are large enough and acknowledged as such, so that violent conflict is avoidable. But when there is a loss of differentiation, when subject and model start inhabiting the same cultural world and sharing the same psychic or political space, and competing for the same objects of desire, external mediation is quickly transformed into internal mediation, and mimetic rivalry inevitably issues in violence between them.

In his next major work, *Violence and the Sacred*, Girard applies this mimetic model to his anthropological theory of cultural origins and social behaviour. When mimetic desire and rivalry between members of a community escalate to a point where social order and cohesion are threatened, that community undergoes what Girard alternatively describes as a 'sacrificial crisis' or 'a crisis of differentiation' or in more specifically Shakespearean terms 'a crisis of Degree', which he describes as follows:

The sacrificial crisis can be defined, therefore, as a crisis of distinctions – a crisis affecting the cultural order. This cultural order is nothing more than a regulated system of distinctions in which the differences among individuals are used to establish their 'identity' and their mutual relationships.⁸

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 147.

⁷ R. Girard, *Deceit, Desire and the Novel*, Baltimore, 1969, p. 9.

⁸ Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, p. 49.

Once such a situation obtains, reciprocal violence becomes contagious and turns the rival members or groups into monstrous doubles of each other, monstrous in that they are caught in a violent ‘whirl . . . a formless and grotesque mixture of things that are normally separate’.⁹ The more they try to differentiate themselves from their rivals in their struggle for supremacy, the more similar and indistinguishable they become in their reciprocal violence. Finally when the crisis of differentiation reaches a paroxysm that threatens the extinction of the community, the latter tries to save itself by re-directing its collective aggression onto an arbitrarily selected victim who is unanimously seen as origin of all its troubles and therefore common enemy to be expelled or sacrificed. The struggle of ‘all against all’ becomes ‘the struggle of all against one’. The mimetic and contagious nature of violence ensures that the mimetic rivalry previously pitting them against each other now unites them against the victim who might be selected either from within or from outside the community. The unanimity and harmony that come about as a result of the sacrifice of the scapegoat are in turn ascribed to some kind of transcendent quality within the victim himself, so that he is endowed by the community with a mysterious and sacred power to restore peace and unity to the group. Thus in a kind of double transference, the victim is regarded as being both evil and good, a source of both order and disorder, disease and healing.

This scapegoat mechanism at the origin of human culture is posited by Girard as the hidden source of all human myths, rituals and prohibitions, which re-tell and re-enact, while camouflaging and displacing it, the foundational murder. Cultural order stems from the mechanism of the surrogate victim, whose expulsion and elimination gives rise to the most elemental cultural distinctions, starting with the fundamental ones such as those between the sacred and profane, the pure and the impure. While most taboos prohibit desires and behaviours that might lead to mimetic rivalry and violence within the community, such as the nearly ubiquitous ones of incest and parricide, ritual sacrifice and festivities allow the periodic release of violence or celebrate chaos momentarily in a controlled ceremonial context. In this way, by unconsciously re-enacting the sacrificial crisis and the mechanism of the surrogate victim, they exorcise the incipient mimetic rivalries that might lead to a looming crisis or even resolve a crisis in progress. Myths are disguised narratives of the community’s origins and history, providing a justification and rationalization for its institutionalized rituals and prohibitions. ‘Disguised’ in the sense that while myths hint at the violence of those origins, the truth about the founding murder is usually displaced and hidden in them; for instance in most cases they tell their stories from the perspective of the victors rather than from that of the victim, in order to uphold

⁹*Ibid.*, p. 160.

the unity of the group. For Girard, therefore, the Sacred in all its forms is society's formula for channelling and containing the mimetic rivalry and violence endemic to the human condition; hence his lapidary definition that 'violence is the heart and secret soul of the sacred'.¹⁰ Sacred violence, with the victimage mechanism as its core, is society's way of defending itself against the periodic and devastating onslaughts of reciprocal and all-consuming violence.

The third and culminating phase in Girard's theoretical elaboration is constituted by his contention that the Biblical revelation, more specifically the Judeo-Christian Gospel, challenges all mythic and sacred violence by revealing once and for all the victimage mechanism in all previous historical and cultural formations. The God of the crucified and resurrected Christ sides with the innocent victim against his unanimous persecutors, and exposes the violent origins of all social orders sprung from mimetic rivalry and collective scapegoating. In *Things Hidden Since the Foundation of the World*, Girard shows how the Gospels present Christ's passion as a supreme enactment and deconstruction from the inside of the whole victimage process, because they stress the innocence of the victim, his repudiation of mimetic revenge by loving forgiveness, and the final vindication of his apocalyptic truth by God raising him from the dead. Christ's sacrifice was a liberating revelation of the origin of all mythical, ritual and religious sacrifices in their ancient mystifying nexus of mimetic desire, violence, and the sacred.

For Girard in fact, all religion originates in sacrifice, specifically that involving sacred violence against a scapegoat, whether human or animal, and he traces this origin in many religious traditions from around the world. For instance, he connects it to the religious custom, still extant in the fifth century Greece of the great tragedians, of the *pharmakos*, a sacrificial ritual in which a human victim was 'maintained by the city at its own expense and slaughtered at the appointed festivals as well as at a moment of civic disaster'.¹¹ He relates the notion of *pharmakos* to the other Greek words: '*katharma*' 'used as a variant of *pharmakos* to designate a sacrificial human victim' and *katharsis* which 'refers primarily to the mysterious benefits that accrue to the community upon the death of a human *katharma* or *pharmakos*'.¹² Furthermore, according to Girard: '*Katharma* is not limited to the victim or the surrogate object; it also refers to the supreme efforts of a mythic and tragic hero'.¹³ The *pharmakos* function of the tragic hero, as well as his implication in the sacrificial crisis of his community, become central in Girard's interpretation of both Greek and Shakespearean tragedy, especially in plays like *Oedipus Rex* and *Julius Caesar*. Girard

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 31.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 9.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 287.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 288.

justifies his anthropological approach to the tragic genre by pointing out the ‘vital role the ritualistic crisis – the abolition of all distinctions – plays in the formation of tragedy. In turn the study of tragedy can clarify the nature of the crisis and those aspects of primitive religion that are inseparably linked to it.’¹⁴

In fact, to corroborate his basic hypothesis and findings, Girard concentrates on one emblematic example that recurs in both his anthropological and literary research: that of the institution of monarchy. The reason is that for Girard monarchy ‘appears essential to the structure of human society . . . as it pertains to sovereigns as well as to political power in general and to the whole idea of central authority’.¹⁵ In a kind of summation that draws together his views on sacred violence and royalty as well as their relation to tragedy, Girard connects his anthropological insights about sacred monarchy with the historical claim of the divine right of kings, the victimage mechanism and Shakespeare’s unique insight into them. In view of its pertinence to the subject of this essay, it is worth quoting Girard in full here:

When we consider the monarchy of the Ancien Régime in France or any other traditional monarchic system, we cannot help wondering whether it would be more profitable to consider these institutions in the light of sacred kingship than in the light of modern ideas about monarchy. The concept of Divine Right is not just a fiction made up on the spur of the moment to keep the king’s subjects in line. The life and death of the monarchic concept in France – its sacred rites, its foibles, its cure for scrofula through the royal touch, the grand final of the guillotine – all this is clearly structured by the influence of sacred violence. The sacred character of the king – that is, his identity with the victim – regains its potency as it is obscured from view and even held up to ridicule. It is in fact then that the king is most threatened.

The master of these paradoxes, the most daringly perspicacious interpreter of the monarchic principle in a world not so far removed from our own is Shakespeare. He bridges the gap between the most primitive concepts of kingship and the most modern, he seems to have been better acquainted with both than we are with either.¹⁶

After this all too brief but necessary foray in Girardian theory, it is time to return to the text of *King Lear*, armed with some of Girard’s hermeneutical tools.

The fake abdication that was only too true

According to Girard’s description, the first pivotal scene in *King Lear*¹⁷ can be viewed as a classic example of how an ongoing Crisis of Degree can be precipitated by a sudden shift from external to internal mediation. As king and father, Lear is both a living emblem of the body politic and guarantor of order and degree through the right exercise of authority and power in love and justice. In Girardian parlance,

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 55.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 300.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 304.

he is custodian of the political and cultural differentiation on which any social order and stability depend. The elaborate ceremonial and ritual pomp of the first scene underlines this status of Lear as royal representative of legitimate authority, even while the action shows how he himself has long embarked on a course that is undermining it.

From a Girardian perspective, Lear's role as guardian of Degree and differentiation is to prevent the level of mimetic desire among his subjects from escalating into mimetic rivalry with its potential for destabilizing violence. He is the external mediator or model of desire for his family and court by his kingly and fatherly exercise of power based on justice and practical wisdom. Yet he himself has already and effectively abdicated from this differentiating sovereign role even before his formal and rather too ostentatious renunciation of royal power. Why? Because he is driven by a 'darker purpose' than he can envisage, a murky mimetic desire that makes him the cause of dangerous internal mediation both in himself and in other.

What Shakespeare makes glaringly obvious from the first spoken words in the play is that Lear's court is riddled with rivalry, that he himself is the chief object of mimetic desire and, more importantly, its chief subject and instigator. In the very first line of the play Kent's words about the apparent edge of Albany over Cornwall in the King's favour: 'I thought the king had more affected the Duke of Albany than Cornwall' strikes the keynote of cutthroat competition that encompasses all human and political relationships within this scene. Rivalry infects and inflects all and everyone's desires here, whether these have to do with court and courtship, generational and sibling relations, transmission of property and power, the divisions of land and love. It is lexically signalled by the profuse sequence of comparatives and superlatives in the words of most of the characters, fatefully initiated by the *more* and *most* of Kent and Gloucester.

The outward ceremonial order of the scene barely hides or contains a simmering concourse of mimetic rivalries goaded on by Lear himself. Lear's language fairly drips with abetting comparatives like 'our no less loving son of Albany ...' a turn of phrase which nicely betrays his inveterate habit of desiring mimetically the desire of others. Even and especially when he is ostensibly and scrupulously giving equal portions of his kingdom to his eldest daughters and their husbands, so that 'curiosity in neither can make no choice of either's moiety', one asks whether this balancing act is a ploy to quell rivalry or to exacerbate it by spurring them to joust for his favour. This is what emerges distinctly later on, when he blatantly stirs their envy and rivalry for his youngest daughter, for whom he has reserved 'a third more opulent than your sisters.' The main point is Lear's ingrained habit of measuring out his favours, of calculating desire and property in terms of each other. Girard sees a close and direct correspondence between mimetic desire and Shakespeare's use of the word 'envy':

Like mimetic desire, envy subordinates a desired *something* to the *someone* who enjoys a privileged relationship with it. Envy covets the superior *being* that neither the someone nor the something alone, but the conjunction of the two, seems to possess. Envy involuntarily testifies to a lack of being that puts the envious to shame, especially since the enthronement of metaphysical pride during the Renaissance. That is why envy is the hardest sin to acknowledge.¹⁸

Similarly, Gloucester's cavalier comparisons between his legitimate and bastard sons, in the presence and hearing of the latter, are almost calculated to whet the sibling rivalry of the resentful and envious Edmund, even while his father is, like Lear, nominally dividing 'equally' his affections for both sons, for Edgar 'is no dearer in my account', as he claims. Then there are France and Burgundy, who are 'great rivals in our youngest daughter's love.' The whole deadly game of mimetic rivalries reaches its sudden and tragically absurd apogee in the 'love' test of Lear, pitting his three daughters in a verbal contest where the best declaration of love wins the best piece of property. Here Lear makes himself the dead centre of a vortex of desire which he deliberately whips up around him in order to bolster his desire for being and to deny, as we shall see, his deepest existential needs and fears. In Girardian terms, Shakespeare in the first scene is treating us to an orgy of mimetic desire, with many of the character mimicking, whetting and competing with the desire of others for some potentially shared object, person or status.

So one might safely say that a latent crisis of Degree has long been underway in Lear's court, presided over by Lear himself, and brought to a head by his fatal decision to divide his kingdom. Much ink has been spilled to decipher what is ultimately motivating Lear in this enigmatic first scene, and many more or less plausible explanations have been given; Girard's mimetic hypothesis and his related interindividual psychology may provide a highly persuasive, if not definitive, interpretation. What is Lear's real 'darker purpose', darker than he knows, driving him into this dangerous game of mimetic rivalry? For Girard, it is 'his desire to be desired', to stimulate and imitate the desire of others for him as a way of self-assurance or self-confirmation. Why should Lear feel the need to mirror himself, to get a sense of being, of worth even from the desire of those around him and to imitate it, even if it is paid in the false coin of flattery? Such a desire may be unconsciously motivated by a deep sense of unworthiness and corresponding shame. Several perceptive critics such as Cavell, Zak, and Fernie¹⁹ have pointed out that Lear's 'darker purpose' (inadmissible to others and above all to himself) is a shameful awareness of being

¹⁷ All quotations from *King Lear* cited below are taken from the Penguin Shakespeare Series, 2005 edition, George Hunter (ed.).

¹⁸ Girard, *A Theatre of Envy*, p. 4.

¹⁹ Stanley Cavell, *Disowning Knowledge*, Cambridge 1987, p. 58; William F. Zak, *Sovereign Shame*, Lewisburg, 1984, p. 89; and Ewan Fernie, *Shame in Shakespeare*, London, 2002, p. 178.

unworthy of love. But what has also probably exacerbated this vigorous denial of spiritual poverty and weakness is fear and insecurity at the proximity of the barely acknowledged realities of fragility, dependence and death.

'Barely acknowledged' because, long accustomed to project himself as a self-sufficient figure of power, both as king and father, Lear is probably and simultaneously propelled by a need for love and a denied and buried shame at his inability to give and receive it. Similarly his curiously brief and evasive afterthought 'while we unburdened crawl towards death', in justification for his abdication, smacks of hollow humility. Curiously, for someone who has tied his concept of mimesis so closely to the metaphysical desire to be, Girard has devoted too little attention in his works to that ultimate and universal denial of that desire, namely death. He does briefly allude to the ontological connection between death and violence 'Death is the ultimate violence that can be inflicted on a living being'²⁰ and treats of the anthropological relations between funeral rituals, ancestor worship and the scapegoat mechanism. He has not, however, theorized to any significant depth the extent to which the human consciousness of death, and its repression, can profoundly deflect all human desires and motives, and hence impinge on the most profound aspects of his mimetic vision of sacred violence and the victimage process. In this case, the insights of someone like Ernst Becker²¹ into the psychological and cultural implications of man's foreknowledge and repression of death, as these condition psycho-political power structures, can be usefully combined with Girard's mimetic theory to supplement and strengthen its illumination of Lear's 'darker purpose'.

Certainly, the shifty claim of apparent readiness to face the ultimate powerlessness of decrepitude and death, so hurriedly and suspiciously glossed over by Lear, sits uneasily in a forceful and over determined speech meant to project the 'fast intent' and 'constant will' of his absolute power. His inability to face the threat and the shame of love and mortality, to acknowledge the prospect of the loss of his autonomous power *to be and to love on his own terms* (both love and death demanding some form of self-renunciation), constrain him to indulge in what Girard calls a kind of metaphysical desire for an almost ontological self-sufficiency, re-affirming his threatened self-system by feeding on the desire of others, through what Girard calls a mimesis of appropriation. This is why he craves for and is satisfied with absolute, exclusive and non-differentiated avowals of love, which Goneril and Regan are only too ready to oblige him with. Much later, it is this futile 'omnipotence project' that he bitterly begins to see through in his lamentation: 'They told me I was everything. It's a lie. I am not ague-proof.' (4.vi.103–104) Later still, with the painful humbling insight that comes from suffering and madness, Lear begins to acknowledge his

²⁰ Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, p. 255.

²¹ Ernest Becker, *The Denial of Death*, New York, 1973.

previously denied limits, responding to Gloucester's offer to kiss his hands by the searing answer: 'Let me wipe it first; it smells of mortality.' Another clue to this darker motivation is Lear's emotional allergy and explosive over-reaction to the word 'Nothing', a word that is first used by Cordelia and that later resonates obsessively and symbolically throughout the universe of the play. It certainly triggers in Lear a disproportionate and defensive fury that covers up a deep and deeply denied primal fear of 'self-loss', the 'nothing' of a perceived personal annihilation.

The darkest irony is that Lear masks this refusal to come to terms with the spiritual and emotional renunciations demanded by both love and mortality, under the guise of a 'fake' renunciation of royal powers and responsibilities. His formal shedding of past power is meant to insure and assure his present and future continued use of it. He uses his ceremonial abdication of power and rule to preventively control and make sure of his daughter's filial obligations to him in future, and this might go some way in explaining the apparently irrational absurdity of the love test.

In his efforts to pass off an irresponsible political abdication as a mature 'spiritual' and pragmatic one, Lear shows that he has long initiated and now enters (with a self-punishing blindness) the mimetic fray that precipitates an escalating rivalry which ultimately contaminates and engulfs not only his family and court but eventually his entire kingdom. In both the families of Lear and Gloucester, natural sibling and generational rivalries are exacerbated by the fathers' triggering of Girardian 'internal mediation', not just between their children and political subjects but between these and themselves. Legitimate and differentiating authority in both cases seems hell bent on destabilizing itself. Girard sums up the perverse logic of these self-destructive desires: 'If desire for the desire of others is responsible for Lear's downfall, it must also play the principal role in the crisis of Degree itself, which is not due to anyone in particular but to a propensity for self-destruction identical to this desire.'²²

That 'Desire is death' (sonnet 147) is certainly true in this, if not in all cases. One might ask why, precisely, is such desire for the desire of others so self-destructive? Perhaps because it is ultimately both narcissistic and solipsistic, its self-referential movement failing to make real contact with the other as other, as she is in herself. The object of such desire is reified as a mirror double, reflecting and enhancing your own desire for yourself instead of being treated as a distinct person who can absorb in her own way your desire as gift and return it in gratitude enriched by her difference – her difference being the only given that can exalt your difference, your identity. Otherwise, as in the case of Girardian internal mediation, you are using the other's desire as fuel for your own desire for yourself, violating her essential difference, her identity. In this sense, though in both Shakespeare and Girard the crisis of Degree

²² Girard, *A Theatre of Envy*, p. 183.

tends to have a definite cultural and political connotation in reference to a hierarchical social setting, its more subtle implications extend to epistemological, moral and spiritual dimensions that underpin any social order, and that any 'materialist' critique of the Shakespearean corpus ignores at its own peril. Commenting on the use of the concept of Degree in the notorious Ulysses' speech in *Troilus and Cressida*, Girard specifies that:

... it is no banal variation on the 'Great Chain of Being' that must be fundamentally unchangeable and eternal, failing which it no longer fits the definition of Being in the metaphysical and medieval sense ... The Shakespearean concept of the word "Degree is unprecedented ... Shakespeare has his own conception of what happens when Degree is "withdrawn": "... untune that string, / And hark what discord follows!". All associative forms become warring connotations of opposites. Being nothing but differences, spiritual and material values lose all reality – as do academic degrees, these specifications of Degree.²³

In an ethical sense, this concept of Degree as evaluative differentiation is a function of the ability to see and relate to the genuine otherness, therefore reality, of others. As Tom McAlindon elegantly puts it, it is ultimately this failure of differentiating vision and love that is the seedbed of all the massive failures of justice and humanity in the play, in both personal and political spheres:

Beginning with Lear's tyrannical treatment of both Cordelia and Kent, the play offers a comprehensive and devastating satire on what passes for justice in organised society. But however comprehensive its satiric scope, the play also indicates that the main source of all injustice in society is a loss of human-kindness and imaginative sympathy – of love in the larger sense. Love and love alone begets and sustains a true awareness of the other person as an individual with feelings and rights of her or his own.²⁴

In the kind of internal mediation that Lear is inflicting on those around him, especially Cordelia, he is trying to incorporate their identity or difference and reduce it to the identity of self. He is propelled by an unconscious 'metaphysical desire' to assimilate the 'being' of his model rivals, at their own expense – a form of psychic cannibalism, which for Girard symbolically underlies the dynamics of actual cases of ritual cannibalism in anthropological literature:

The eating of sacrificial flesh, whether animal or human, can be seen in the light of mimetic desire as a veritable cannibalism of the human spirit in which the violence of others is ritually devoured. Mimetic desire, once frustrated, seeks at once to destroy and to absorb the violence incarnated with the model-obstacle.²⁵

²³ *Ibid.*, pp. 161–2.

²⁴ Tom McAlindon, *Shakespeare's Tragic Cosmos*, Cambridge, 1991, p. 168.

²⁵ Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, p. 277.

Hence the recurrence of the ‘cannibalistic’ images in the play as clues to the spiritual and emotional exchanges based on mimetic rivalry between characters. Lear, for instance, ironically transfers his own spiritual violation of Cordelia on to her by making ‘The barbarous Scythian, Or he that makes his generation messes, to gorge his appetite’ closer to his bosom and affections than his ‘sometime daughter.’ The fool echoes and reverses these cannibalistic implications in his ironical witticism; ‘The hedge-sparrow fed the cuckoo so long / That it’s had it head bit off by it young.’ (1.iv.211) Later on Lear himself refers to his ‘pelican’ daughters, comparing their ‘Filial ingratitude’ to cannibalistic behaviour: ‘Is it not as this mouth should tear this hand / For lifting food to’t?’ (3.4.15), when he in turn becomes the victim of their plan to devour his royal prestige. Finally, at the height of the mimetic crisis, when reciprocal violence reaches a monstrous pitch, it is Albany who resorts to cannibalistic images to underline the ultimate consequences of the sacrificial crisis engulfing the kingdom:

If that the heavens do not their visible spirits
Send quickly down to tame these vile offences,
It will come --
Humanity must perforce prey on itself,
Like monsters of the deep. (4.2.46–50)

Lear’s ‘darker purpose’ drives him into a series of double binds and contradictions that are symptomatic not just of his private lacerating self-divisions but of the violent social and political hierarchies that prop up his absolute rule. Both are manifestations of the Crisis of Degree that simmers and erupts in the verbal and almost physical violence that explode in the first scene. Lear’s actions in fact trigger what Girard calls a ‘de-symbolisation process’ of unravelling, not just of his overt intentions and identity, but also of the stability and unity of his kingdom. He embarks on a contradictory course where his unspeakable and denied fears and nightmares come true. He planned to entrust himself to the ‘kind nursery’ of his favourite daughter, yet he cruelly rejects her. He wants to prevent future power struggle among his daughters, yet his kingdom is plunged into near civil war and subjected to invasion by a foreign army. The love he tried to bribe by promise of property turns into ungrateful rejection and systematic humiliation. His fake ceremonial abdication precipitates a *de facto* abdication of royal and fatherly authority and identity which he is forced to undergo in an ordeal of dispossession that reduces him to the ‘nothing’ he so dreads. For Girard, this is the most striking example of ‘the fundamental principle on which the entire theatre of Shakespeare is founded, the self-destruction of authority in all its forms. Power’s deepest yearning is to abdicate.’²⁶

²⁶ Girard, *A Theatre of Envy*, p. 184.

The double bind of mimetic desire

According to Girard, mimetic desire for the same object inevitably leads to rivalry and conflict, and the violence that is unleashed spreads by contagion to engulf all members of a family or community. Initially, Goneril and Regan imitate and feed their father's mimetic desires, lured by the promise of rich land and power. Their political ambitions and sibling rivalry are exacerbated by their imitation of Lear's reduction of love to a manipulable calculus of power and property. In their case, imitation certainly turns out to be the most insincere form of flattery. Their inflated language mirrors his inflated desire for self-confirmation through flattery. Regan even tries to outdo her elder sister in mimetic rhetoric, betraying the seeds of their future murderous rivalry over Edmund: 'In my true heart / I find she names my very deed of love; / Only she comes too short . . .' (1.i.70–71)

It is Cordelia, however, who spoils the game by rejecting the mimetic bait dangled by Lear. She refuses to participate in the love contest, intuitively aware of its mimetic dangers and inauthenticity. She short-circuits the mimetic current by making a desperate and unsuccessful effort to explode the rhetorical balloon of acquisitive mimesis, first by opting for silence and then for plain language as indexes of the real. She stands up for the truth of 'degree', in the sense of moral, cultural and generational distinctions that are being violently swept away in a mimetic frenzy. She tries to substitute a 'good' mimesis of reciprocity based on respect and recognition of otherness for the mimesis of appropriation raging around her. For this she earns Lear's fury.

In the hall of mirrors that is Lear's court, the rivalry between France and Burgundy is another example of mimetic and contagious competition. One might be tempted to ask whether the mimetic rivalry between them, stage-managed by Lear himself, is also used by him to enhance his own 'darker purpose': the more they desire Cordelia, the more they stimulate Lear's own mimetic desire for her. Burgundy readily imitates the desire of Lear and the elder sisters for 'love' as a commodity in a calculus of debt and exchange. He naturally follows Lear in rejecting Cordelia, once her 'price is fallen.' France, like Cordelia, resists the mimetic contagion and utters the words which illuminate the whole reality or rather unreality of Lear's 'darker purpose' with its loss of crucial distinctions:

Love's not love
When it is mingled with regards that stands
Aloof from th' entire point.

He acts from a counter-mimetic impulse that sees an enhanced value in Cordelia through the very fact of her rejection, sensing the violent logic behind her scapegoating and expressing his resistance in the contradictory language of paradox that subverts the language of inflation and conformity used by her accusers:

Fairest Cordelia, that art most rich, being poor,
 Most choice, forsaken, and most loved, despised,
 Thee and thy virtues here I seize upon. (250-253)

What is the nexus between mimetic desire, property and power in the first scene? As already shown, in dangling before his daughters the promise of property and power to enhance his own desirability, Lear is goading them on in what Girard terms an 'acquisitive' mimesis and eventual rivalry not only with each other but with himself. The stakes for this mimetic contest, however, are not just the 'rule, Interest of territory, cares of state' 'power, pre-eminence, and all the large effects that troop on majesty' as Lear thinks. They also include the 'the name and all th'additions to a king', which he, however, wants to reserve for himself. Now prestige, as Simone Weil has shown, is at the heart of all forms of power: 'Prestige has no bounds and its satisfaction always involves the infringement of someone else's prestige or dignity. And prestige is inseparable from power.'²⁷ Girard detects a similar order of ideas in the Greek concept of *Kudos* found in the *Iliad*, a text from which Weil also derived her insight into the connection between force and prestige:

Kudos is best defined in terms of semi-divine prestige, of mystical election attained by military victory . . . Man can only enjoy this condition only fleetingly, and always at the expense of other men.²⁸

Lear wants to retain the royal prestige and sacred authority that are inextricably tied to power and property while giving the latter away. This is a classic case of what Girard, borrowing the phrase from Gregory Bateson, calls a double bind. In essence, subject and model are caught in a contradictory and violent situation where they are telling each other: 'Imitate me – Don't imitate me'. Girard defines the double bind as a 'contradictory double imperative, or rather a whole network of contradictory imperatives [that] is an extremely common phenomenon. In fact, it is so common that it might be said to form the basis of all human relationships.'²⁹ In Girardian theory, when the subject and his model at a certain stage of the mimetic crisis lose their initial interest in the original object of desire, they start seeing each other as an obstacle, or *scandalon*. They become doubles of each other, their major interest being the mimetic appropriation of each other's being. The original acquisitive desire is transformed into a kind of metaphysical desire for the rival's perceived self-sufficiency and prestige. In offering himself as a mimetic model to his daughters, Lear is unwittingly ensuring that once he has handed over to them the power and property 'the sway, the revenue and execution of the rest', they will go after his royal prestige,

²⁷ George A. Panichas (ed.), *Simone Weil Reader*, Rhode Island, 1999, p. 284.

²⁸ Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, p. 152.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 147.

perceived as a threat to their dream of absolute power. This they promptly proceed to do by the end of the first scene, justifying their preventive measures to neutralize and appropriate his sovereign prestige by signalling his rashness of character and the 'unruly waywardness' of old age: 'If our father carry authority with such disposition as he bears, this last surrender of his will but offend us.' They have taken their first step on the road that will lead to Lear's transformation into chief scapegoat

The final conversation of Goneril and Regan in this first scene, therefore, already contains ominous hints of the coming dynastic rivalry between Lear and themselves. Hidden from him, it is clearly anticipated by their more far sighted realpolitick. Lear, their model of imitated desire, is already seen as a political rival, a potential obstacle to their bid for total power. The stake is his sacred authority. They criticize the way he carries authority and hint they must do something 'in the heat' to curb 'this last surrender of his will'. This is the beginning of their calculated and cold-blooded dismantling of the aura of royal prestige which Lear insists on retaining, through a systematic humiliation and degradation of the symbolic vestiges of his authority and identity, shown in their treatment of his hundred knights, his messenger, his fool, even his requests for a meeting.

Contagious violence in *King Lear*

To briefly recapitulate the argument so far: by projecting himself as both object and model of desire Lear objectifies himself as much as he objectifies his relationship with his daughters and his subjects, tying such relationships to the calculus of property, power and prestige. Both as king and father he abdicates from his role 'as model of external mediation that he should be for both his children and his subjects'³⁰ He therefore becomes a model of internal mediation (since the same desire for personal and political prestige comes to be imitated by both model and subjects) and he is quickly transformed into a dangerous rival for his daughters once they are handed the power. They quickly become what Girard calls his 'monstrous doubles', bent on eliminating him as *scandalon* or model-obstacle and scapegoat of their mimetic ambition. This explains their systematic humiliation of Lear in reducing the number of his knights to zero and denuding him of his royal and paternal dignity. They have learned their father's habit of reasoning 'the need' for such things only to well, their cold calculation of his retinue being a monstrous version of his initial calculus of desire in the first scene. R. A. Foakes points out the reciprocal roots of the violence between Lear and his daughters, claiming that the latter's cruel deed 'grow out of the dynamics of the play, and though they shock, they do not surprise, because they represent an extension of that licence to violence that Lear had established by his

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 181.

own conduct and that of his followers.’³¹ Lear comes close to an ambiguous, half-acknowledgement of this complicity in their mutual violence when he compares Goneril to a boil in his flesh, though typically the metaphor of disease tends to mitigate his responsibility. The reciprocal violence is further shown when in their eyes, his ‘riotous’ ways, and fulminating curses transform him into *their* monstrous double, source of domestic riot and potential civil disorder. Reversing their generational roles, they start viewing and treating him as their childish ward, a senile nuisance whose second childhood deprives him of any adult rights or self-determination. Finally it is not just the presence of his hundred knights, but also his continued existence that comes to be seen as a challenge and the real threat to their power base. When Gloucester hurries back to warn Kent that Lear and his followers are in danger of being murdered, we realize that conflictual mimesis has reached the point of breaking the ultimate taboos, parricide and regicide.

A similar process can be traced through the sub-plot in which Gloucester’s mimetic desire for his sons’ desire in terms of unquestioned loyalty and love hides his denied shame and deep anxieties about his claims to paternal authority and social prestige. These repressed fears he blurts out in his pained uncertainty about Edgar’s alleged treachery: ‘I would unstate myself to be in a due resolution’. In making light of his adultery and pretending with a defensive and jocular embarrassment that he is now ‘brazed to it’, he is unwittingly calling attention to his failure to come to terms (in both a moral and biological sense) with ‘the living issue of it’, personified in Edmund. As Stanley Cavell has aptly put it:

He recognizes the moral claim upon himself, as he says twice, to ‘acknowledge’ the bastard; but all this means to him is that he acknowledge that he has a bastard for a son. He does not acknowledge *him*, as a son or a person, with his feelings of illegitimacy or being cast out. *That* is something Gloucester ought to be ashamed of; his shame is itself more shameful than his one piece of licentiousness.³²

Like Lear who fails to see Cordelia for what she is as a distinct person, Gloucester fails to see Edmund as a personal other. Both cases involve a loss of distinctions on the spiritual and emotional planes that correspond to and help precipitate the loss of differentiation in the political and cultural dimensions. By fomenting mimetic rivalry, they at once subvert their hierarchical authority while defending it violently by creating their own scapegoats. Lear’s humiliation of his daughters and his disowning of Cordelia is paralleled by Gloucester’s shamefaced distancing of Edmund and his rash persecution of Edgar. Both are betraying the violent fissures and contradictions of a sacred political and institutional order that, like most human and cultural orders

³¹ R. A. Foakes, *Shakespeare and Violence*, Cambridge, 2003, p. 148.

³² Cavell, *Disowning Knowledge*, p. 48.

in the Girardian perspective, is ultimately founded and, in many instances, unjustly maintained on the 'legitimized' marginalization or 'expulsion' of victims.

Gloucester breaks his marriage vows and avoids the consequent responsibility and shame, all the time considering himself a firm upholder of the patriarchal system and paternal authority, both resting on the twin pillars of legitimacy and primogeniture. Moreover, he cavalierly claims that 'there was good sport in [Edmund's] making, and the whoreson must be acknowledged' and that he loves his sons equally. Yet he is sending Edmund for another nine year spell abroad, 'expelling' with him his shame in order to retain his paternal and social prestige. Once more we witness the double bind situation which we see occurring later in the Lear family dynamics. Gloucester is sending his bastard son the contradictory message of 'Imitate me – Don't imitate me', fomenting mimetic rivalry not just between siblings but also and eventually between them and himself. Edmund responds quite literally with a mimetic vengeance.

Once again external mediation is transformed into internal mediation, giving rise to the crisis of Degree that Gloucester can describe quite succinctly without being able to diagnose his own contribution to it:

These late eclipses in the sun and moon portend no good to us. Though the wisdom of nature can reason it thus and thus, yet nature finds itself scourged by the sequent effects; love cools, friendship falls off, brothers divide. In cities, mutinies; in countries discord; in palaces treason; and the bond cracked 'twixt son and father . . . the King falls from bias of nature . . . We have seen the best of our time. Machinations, hollowness, treachery, and all ruinous disorder follow us disquietly to our graves. (1.ii.102–117)

He mythically projects it onto the behaviour of others acting under the baleful influence of the stars. Edmund's energetic celebration of Nature's amoral vitality (1.ii.1–22) can once more be seen as a 'monstrous' imitation of his father's 'good fun' and alleged equality of affection, but it barely hides his raging and sinister resentment of his brother's legitimacy and of his father's beliefs in the 'customs' and 'curiosity of nations'. Later on he will make contemptuous fun of his father's astrological beliefs as self-serving superstition, yet his own vision of Nature 'red in tooth and claw', where right is might and cunning is, in Girardian terms, yet another mystification of the crisis of Degree that ultimately will demand its scapegoats for its resolution. In Edmund's book, these will be his brother and eventually his father. He will deprive them both of property, status and prestige. Mimetic rivalry makes him desire what he denigrates. One can see Edmund as the major catalyst of the 'undifferentiating' process in the tragedy.

In both main and sub-plot therefore, *King Lear* combines what Girard calls 'the two major domains of the mimetic crisis that we regard as inseparable'³³ in a tragedy

³³ Girard, *A Theatre of Envy*, p. 181.

– the family and the polis, the hero and the community. The map over which Lear imperiously and ceremoniously traces his division of the kingdom, is an apt visual and dramatic symbol of all the lacerating divisions that are revealed in the play, starting with Lear's own self-division concealed in his 'darker purpose'. The map's stylized abstractions of territories and arbitrarily drawn lines delimiting frontiers props up Lear's deluded belief in his control over space, time and human relations, as well as his moral blindness to the reality, not just of the true nature of his daughters, but even more of the 'poor naked wretches' that populate but never appear on the map which represents those 'bounds. . . . With shadowy forests and with champains riched . . .' Embracing as it does all the facets of the 'crisis of Degree', the personal, familial, political, and natural or cosmic, *King Lear* is perhaps rightly considered by Girard to be the most comprehensive tragic exploration of it in the Shakespearean oeuvre.

The Crisis of Degree in King Lear

Whether or not it constitutes a separate theme, the crisis of Degree pervades all the plays of Shakespeare, and we can easily understand why. Drama requires intense human conflict; human conflict in Shakespeare takes the form of mimetic rivalry; mimetic rivalry is the product of internal mediation; internal mediation does not normally occur until a society becomes 'undifferentiated'.³⁴

According to Girard, as the reciprocal violence within a community worsens and spreads by contagion, it precipitates a deepening crisis of Degree which 'erases all manner of differences: familial, cultural, biological and natural'.³⁵ In *King Lear*, the disintegration of these four differentiating categories is manifested throughout in plot, character interaction and the metaphorical structure of the play. The violent loss of differences is seen in the breaking of family bonds, the collapse of any semblance of legitimate authority and order, the blurring of distinctions between human, animal and the fiendish, and the sickening plunge into chaos of the worlds of man and nature leading to the apocalyptic denouement of the last scene.

The multifaceted nature of the crisis is synthesized early on the play, in almost programmatic fashion, in the prose speech of Gloucester quoted earlier (1.ii.102–117). Significantly, Gloucester places civil order in the past and stresses the fact that the crisis has been an ongoing one, culminating in Lear's division of the kingdom and the rejection of Cordelia and Kent.

The crisis of Degree is quite clearly evidenced throughout *King Lear* in the breaking of the most intimate and elementary family bonds – paternal, filial, sibling, and marital. The unjust treatment meted out by Lear and Gloucester to their children,

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 174.

³⁵ Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, p. 166.

both the 'good' and the 'bad ones' is too patent. Lear's rash and violent demands places Cordelia in an impossible situation where she is constrained to manifest the pole of measurable 'duty' rather than that of incalculable affection in verbalizing her filial bond, which ideally should comprise both. The result is that Lear repudiates the daughter who truly loved him, and 'on whose kind nursery' he thought 'to set [his] rest'. The hard-worded farewell between Cordelia and her sisters in is an anticipation of the civil war that they will wage on each other when she returns leading a foreign army to liberate her father and his kingdom. As for Goneril and Regan, once their common scapegoat Lear is sufficiently neutralized, and they start sharing the same object of desire Edmund, their mimetic rivalry turns murderous and they are ready to eliminate each other as mutually hateful 'monstrous doubles' of each other.

Since such family bonds, along with social roles, are the roots of personal identity, their betrayal leads to a crisis of identity, both private and public, in some of the main characters. In Lear's case, this loss of self goes as far as mental breakdown and madness. Goneril's volt face in her treatment of him starts him on the road of self-questioning: 'Are you our daughter? . . . Does any here know me? . . . Who is it that can tell me who I am?' These melodramatic interrogations are early seismic signs of the initial dissolution of his personality that passes through irrepressible hysteria and culminates in the cataclysm of madness, the ultimate state of personal 'undifferentiation.' Correlatively, Gloucester's original betrayal of his marriage vows has its distant but not unrelated reverberations in Edmund's forged letter with its reversals and subversions of generational and paternal authority: 'I begin to find an idle and hard bondage in the oppression of aged tyranny who sways not as it hath power but as it is suffered.' (1.ii.48–51) Here familial bonds are transformed into hierarchical bondage. Eventually, driven by mimetic rivalry and envy, the bastard supplants first his legitimate brother then his father. Edmund, effectively excluded from all family and social status, feels no affection or loyalty to anyone except himself – he becomes the breaker par excellence of all family bonds.

The near total loss and confusion of any substantial form of familial differences is highlighted when the father – son relationship is grotesquely parodied in the offer of Cornwall to supplant the 'traitor' Gloucester as Edmund's father figure: 'I will lay trust upon thee, and thou shall find a dearer father in my love.' (3.v.23) Again the aberration of confounded family roles is repeatedly shown in the methods that the strict and 'puritanical' Goneril and Regan use to 'mother' and discipline their father as an unruly child. This situation provides rich fodder for the fool's caustic digs; 'I have used it, nuncle, e'er since thou madest thy daughters thy mothers / for when thou gavest them the rod and puttdest down thine own breeches . . .' (1.iv.168) The initially naïve Edgar, hunted by his own father as a wanted criminal, has to survive by assuming the protective identity of a mad tramp, since his real one has been

practically erased: 'Poor Turlygod! Poor Tom! / That's something yet; Edgar I nothing am.' (2.iii.20) The conflict between Edmund and Edgar is a dramatic representation of the archetypal theme of 'enemy brothers', which Girard considers a universal literary and mythic sign of mimetic rivalry and the presence of the sacrificial crisis:

We instinctively tend to regard the fraternal relationship as an affectionate one; yet the mythological, historical, and literary examples that spring to mind tell a different story: Cain and Abel, Jacob and Esau, Eteocles and Polyneice, Romulus and Remus, Richard the Lionheart and John Lackland.³⁶

In the final ritual combat between the two, the 'good' Edgar has to justify his innocence and redress injustice through fratricide, before he goes on to become the new ruler of the 'gored state', inaugurating a new dispensation, a fresh cycle of cultural order founded on the 'sacred violence' involving a number of surrogate victims.

The disintegration of Lear's personality into raging hysteria and eventual madness is strictly related to the dissolution of his kingdom into cultural and political chaos. In Girardian perspective, both are manifestations of the overall mimetic crisis that is tragically and ironically sparked by absolute authority itself through what Girard calls the 'most profound and mysterious aspect of Lear, the self-destruction of Degree'.³⁷ Though it needs hardly be remarked that Lear is by no stretch of the imagination an evil man, his absolute power verges on tyranny, especially when his subliminal mimetic games lay him wide open to the one of the greatest dangers of those in power – flattery. This political truth was a commonplace in Tudor political theory, endlessly reiterated in quotes and glosses derived from both Stoic and Christian literature. Lear's abdication as king and father in the first scene, lays bare a massive failure of sovereign justice that has fearful repercussions in both spiritual and political dimensions. As a result, 'throughout the kingdom, a general inversion of all values occurs that systematically exalts such scoundrels as Edmund in the place of their more deserving brothers'.³⁸ The loving Cordelia is disowned while her callous sisters are rewarded with power and property. The feudal bond of mutual protection and service between King and subject is subverted when the honest Kent incurs exile for challenging Lear's authority in order to show him his loyalty, much as Cordelia has to do in her quieter way in order to show her love. Goneril and Regan methodically dismantle Lear's royal prestige and fatherly authority, answering his verbal violence with a series of humiliating manoeuvres – reducing his retinue to zero, inciting Oswald to disrespect him, ignoring his letters and summons, stocking his royal messenger,

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 61.

³⁷ Girard, *A Theatre of Envy*, p. 183.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 182.

locking him out in the wild stormy heath, and finally plotting parricide and regicide. All cultural codes of civilised behaviour are annulled. Gloucester's torture and blinding is an outrageous violation of the ancient and universal hospitality ethic as well as a sadistic parody of the rule of law and patriotic duty

The rebellion of Cornwall's servant against his master is a particularly striking example of how a full-blown crisis of Degree creates a topsy-turvy world in which bonds of service and loyalty have to be broken in order to be observed: 'But better service have I never done you / Than now to bid you hold.' (3.vii.73) This attitude is mirrored and inverted in Oswald's obedient loyalty to Goneril that, unlike the insubordination of Kent or that of Cornwall's servant, is a form of opportunistic and self-serving duty. Kent in fact compares Oswald to the 'rats' that 'oft bite the holy cords atwain / which are t'intrince to unloose.' These cameo scenes are part of the tragic mosaic that conjures up an apocalyptic scenario of a widespread crisis of Degree during which 'the distinctions or differences that define all human institutions decline to their confounding contraries, and all ethical, religious, social, cultural, and political life comes to an end'.³⁹

The mimetic crisis in the play takes on national dimensions when we are told about rumours of 'likely wars toward 'twixt the Dukes of Cornwall and Albany.' But the portrayal of the sacrificial crisis reaches the height of poetic and dramatic intensity in Lear's mad denunciations of the violence, injustice and corruption that he comes to recognise by being subjected to them as surrogate victim. His discovery (O, I have ta'en too little care of this) of the 'poor naked wretches' in his kingdom, the chilling grotesquery of the mock trial scene, the bitter insight into the 'great image of authority: a dog's obeyed in office' or into that of the beadle lusting after the whore he is lashing for the same sin – these are the apocalyptic images that reveal a whole kingdom plunged into near total and chaotic sacrificial crisis. The fact that the vision comes to Lear in a state of abjection and madness, itself the ultimate subjective condition of 'undifferentiation', points in the direction of Girard's claims about Shakespeare's special insight, in this above all his other tragedies, into the 'sacred character of the king – that is, his identity with the victim', and therefore the centrality of the scapegoat mechanism in his tragic vision.

The preponderant presence of animal imagery in *King Lear* has been exhaustively studied by many critics such as Bradley, Spurgeon, Holloway, and Roberts and need not be examined here in detail. Viewed through the Girardian perspective of the mimetic crisis, however, it assumes even greater thematic and structural significance. The whole metaphorical resonance of the animal images, in its rhythmic intensification in the course of the action, charts and enhances the radical questioning of human

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 175.

nature precipitated by the crisis of Degree, an issue that lies at the heart of the tragedy itself. Lear's initial self-identification in his furious reaction to Kent: 'Come not between the dragon and his wrath' contains the seed for all the later blurring of distinctions between the animal, the human and the monstrous that will proliferate and explode in the violent dissolution of such differences in Act 3. For Girard, 'this loss of distinction between man and beast is always linked to violence'.⁴⁰ The vituperative heaping of animal accolades on his daughters by Lear does not merely register his angry shock and hurt at their cruelty, but mimetically construes them as his 'monstrous' doubles, grotesque and unnatural perpetrators of the same violence which he can only enact verbally and impotently.

Lear's initial insults to Goneril as 'detestable kite' with a 'wolfish visage' soon escalate into the paroxysm of helpless rage that equates all women with the 'fitchew', 'soiled horse' and the monstrous 'centaurs'. (4.vi.124) The cold cruelty of Goneril and Regan in sending him out into the stormy heath in turn reduces Lear to the level of being 'comrade to the wolf and the owl'. Earlier the humiliated Lear had anticipated this kind of human degradation in his plea: 'Allow not nature more than nature needs – Man's life is cheap as beast's.' The whole phantasmagoria of dissolution of differences reaches its climax in Lear's vision of Poor Tom, of whom he asks 'Is man no more than this?' The categories of man and beast are finally conflated in Lear's mad and lucid vision of 'unaccommodated man', 'the poor, bare forked animal', 'the thing itself'. (3.iv.104) Here the human image, distorted and violated beyond any civilized recognition, is finally dissolved in a kind of anticipated Darwinian state of nature that marks the collapse of all natural and cultural distinctions. This relentless process of 'undifferentiation' reaches its tragic, almost absurd apotheosis in Lear's final heart-rending question 'Why should a dog, a horse, a rat have life / And thou no breath at all?' Madness itself, mimicked by the fool, feigned by Edgar, and all too real in Lear, is shown to be the ultimate form of the 'biological' and 'spiritual' loss of distinctions in rational man, since it is the very loss of the ultimate human capacity to make them at all.

The play also registers the mimetic crisis through other tropes such as that of the confusion between the human and the fiendish. Albany accuses Goneril of being a devil in human form; 'See thyself, devil! / Proper deformity shows not in the fiend / So horrid as in woman.' (2.iv.59–60) Similarly, Edgar's pretence of being persecuted and possessed by evil spirits is another metaphorical, 'carnavalesque' instance of the violent blending of the human and the diabolical in a grotesque display that marks once again the loss of normal, natural differences characteristic of the crisis of Degree. Finally, the same loss of distinctions is adumbrated in the gender and role inversions

⁴⁰ Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, p. 138.

that can be seen in the aggressive 'male' domination shown by Goneril and Regan vis-à-vis their husbands. Goneril accuses Albany, her 'mild husband', 'the milk-livered man', of lacking manhood, which she has to make up for by assuming herself the missing masculine and military virtues 'I must change arms at home and give the distaff / into my husband's hands.' (4.ii.27–28)

In the storm scenes of Acts 3 and 4, Lear projects on the canvas of chaotic nature his own conflicting desires, reflecting on an individual plane what Girard sees as the symbolical transference of the crisis of Degree caused by reciprocal violence onto images of 'storm, floods, plagues',⁴¹ typical of a community in the throes of a sacrificial crisis. In this sense, the storm is the visual and dramatic symbol of the general loss of differentiation that marks all relations between men, nature and the gods during the crisis of Degree. This is amply seen in Lear's chaotic images of confusion in the boundaries between land and sea, sky and earth that dominate his jeremiads in Act 3. Violence projected and externalised is in fact the typical rhythm of the play's tragic action, where we see the characters projecting their innermost hopes and fears outwardly, not just in their interpersonal relations but also in their attitudes to nature and its gods, as Snyder has clearly seen:

... it gradually becomes apparent that images of the gods in *Lear* have a close subjective relation to the characters who offer them. Kind and protective themselves, Kent and Cordelia see the gods as kind and protective. Edgar and Albany, who value justice, see them as just. For Lear in his anger at his elder daughters, they are wrathful and punishing, but after he is reborn into humility, they smile on self-sacrifice. For Gloucester after he has sheltered Lear from the storm, the gods are kind; when he despairs they are wantonly cruel; after he is brought from despair to acceptance they are 'ever-gentle'.⁴²

It is seen in Gloucester's attribution of the kingdom's trouble to planetary influence and Kent's explanation of the good and evil offspring in the Lear family to the stars. Wild nature, evoked in images of heath, storm, lightning, fire and flood, is used as a metaphor for contagious violence; the more man tries to contain and master it (Lear's illusion), the more it dominates him.⁴³ The stormy heath becomes the locus of expelled, marginalised scapegoats, a liminal context where all political and personal differences and identities are blurred. In it all hierarchical distinctions are levelled, since king, nobleman, beggar, and fool are all expelled victims. In the mock trial scene, the most elementary distinctions are obliterated, such as those between sanity and madness, justice and injustice, the human and the animal, the tragic and the grotesque.

Lear's projection of reciprocal human violence onto the Gods as his avengers is paralleled by Gloucester's vision of their sadism: 'As flies to wanton boys are we to the gods / They kill us for their sport.' (4.i.36–37) Both can be partly seen as evasions

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 31.

⁴² Susan Snyder, *The Comic Matrix in Shakespeare's Tragedies*, Princeton, 1979, p. 174.

⁴³ Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, pp. 266–7.

of personal guilt and shame. But Lear's demented invocations to nature and its gods to punish his tormentors and redress his disproportionately unjust afflictions also imply a germinating awareness of the fundamental need for human and divine justice. It is a Job-like cry of every human being to be treated justly and not be hurt which, as Simone Weil has shown, is the basis of all human dignity and civilised existence. His magnificent wild cry 'I am more sinned against than sinning' expresses not just a real self-pitying plea but also an equally real insight into the plight of the sacred scapegoat, and through him of all victimized humanity: 'None, I say none doth sin.' This painful experience of denied justice that reduces Lear to the state of unaccommodated man leads to his physical empathy with the plight of the disinherited and the wretched of the earth, marking the initial stage of his temporary self-recovery. It all starts with Lear's identification with the shared bodily plight of Poor Tom and the Fool: 'The art of our necessity is strange and can make vile things precious'. These 'vile things' go beyond the intended hovel to include the excluded and vilified Cordelia, mad tramps, and fools – the wretched of the earth who are the king-forsaken scapegoats of the rich and powerful. Lear's despoliation and madness transform vision and valuation. The encounter with degradation and shame has liberating and morally curative aspects in both personal and political spheres. Significantly, Lear's changing attitude to the storm raging outside and inside him reflects the *reductio ad absurdum* of his religious and political 'idolatry'. First he sees it as the scourge of the Gods and their retributive justice, supporting his sacred royalty and vindicating his moral and political rights. Then it becomes a consolatory distraction from the lacerating storm inside him and finally it is a sign of nature's injustice in league with human evil to reduce him and his companions in misfortune to the state of 'poor bare forked animals'. In the storm scenes we witness Lear's desperate rearguard defence of his ego-system, the inner struggle in his 'single state of man' between moral vision and blindness. As expelled scapegoat, he imitates by identification the condition of his kingdom's dispossessed, personified in his maddened imagination by the 'philosopher' and Theban – 'the poor mad Tom'. This need for self-recognition is evident in his desperate effort to shed off his clothes: 'Off, off you lendings.'

'Upon such sacrifices . . .' The scapegoat mechanism in *King Lear*

The acceleration of rivalry induced by Lear's 'love test' leads to an explosion of verbal, emotional and moral violence in the first scene. This initial outburst will spiral downwards into a near universal orgy of reciprocal violence and death by the end of the play. His obviously disproportionate fury against Cordelia is only comprehensible when seen through the distorting dynamics of mimetic desire operating throughout. It is an open secret that she is his favourite daughter, and deep down and in his own way he loves her most and craves most deeply for her love. Yet

his is a love driven not by a self-transcending insight into her objective virtues or affections, but by an outrageous (and intrinsically violent) desire for her exclusive desire of him. When she resists the mimetic charade, in defence of a truly differentiated love for him, he finds it unbearable. Her rejection of his 'sick' modelling of desire, which does not see her as she is but as he wants her to be in his distorted dream of an absolute love that can confirm his metaphysical desire to be, he misinterprets as a rejection of his love: 'so young and so untender'. He responds by angrily rejecting her, making explicit the implied violence of his dark project. Cordelia clearly finds herself in an impossible situation. Her initial intention to 'love and be silent', issuing in the 'nothing' of her first answer, is too subtle and delicate for the self-alienated condition of Lear's mind and feelings. In her plain and painful way, she then tries to explain the natural bond of love that differentiates truthfully what Girard would call their interindividual relations. Induced, perhaps even forced to sound cold and sober, even prim and proper by the surrounding miasma of mimetic rivalry and surreal flattery, she distinguishes between love of father and husband, generational gratitude from mimetic fawning, true speech from deceptive rhetoric. She even makes a desperate effort of adequation to Lear's reductive calculus of love by using quantitative metaphors which she hopes might break through his present understanding or lack of it:

Haply when I shall wed,
That lord whose hand must take my plight shall carry
Half my love with him, half my care and duty.
Sure I shall never marry like my sisters,
To love my father all. (1.i.100–105)

The slight but unmistakable note of icy polemic in her last comment shows that even Cordelia can't escape a minimal contagion by the reciprocal violence that mimetic rivalry has brewed. But from registering this forced ring of harshness and stubbornness in her utterance of a vital truth to seeing Cordelia as guilty of her own rejection, as some critics have done, is to blame the victim with a vengeance. It is to accuse her for not being able to provide, given the circumstances, what Lear is demanding – the impossible. Girard would perhaps ironically point out that such critics are themselves drawn into the mimetic vortex that would ensure the unanimity of collective violence by convincing themselves of the guilt of the victim.

In Lear's violent diatribe, his invocation of the most sacred sanctions in order to 'demonize' and disown Cordelia, smacks of a form of ritual scapegoating. He transfers all his repressed fears and raging shame about mortal limits onto her because she has inadvertently questioned his assay at a kind of narcissistic omnipotence. Cordelia's 'scapegoat' status in this scene is hinted at in the adumbration of Christ-like rejection, with its Biblical echoes of the cornerstone

rejected by the builders, suggested by France's words when he finds her all the more precious for being rejected:

Fairest Cordelia, thou art most rich being poor,
Most choice, forsaken, and most loved, despised,
Thee and thy virtues here I seize upon.
Be it lawful I take up what's cast away. (250–254)

Later on in the play, her return as a kind of redeeming figure of love reveals her symbolic status of 'pharmakos' in Lear's imagination, though not in the play's overall economy. Her death, with that of Lear himself as we shall see later on, in fact challenges the whole sacrificial system that requires the scapegoat mechanism to maintain or restore order. She is, however 'sacralized' for Lear as a heavenly spirit and her forgiving love is the spiritual 'medicinal herb' that temporarily returns him back to sanity and a revived identity.

Kent is also scapegoated as truth teller in the face of Lear's mimetic self-deceptions. He at first refuses to succumb to the contagion of mimetic rivalry let loose by Lear and inevitably becomes the target and victim of the king's rage. He does, however, for temperamental reasons, fall for the reciprocal violence that is unleashed by Lear's precipitation of the crisis of Degree. In this he displays what Girard calls 'the opposition of symmetrical patterns',⁴⁴ one of most characteristic traits of the art of tragedy that shows how contagious violence turns antagonists into each other's doubles. His is the forced and angry insubordination of the honest indignant servant who sees his master acting unjustly, and retaliates by an equivalent and violent fury of his own:

Thinks't thou that duty shall have dread to speak
when power to flattery bows? To plainness honour's bound when
Majesty stoops to folly. (147–149)

The underlying violence of Lear's rule surfaces when he physically threatens Kent and has to be restrained by the other lords. Kent's rebellion is another symptom of the loss of differentiation, in this case that between king and loyal subject that characterizes the full blown crisis of Degree. The exile of Kent is one in a series that sees more or less innocent victims being expelled from the community, starting with the socially sanctioned marginalization of Edmund, and going on to hit in turn Cordelia, Kent, Edgar, the Fool, Gloucester and finally Lear himself abandoned to the wild heath and storm. In Girardian theory, the social order and power structure is built on the victimage mechanism, and the deeper a community plunges into the

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 44.

sacrificial crisis, the greater its need for surrogate victims as a way of conserving itself

The king as supreme scapegoat

The play offers a complex series of permutations on the underlying dynamics of the scapegoat mechanism. According to Linda Woodbridge,⁴⁵ the scapegoating process is based on three fundamental operations, starting with a split within the psychic or spiritual state of the protagonist, making him self-alienated from his deepest needs and fears. This detached or shadow part of him is then transferred onto the other, who is demonised as possessing all the disowned qualities. Finally in a kind of psychological counterpart to the physical law of the conservation of energy, the transferred evil is considered as indestructible. The scapegoat rite itself unfolds in two movements, in which social evil is first transferred to a selected victim who is then eliminated by expulsion and eventual destruction. In the Girardian economy of the victimage mechanism, the sacrificial victim is transformed into a consecrated figure of Sacred Violence which is in turn deified as a vast power to be periodically appeased on the periphery of the Polis, the ever present and ever dangerous Wild beyond the margins of the civilized existence. In Girard's words:

Once the outer limits of the community have been crossed we enter the domain of savage sacredness, which recognizes neither boundaries nor limits. This is the realm not only of the gods and supernatural creatures, of monsters and the dead, but also of nature itself (insofar as it remains untouched by culture), of the cosmos and of all the rest of humanity.⁴⁶

Lear is thus first expelled by his daughters into the wild as a source of anarchy and chaos, then targeted to be killed so that they can appropriate completely his royal prestige. Similarly Gloucester is blinded and expelled as a traitor for his loyalty to Lear then a prize is put over his head, once again to neutralize and assimilate the potentially destabilizing political prestige that may accrue to him from people's pity of his plight, as Regan correctly surmises. Again, both of them first scapegoat others (Cordelia and Edgar), then are in turn scapegoated themselves, exemplifying Girard's insight into the rhythm of the alternation of roles characteristic of tragic protagonists in the reciprocity of violence that engulfs them all. In fact, one of the most striking and repeated motifs in *King Lear* is the almost universal tendency in the characters to displace and transfer their inner conflicts outside them not just on other characters but also on nature and the Gods. This blame game can be seen as an individual manifestation of the mechanism of collective scapegoating, which Girard attributes to the fundamental *méconnaissance* that props up sacred violence in myth and ritual:

⁴⁵Linda Woodbridge, *The Scythe of Saturn*, Illinois, 1994, pp. 95–107.

⁴⁶Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, p. 266.

Now we see why the sacrificial crisis is never described in myth and ritual as it really is. There human violence is envisioned as issuing from some force exterior to man. It is one with religion, as well as with those forces that really do emanate from without human will: death, illness, natural phenomena.⁴⁷

In this scenario, even Edgar's demonology or pretended possession can be viewed as a conscious and subjective form of this mechanism of collective projection onto a supernatural source of violence, as Girard has pointed out in his comments on ritual possession: 'The condition called "possession" is in fact but one particular interpretation of the monstrous double . . . Possession is an extreme form of alienation in which the subject totally absorbs the desires of another.'⁴⁸ When to Lear's mad question: 'What is your study?' he answers 'How to prevent the fiend and kill the virmin' (3.iv.151–152), Edgar may be partly using ritual role-play to 'exorcise' latent violent feelings towards his internalized 'monstrous doubles' (brother and father), projecting them onto his 'foul fiends'.

Practically all the strife and divisions that manifest in the course of the tragic action are embodied in embryonic form in the Lear of the first scene. Both as man and ruler, Lear is deeply alienated, unable to keep the two sides of his identity, the private and the public, in any kind of harmonious and precarious balance. Internally, he is torn between two strong and opposing desires, clashing in civil strife within 'his little world of man.' First, there is his obscure desire for self-renunciation and spiritual growth that is forced on him by his genuine need for love and his fear of the impotence brought on by old age and death. Second, there is his desire to hold on to his forceful ego that extorts love and respect from others and demands them on his own terms of power and calculation. Externally, his role as king involves the exercise of political justice based on prudence, yet his inner conflicts blind him to the necessary ethical discriminations or differences such practical wisdom requires. His immense need for love and personal recognition calls for a self-renunciation on the spiritual and psychological plane that he powerfully and subliminally feels but can't submit to initially. He substitutes for these the arbitrary and misguided plan of political abdication leaving, as he thinks, his ego intact. Simplifying somewhat, one can say that it is not just the king's 'two bodies' that are at odds, but the King's two minds and hearts. This clash in Lear between a monumental self-love and a repressed self-hate issues in the violence inflicted on Cordelia. All his lacerating inner conflicts are displaced and discharged onto her as scapegoat, for she personifies in her stubborn and discriminating truth the recalcitrant reality principle, the much desired, hotly feared, even hated 'other', that can only be related to by an equally desired and dreaded abdication of self. At this stage, however, any love for Lear is bound with

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 82.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 165–6.

control, the possession of the other's 'being' that conflictual mimesis involves. In rejecting Cordelia, he is rejecting the deepest and greatest part of himself, constituted by his hunger for true love and justice as distinct from power relationships based on self-deception and the deception of others through flattery. Many commentators have pointed out the possible echoes of the Latin *cor* and Medieval Latin *cordialis* in Cordelia's name as symbolic pointers to the deepest desires of the human heart, that in the play 'is arguably its major image.'⁴⁹ Correlatively, in compulsively approaching all human relationships as power relations, Goneril and Regan confirm themselves as monstrous doubles of Lear's own violent need to be always in control. They carry to grotesque, even sadistic length a tendency in Lear without, however betraying any trace of his rash generosity or his saving sense of the need for real love and his later 'sovereign shame' at its denial.

The play has been seen as Lear's 'search', through loss, degradation and madness for his real deeper self against the self-idol of absolute power and control. It bears repeating, however, that this painful denudation of the idolatrous self-system can only be fully understood in the context of the crisis of Degree that overtakes his community. In Girard's anthropological perspective, Lear's 'passion' reveals the inseparable roles of sacred monarch and surrogate victim. Lear becomes the supreme tragic pharmakos for a society in crisis, preceded and accompanied in that role by Cordelia as his own initial scapegoat. Alternatively, Lear's expulsion of Cordelia can be seen as scapegoating and distancing of the 'feminine' principle in himself – the principle of human relation, symbolized by her bond. In Jungian terms, Lear projects his feared shadow of an untender calculating love onto Cordelia and banishes it from himself through her disowning. In a similar misogynist vein, this fear and rejection of the feminine can be seen in Lear's resistance to hysteria and tears, both seen as 'feminine' threats to his male dream of control. The feminine returns to him, however, in its demonic double, through Goneril and Regan, to persecute and hound him, according to the well known psychological law of the return of the repressed. In her particularly feminine form of victimhood, and not for the first time in the Shakespearean canon, Cordelia represents the highest human potential for a good mimesis of self-transcendence through love and forgiveness that is sacrificed by a typically 'masculine' power drive behind mimetic rivalry. In this context, the unnaturalness of Goneril and Regan is the ultimate distortion of their femininity, signalled as we have seen, by their virile aggressiveness and their frequent description in terms of animals.

The crisis of Degree in *King Lear* should be simultaneously seen both in its political, social sphere and also in its spiritual and ethical implications, as the former

⁴⁹McAlindon, 1991, p. 175.

condition and are in turn conditioned by the latter. Lear, 'every inch a king', is a living emblem of a community in crisis, an embodiment of a sacred hierarchical order whose unity, like all human cultural orders, rests on and is renewed by the creation of scapegoats and their expulsion. An example of this is the socially sanctioned form of expulsion evident in the 'distancing' of Edmund, whose illegitimacy is seen, not just as a source of personal and social shame for his father but also a threat to the familial and patriarchal foundations of a rigidly hierarchical society. Such exclusion partly explains, though it may not justify, his victimization of others in turn as a result of mimetic rivalry. He responds to culturally instituted violence by a 'natural' amoral violence of his own. Edmund's monstrous blindness to ethical and emotional bonds throughout most of the play makes him in fact a sinister, at times 'carnavalesque' double of the powers that be.

Both Lear and Gloucester exemplify the crisis of Degree as a loss of distinctions in their spiritual insight. They exhibit a form of moral blindness that is itself a kind of violence and unleashes in some of the younger generation a far more inhuman and devastating violence that engulfs and almost destroys the kingdom. Lear is initially presented as being totally alienated from the enormous reality of personal and political violence and injustice that underlie his reign, just as Gloucester is, on a more domestic level, blind to his own responsibility in undermining the moral order he upholds and the unjust treatment, in different ways, of his two sons. Both of them discover, through their own scapegoating and expulsion, the immense suffering and violence that underpins their 'sacred' power and authority – the 'poor wretches' and mad Toms, the injustices visited on the defenceless, the lack of awareness and compassion that those on top exhibit in their treatment of those below them, the interactions of individual and collective violence, and finally the shared sense of universal human frailty and helplessness in confrontation with the vast forces and relentless, baffling necessities of nature, chance and death.

The Girardian theory about the demystifying effect of tragic inspiration, its partial dismantling of the myths and rituals of sacred violence is borne out by the play's revelation of the operations through which mimetic rivalry leads to the crisis of reciprocal violence and the widespread scapegoat mechanisms that finally transform the king himself into the supreme victim. The converse side of such deconstruction of sacred violence is the evocation of universal compassion, especially for the tragic hero, that is the central tragic effect. Critics of the play like McAlindon have pointed out the centrality of 'pity' in the play, not just in re-affirming human 'kindness' as being the basis for the oneness of humanity, but also as a political force for change in its own way. In its fearful, at times unbearable revelation of collective violence tearing apart human bonds, the play achieves its main cathartic effect through radical compassion that implicates not just the dramatic protagonists but also its audiences and readers.

Lear, like most tragic heroes, embodies human potential at its highest and at its lowest. In spite of fashionable Marxist, historicist or materialist allergies to 'essentialism', one cannot escape this strong universal human dimension of *King Lear* that can still speak so powerfully to us who have seen the near global demise of sacred monarchy. In this sense, Girard explains the enduring appeal of such tragedy by a kind of 'interiorization' of sacred monarchy and its tragic saga:

The unstable character of 'historical' societies is perhaps reflected in this 'royal' interiorization in each one of us, this play of differences, undifferentiation, and scapegoating in each of us, which encourages tragedians to treat the surrogate king like the prototype of human beings caught up in a constant state of crisis and plagued by an unending vacillation of differences.⁵⁰

Man's greatness, shown in his titanic efforts to impose a religious and cultural order on the vagaries and contingencies of his existence, is confronted by the vision of his ultimate helplessness in the face of brutal necessity, in the form of nature's violence and misfortunes, as well as human violence which in both its collective and personal forms informs 'the weight of this sad time' that is man's fleeting presence on earth. In this vision, man himself is the ultimate victim of the blind violence of existence that defeats all merely human ideas of sacred and social order. *King Lear*, especially in its apocalyptic ending, points at this vision of historic entropy, glimpsed with special force in particular scenes (Gloucester and Edgar at Dover, the mad trial scene, the devastating last one) and epitomized in unforgettable turns of phrases such as Edgar's 'the worst is not / So long as we can say 'this is the worst' or Kent's 'the rack of this rough world'.

The play is a journey to the limits of human horror and endurance, and as such seems to cry out for some kind of redemption, without obviously offering any consoling re-assurance as to its merely 'human' realization. It can only gesture negatively towards it by its searing presentation of the need and the absence of it, implied in the apocalyptic images that cluster the final scene as well as the chastened words and experiences of the survivors of the 'gored state'. The absurdist and nihilist interpretation of the play is not, however, completely viable, for *King Lear* also hints obliquely at an implicitly Girardian apocalypse of sacred violence in such epiphanic scenes as the re-unions between Lear and Cordelia and that of Gloucester and Edgar in Dover, or that between the mad Lear and blind Gloucester. In these scenes we witness a kind of reversal and deconstruction of the scapegoating mechanism at the personal level. The dynamics of victimization originating in an excess of mimetic rivalry and internal mediation is overturned by a countervailing excess of 'good mimesis' shown in mutual love and forgiveness that re-establishes the lost distinctions

⁵⁰ Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, pp. 305–6.

of external mediation and family bonds in the reciprocal recognition of the other in his or her full integrity.

Lear's identification and com-*passion* with the poor naked wretches can be 'ritually' seen as ways of sharing in the 'pollution' of these expelled victims and scapegoats of his sacred order. The figures of King, fool and beggar are to a certain extent conflated in the storm scenes, forming a kind of composite image of the expelled victim. The fool, as subversive truth teller within a power structure built on lies and violence, cannot escape the fate of the surrogate victim, of which he is somehow aware: 'I marvel what kin thou and thy daughters are. They'll have me whipped for speaking true; thou'll have me whipped for lying; and sometimes I am whipped for holding my peace. I had rather be any kind o'thing than a fool.' (1.iv.178–182) Once more Girard's theory illuminates this shared role of king and fool as surrogate victims, who are usually 'either outside or on the fringes of the society':

But what about the king? Is he not at the very heart of the community? Undoubtedly – but it is precisely his position at the centre that serves to isolate him from his fellow men, to render him casteless. He escapes from society, so to speak, via the roof, just as the *pharmakos* escapes through the cellar. The king has a sort of foil, however, in the person of the fool. The fool shares his master's status as an outsider – an isolation whose literal truth is often of greater significance than the easily reversible symbolic values often attributed to it. From every point of view the fool is eminently 'sacrificeable,' and the king can use him to vent his own anger.⁵¹

In view of this sacrificial reading, Lear's richly ambiguous conflation of the fool and Cordelia in his final distracted speech: 'And my poor fool is hanged!' assumes far deeper symbolic resonance.

But amongst the many surrogate victims of this play it is Lear who as king subliminally takes up the guilt and corruption that undergird his constituted sacred monarchy, and his recognition of this violence and injustice makes for a partial transcendence of it in Lear himself, carried on by Edgar, the implied inheritor of the sacred royal mantle at the end of the tragedy. Partial because such restoration of order in tragedy leaves only a 'gored state' with a possibly more enlightened ruler, but it cannot eliminate completely the reciprocal violence and recurring sacrificial crisis from the earthly city, as Linda Woodbridge points out:

One cannot speak, of course of permanent efficacy, of a society saved once and for all; and often in these plays we have the impression that the troubles temporarily cured by the sacrifice of the scapegoat are deeply structural in the society the play depicts and will recur. This is in part what makes scapegoating so troubling a phenomenon – the sense of futility in the long run, the melancholy recognition that in the fallen world of civic and national strife, every generation will need its scapegoats.⁵²

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. 12.

⁵² Woodbridge, *The Scythe of Saturn*, p. 89.

Woodbridge goes on to point out how Lear's banishments and curses against his evil daughters are intended by him as performative speech acts and exercises in royal mana able to expel evil and subversion, beliefs sanctioned by the myths and rituals of sacred monarchy. They are, however, presented by Shakespeare in this play as impotent wishful thinking, ways of evading his fearful repression of frailty and dependence, like his pretence to control the weather or claim the justice of the Gods on his side. Several critics have pointed out the play's subversive element that challenges the mythology and rituals of royalty. Greenblatt, for instance, contends that the tragedy releases its subversive political critique of the status quo only to reign it in through a 'process of containment . . . strained to the breaking point.' For him, the play ultimately manages to uphold the status quo.⁵³ Moretti claims that the play contributed to the 'deconsecration of sovereignty' and paved the way for the English revolution!⁵⁴ But from a Girardian perspective, all Lear's commands, curses and invocations, as well as his degradation and death, can be interpreted not just in psychological terms as subjective delusions but also anthropologically as mythologized rituals of sacred violence focused in the king's monopoly of it. In this view, the play's action, by focusing on the nature of reciprocal violence and the disproportionate suffering of Lear as someone more sinned against than sinning, reveals his role as surrogate victim in order to demystify the whole scapegoat mechanism hidden under the mythological trappings and sacred rituals of royalty that, by Shakespeare's time, had culminated in the doctrine of the divine right of kings. Shakespeare, like the Greek tragedians before him, could not go the whole hog in his demystification of sacred violence behind the monarchic institution, partly because of the limitations of the tragic genre itself which, while being anti-ritualistic cannot completely dispense with ritual elements and beliefs for its dramatic efficacy, and partly because a total critique would have meant a radical questioning of and challenge to the status quo – a challenge that would in 1648 lead to the bloody anarchy of a civil war and the beheading of a king. Shakespeare, like the Greek tragedians before him, was somehow aware that the veil of religious mythology and ritual that covered the sacred violence monopolized by royalty could not be lifted with impunity, without the possibility of unleashing far worse forms of violence and disorder. Girard offers this explanation for such oscillation between audacity and timidity in the tragic poet:

For religion protects man as long as its ultimate foundations are not revealed. To drive the monster from its secret lair is to risk loosing it on mankind. To remove man's ignorance is only to risk exposing them to an even greater peril. The only barrier against human violence is raised on a misconception

⁵³ Stephen Greenblatt, *Shakespearean Negotiations*, California, 1988, p. 65.

⁵⁴ Franco Moretti, *Signs Taken for Wonders*, New York, 1983, p. 42.

. . . From the very fact that it belies the overt mythological messages, tragic drama opens a vast abyss before the poet; he always draws back at the last moment. He is exposed to a form of hubris more dangerous than any contracted by his own characters; it has to do with the truth that is felt to be infinitely destructive, even if it is not fully understood . . .⁵⁵

Aside from these cultural and artistic reasons, Shakespeare knew all too well that an open and radical shaking of the foundations, even in the form of dramatic representation, would have been dangerous personally and certainly suicidal in the violent police state he lived in. Yet, however disguised and indirect, the tragic critique remains part of the enduring power of *King Lear*. As Girard claims:

If tragedy is, or once was, rich in katharsis, that can only be attributed to the anti-ritualistic aspects of its original inspiration. Tragedy advances towards the truth in the face of reciprocal violence and while assuming the guise of reciprocal violence. But it invariably draws back at the last minute. As soon as mythical and ritualistic differences are seriously challenged, they are replaced by 'cultural' and 'aesthetic' differences. Tragedy thus shares a fundamental experience with ritual. Both have advanced to the very brink of that terrible abyss wherein all differences disappear. Both have been permanently marked by the ordeal.⁵⁶

It is the height of ideological anachronism to scapegoat Shakespeare himself, as some radical leftist critics do, for not being a crypto-Marxist or leftist liberal before the time.

Lear as king and victim becomes his community's pharmakos, half-consciously taking up in his mad self his society's guilt and sacrificial crisis, its reciprocal and collective violence. His mad denunciations against socially sanctioned injustices, with their implied self-denunciations, enact in his personal suffering and breakdown the contradictions and conflicts of a whole social order undergoing a severe crisis of Degree, that he reflects and sees himself reflected in. Madness itself, as the ultimate loss of differentiation, is here the catalyst for personal and political revelation, 'the reason in madness' pointed out by Edgar. It liquefies Lear's heart out of its hard congealment, opening it up to symbiotic compassion for others, just as the spectacle of his passion is an appeal to the individual hearts of the audience. The challenge he hurls at the end of the play to 'the men of stone' is aimed at both the play's community and its theatre audience, in Shakespeare's time as much as in ours.

Ultimately, the play can be seen as an 'apocalypse' of a social system that, in Girardian terms, is propped up by the scapegoat mechanism as the origin of all cultural order. As the new historicists and cultural materialists have amply shown, the play inevitably reflects the social crisis and violent upheavals of Stuart and Tudor times, with their constant creation of innumerable scapegoats in the name of perceived

⁵⁵ Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, p. 135.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 292.

threats, both external and internal, to national unity and identity as well as to the concept of sacred monarchy. But it shows such a historical and political crisis as only one instantiation of Girard's meta-historical claim that the surrogate victim is the ultimate foundation of most political and cultural orders, both primitive and modern. Other authors, ancient and living, have reiterated Girard's insight without his systematic and theoretical rigour. St. Augustine for instance, in his 'City of God', showed how the city of man, incarnated in contemporary Rome, was mythically founded on fratricide, its glory and virtues were those of coercion and empire, and the Pax Romana rested on a violent restraint of chaos through a ruthless military rule. Echoing this theme in our days, the sociologist Peter Berger claims 'that violence is the ultimate foundation of any political order'.⁵⁷

Tragedy as partial unveiling of sacred violence

The scapegoat mechanism helps a community to restore order and stability when they are threatened by a breakout of mimetic rivalries leading to a sacrificial crisis. According to Girard, however, for this mechanism to work effectively, it has to be based on a fundamental *méconnaissance*, that is, the group's capacity to hide from itself the true nature of its foundational and operative violence. Though they may hint at generative violence, myths, rituals and prohibitions displace it by concealing the reciprocal violence and the victimage mechanism, otherwise they would forfeit their sacred power to prevent and control recurring crises. Tragedy, for Girard, derives its inspiration and power from being a *partial* unveiling or demystification of the violence disguised in the Sacred and all its cultural manifestations.

Like many theorists of tragedy before him, Girard contends that the tragic genre flowers particularly, and even then only under certain given conditions, in times of crisis or troubled transition between one epochal dispensation and another. Thus Greek tragedy 'belonged to a period of emergence between the dominance of an archaic theocracy and the emergence of a new, 'modern' order based on statism and laws'.⁵⁸ Similarly he locates Shakespearean tragedy in the religious and cultural upheavals that marked the often violent transition between a decaying but somehow still latent mediaeval order and the birth pangs of the early modern age:

Tragic and prophetic inspiration do not draw their strength from historical or philological sources but from an intuitive grasp of the role played by violence in the cultural order and in disorder as well, in mythology and in the sacrificial crisis. England, in the throes of religious upheaval, provided Shakespeare with such an inspiration . . .⁵⁹

⁵⁷ Peter Berger, *Invitation to Sociology*, New York, 1963, p. 69.

⁵⁸ Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, p. 42.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 66.

For Girard, therefore, tragedy 'springs from mythic and ritual forms' and in describing the function of tragedy he partly follows Aristotle's claim that in its cathartic effects tragedy 'can and should assume at least some of the functions assigned to ritual in a world where ritual *has almost disappeared*.'⁶⁰ Yet Girard contends that unlike myth and ritual, tragedy has an anti-ritualistic thrust that unveils the *méconnaissance* through which they function by revealing the scapegoat mechanism which they use to maintain a given cultural order:

The traces of sacrificial crisis are less distinct in myth than in tragedy. Or rather, tragedy is by its very nature a partial deciphering of mythological motifs. The poet brings the sacrificial crisis back to life; he pieces together the scattered fragments of reciprocity and balanced elements thrown out of kilter in the process of being 'mythologized'. He whistles up a storm of violent reciprocity, and differences are swept away in this storm just as they were previously dissolved in the real crisis that must have generated the mythological transfiguration.⁶¹

In what sense is the tragic hero a pharmakos figure within Shakespearean tragedy? Like Lear, he usually combines in his person the two often opposing claims of a private self, with its mimetic passions and rivalries, and a public self that is structured by cultural bonds and social distinctions. In breaking away from the established communal bonds to assert his individual will or desire, he comes to embody and localize the anarchic forces of mimetic desire that are threatening the cohesion and order of his community, from which he derives his own status and identity, especially if as king or hero he is its living emblem. Hence he rapidly estranges himself from his established identity to become the opposite of everything he initially stood for, in other words, a surrogate victim. His divided personality and its related family crisis dramatize and concretize a wider political and cultural crisis in his own society, which is usually in the pangs of a 'crisis of Degree' because of the accelerating mimetic rivalries that are undermining it.

The fact that the hero is usually a figure of power, embodying a sacred or political authority, makes his inner division or psychomachia both a reflection and a central contributing factor to the cultural and social crisis around him. Both in his private and public life, he is taken over by and exemplifies the chaotic and contradictory forces of his community, until he himself comes to be seen as the source of social malaise. Hence he is scapegoated as major cause of the crisis of Degree and isolated, marginalized or expelled by his community. From being the central guarantor of power, prestige or fame in his group he becomes a social outcast, relegated to criminality, poverty or madness, a liminal figure in whom all the responsibility for the crisis is concentrated. In Girardian terms, he becomes the surrogate victim of the

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 290.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 64–5.

sacrificial crisis that engulfs his society. In the process he loses his communal identity, a loss that crystallizes the general loss of distinctions that threatens his kingdom. Through this painful process of degradation and dispossession, however, he re-discovers a deeper identity – that of a profoundly shared common humanity that binds him, his community and the audience of the tragedy in the awareness of a shared responsibility for the drama of sin and suffering, good and evil that is human life. This re-discovery may come to him either negatively or positively, that is, either as partial re-appropriation of the bonds that tie him to all humanity (as in *King Lear*), or as an utter and irrevocable loss of them (as in a tragedy like *Macbeth*). His scapegoating entails also that of other more or less innocent protagonists involved in his fate; in the case of the former, it enhances the empathic identification (cathartic pity) of the audience, while in that of the latter it sharpens the self-judgement (cathartic fear).

One might speculate that Shakespearean tragic drama, in its imaginative, artistic and social production and reproduction, involves various modes and degrees of participation in the victimage mechanism that overtakes the pharmakos figure of the tragic hero. One might broadly speak of three levels of participation. First there is that of the hero's community within the tragic drama itself, as it experiences its own 'sacrificial crisis' and resolves or partially resolves it through the death of the hero as surrogate victim. The second involves the Shakespearean audiences who participated in his tragic drama against a background of great historical upheavals and crisis when the theatre fulfilled some of the semi – ritual functions lost in the passage from Mediaeval to Modern sensibilities. This might go some way to explain the flowering of the tragic genre in the period. Finally one might speak of the participation of later audience/readers who, through the mediation of their own historical context, in every age re-engage with the dramatized anti – ritual of the plays in text or performance. Again, this might explain the well charted and historically conditioned responses and re-interpretations of Shakespearean tragedy. For instance, the vision of Lear as 'victim' of nihilistic forces *a la* Jan Kott or Peter Brooks, can be seen as a reflection of mid-twentieth century *frisson de neant* that gripped the theological, artistic and political sensibilities of the post-Holocaust generations. Another example would be the conservative or subversive readings, or both simultaneously, that have characterized more recent new historicist and cultural materialist interpretations of *King Lear*, emerging from and reflecting the search for some kind of politico-literary engagement after the failure of the grand ideological narratives of left and right at the end of the last century.

In a tragedy like *King Lear* we witness the transformation of the hero/king into his hierarchical opposite the outcast/beggar, combining the typical ritual double transference of the surrogate victim or pharmakos: healing and polluting, life-giving and

death dealing, cause of crisis and source of order. This transformation of the hero makes him a supreme scapegoat of his society; he canalises and concentrates all the loss of differentiation plaguing his people, so that his fall, expulsion and death restore a temporary order. He also becomes a 'scapegoat' for the theatre audience in the artistic and anti-ritualistic sense peculiar to tragic drama. This drama enables the audience (or some of them at least) to see clearly the conflictual mimesis and reciprocal violence at the heart of the victimage mechanism that operates in sacred myth and ritual as source of all cultural and social order. It thus dismantles the myth of the surrogate victim by revealing a collective violence for which all individuals are more or less responsible and which is usually displaced and discharged on the scapegoat(s). The fallen hero is in fact sympathetically drawn by the tragic play-write to induce identification in the individual members of the audience (pity) while his degradation and death confront them with their own human frailty and wretchedness (fear), forcing them to acknowledge their own complicity in such scapegoat mechanisms as a way of exorcising them. Tragedy, by demystifying the sources of violence in the victimage mechanism, potentially enables the audience to become aware of it, purging it of its collective violence by eliciting an individual and personal response and sense of responsibility for it. Northrop Frye has some important insights into this individualising effect of tragic inspiration awakening morally each spectator from the collective nightmare of the scapegoat mystique:

Tragedy individualizes the audience, nowhere more intensely than in the tragedy of isolation. Man is a creator as an individual; as a member of a society or species, he is a creature . . . The end of a tragedy leaves him alone in a waste and void chaos of experience with a world to remake out of it.⁶²

A tragedy like *King Lear* is in fact a partial demystification of the scapegoat mystique, mainly achieved by showing how the operations of mimetic rivalry become a principal source of reciprocal violence that spreads in a society undergoing a sacrificial crisis, and how it is resolved by the victimage process. Also, symbiotic compassion for the hero deconstructs the unanimity behind collective violence that sustains the scapegoat effect. Such pity individualises the audience, wakes it up from its consensual dream about a victim or victims who can polarize all the evil and guilt of the group, both in the play and outside the theatre. That is why in *King Lear*, one can see how guilt and innocence, though principally embodied in Lear as surrogate victim, are also 'distributed' to different degrees among several characters or groups, to enhance the contagious effect of reciprocal violence during a mimetic crisis. No one seems quite immune or is able to transcend completely this collective violence with its resulting moral ambiguity, corroborating Girard's claim that:

⁶²Northrop Frye, *Fools of Time*, Toronto, 1967, p. 120.

The tragedians portray man and women caught up in a form of violence too impersonal in its workings, too brutal in its results, to allow any sort of value judgement, any sort of distinction, subtle or simplistic, to be drawn between 'good' and 'wicked' characters.⁶³

As was shown previously, even 'good' characters like Cordelia and Kent are, to however minimal a degree, not immune from some degree of contagion; they find themselves waging a fraternal and civil war against their own. On the other hand, even Edmund, the amoral 'villain' of the piece, at the end succumbs to the 'good' mimesis of kind action in his final effort to save Lear and Cordelia, inspired by the narrative of his brother's kindness to their suffering father, as well as the love, however distorted and perverse, of the two sisters: 'Yet Edmund was beloved.' (5.iii.237) The audience in turn cannot escape such contamination, for better or for worse. Lear's 'mad' judgement 'none, none doth sin' ethically implicates each member of the audience, by its moral corollary that everyone does.

In the critical literature about tragedy, this surrogate status of the tragic hero vis-à-vis the audience has been amply noted and commented on. In the Girardian perspective, however, the symbiotic relation of substitution between tragic hero and audience is always linked to what he calls the 'underlying mystery of violence' surrounding the scapegoat mechanism and its disturbing revelation: 'the sacrifices made by art and ritual substitute for actual violence'. In a highly illuminating essay on 'Catharsis in English Renaissance Drama', Clifford Leech comes to the same Girardian conclusions about the anti-ritualistic effects of Shakespearean tragedy:

And with Elizabethans or ourselves seeing tragedy enacted, there is again a sense that a man has purged a corrupt society through his death. The state of purgation will not last long. There must be recurrent victims, but for the moment our sin is not with us . . . Tragedy is the product of a highly self-conscious society, of for example, fifth-century Athens, seventeenth-century London or Paris, and such societies are not to be equated with those that get a straightforward relief from a scapegoat ritual. The ritual remains, in a more complex form, but the effect too has become complex and contradictory. That the king has died gives us relief, but we are simultaneously revolted at the need for him to die. The whole system of things comes under our question . . . Rationally we know that we have been not been purged, however strong the vestigial sense that a purging has taken place. And even if we were thus relieved, we should resent it. We do resent it, for has not a solemn ceremonial been powerfully suggesting that the old rite, the old demand from on high, the old psychological need from within, are still with us? So the effect of tragedy is double once again: the peace of vicarious atonement, the resentment of things within and without that has made us want it. But here indeed we can say the effect is a treble one, for we feel shame at our need as well as rebellion against its being implanted within us.⁶⁴

In this 'maimed' rituality peculiar to tragic drama Lear, like all tragic heroes, suffers our agonies and dies our deaths, purging the latent collective violence in us,

⁶³ Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, p. 47.

⁶⁴ Clifford Leech, *The Dramatist's Experience*, London, 1970, pp. 131–2.

by evoking and 'purifying' its concomitant human emotions of pity and fear. This purification essentially entails a profound awareness, at once disturbing and liberating, of the audience's complicity in the mechanisms of collective violence against surrogate victims, anywhere, anytime. Tragedy's community transcends its intra-dramatic personages to include the extra-dramatic audience, which is the necessary tertium quid of the tragic event. As Northrop Frye has noted:

The hero of a tragedy ultimately includes the audience who form the *substance* of the hero . . . who participate in a ritual act of suffering in which the suffering is not real but the awareness of it is. The awareness survives the play and gives it a death and resurrection pattern. . . .⁶⁵

Tragic art re-enacts in dramatic form some of the cathartic process of sacrificial ritual in order to de-mystify it to a certain extent, re-utilizing the victimage mechanism to deconstruct it for its audience, to disillusion them out of what Girard calls their *méconnaissance*. It re-presents surrogate victims in order to force us as audience to ask, 'Must there be scapegoats?' Viewed through this Girardian perspective, tragedy is an imaginative enlargement of the spectator's capacity to see his spiritual and social complicity in the scapegoat mechanism that underpins, to a lesser or greater degree, all cultural and political order. Through the stories of blood and death that they dramatize, great tragedies like *King Lear* can be seen as bloodless anti-ritualistic representations that use the forms and tropes of myth and ritual, both ancient and modern, in order to demystify them, and us.

⁶⁵ Frye, *Fools of Time*, p. 118.