

# Shakespeare's Linguistic Turn in *King Lear*

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Richard van Oort's *Shakespeare's Big Men: Tragedy and the Problem of Resentment* affords a productive encounter between René Girard's mimetic theory and Eric Gans's generative anthropology, where the center/periphery structure is the model of cultural origins and subsequent organization. Lear's abdication of the royal center precipitates a lethal mimetic vortex all along the periphery of an apocalyptic tragedy. By rigorous contrast with *Hamlet*, it is the king's resentment that unleashes "a theater of envy," where madness figures centrally, literally, as cultural meltdown (12-21).

In his preface, van Oort states that he could have included *King Lear* in his analysis of five Shakespeare tragedies (*Julius Caesar*, *Hamlet*, *Othello*, *Macbeth*, *Coriolanus*). That is what I undertake to do here, drawing from his keen insights into tragedy, which are clearly nourished by Girard's work for all that his principal model is drawn from Gans. On occasion I will invoke the literary humanism advanced by Harold Bloom, as a foil to highlight the more coherent and cognitively productive understandings afforded by Girard and Gans.

*Hamlet* is the drama of the son who seems stymied by his complex relation (which is Oedipal for too many critics) to a father and a king, his paternal namesake, murderously usurped by his uncle who marries his mother. *King Lear* is the drama of a father-king reduced to nothing by his two daughters. This "nothing" is a capital word in the play, betokening its nihilism for Harold Bloom: "'nothing begets nothing' could be the pragmatic motto of fatherhood in Lear's play" (515).

The symmetrical antitheses do not end here. In *Hamlet*, crown and queen are arrogated by a rival brother, setting the stage for the cardinal theme of revenge that for the prince, as for his admirers, is so inexplicably, inexcusably deferred. In *King Lear* there is no usurpation, but its thematic opposite: the aging monarch abdicates his throne in favor of his daughters, rashly declaring his intention to bequeath to them in proportion to their expressions of love for him.

*Lear's* subplot, in which the bastard Edmund deceitfully turns his father Gloucester against his legitimate brother, Edgar, and then acquiesces to his father's destruction, serves to

underline this symmetry, indeed the very notion of symmetry itself. We can state this symmetry again in terms of the usurpation by brother against brother that goads the son to deferred revenge in *Hamlet*, versus a father's resolute abdication to daughters whose "filial ingratitude" arouses the thoroughly impotent vengefulness in *Lear*—"I shall do such things—/What they are, yet I know not" (2.4.279-280)—that is the wellspring of his nihilating intuitions: "Is a man no more than this," he says of the half-naked Edgar, "unaccommodated man is no more but such a poor, bare, forked animal as thou art. Off, off, you lendings. Come, unbutton here" (3.4.109-111). Regicide and frustrated revenge are the common denominators of the two tragedies, whose pathos in both cases springs from the agonizing postponement of reprisal. Villainy is ultimately defeated, as it is in *Macbeth* and *Othello*, but, as with these plays too, the audience derives no sense of justice restored: retribution is a violent muddle in Act 5 of *Hamlet*, as Bloom and Van Oort aver; Cordelia's death in Act 5 of *Lear* deprives us of any consoling sense of wrongs righted, as it inspires in her mournful survivors a genuinely apocalyptic sense of devastation:

Howl, howl, howl, howl! O, you are men of stones:  
Had I your tongues and eyes, I'd use them so  
That heaven's vault should crack. (5.3.260-65)

*Lear*'s lament prompts Kent to ask: "Is this the promised end?" Edgar's rejoinder—"Or the image of that horror?"—suggests their drama as a foretaste of biblical apocalypse, which Albany's shuddering declension only confirms: "Fall and cease" (5-6).

Bloom wants to save Shakespeare from the critical "School of Resentment" but Girard and Gans rightly see in Hamlet himself the archetype of resentment, which is the name for failed rivalry, vengeance deferred, balked reprisal: "It is no accident if the sanctity of revenge provides a perfect vehicle for all the masks of modern *ressentiment*," which, Girard writes, engages "that specifically modern space where everything becomes suffused with sick revenge" (1991, 288). His remarks here find their equivalent in many of Gans's *Chronicles of Love and Resentment* (e.g. nos. 9 and 290).

His resentment is doubtless Hamlet's appeal to Romantic writers, amongst whom we find a cult of sensitivity and intelligence, of Bloomian inwardness to be sure, that the vulgar bourgeois does not reward, but this resentment is fueled by what is often only weakly acknowledged as the callous indifference of industrialized capitalism in which there is no official patronage and no market, no monetizable use or exchange value for spiritual and esthetic experience. This is romanticism's objection to modernity. Perhaps the majority population of academic humanists fuels its resentment by rerouting it via everything from Bloom's genteel nostalgia for high culture to "radical critiques" of "social arrangements," "hegemonies" etc., that Gans copiously censures on the left in his *Chronicles*.

Bloom's "Western hero of consciousness" is in fact Western theater's first anti-hero.

Foremost among Hamlet's progeny is Dostoevsky's underground man, with his manic-depressive musings on "the sublime and the beautiful," interspersed with fantasies of "sick revenge" on the world's indifference to his intelligence and sensibilities. He admits to craving "a more *literary* quarrel" (176) to the commonplaces that his peers are wont to exchange. Dostoyevsky's other-obsessed narrator, self-described as an antihero at the end of his contradictory ruminations, shares with Hamlet the problem of anyone self-consciously on the periphery of imaginary or usurped centrality, who lucidly "does not even believe in himself" (van Oort 79).

The issue joined by Girard's and Bloom's Shakespeare is between a sublime self and an other-centered self, between an individualism rooted in self-consciousness and a conception of the self as "interdividual," to cite Girard's only neologism, as it evokes our "self/other-centeredness" (1991, 133). Girard avers that we are inextricably in-between self and other; our mode of being, or non-being, our non-entity, in sum, our essential eccentricity or relationality, is constituted by mimetic desire which binds our identity to actions that others model for us:

This is the paradox of the human self, the mysterious unity of self-centeredness and other-centeredness in all human beings. Even though the two drives go in opposite directions and can never become complementary, they are always combined and their combination binds people inextricably to one another, even as it tears them apart internally and externally. It becomes an endless source of conflicts among entire societies as well as inside each individual. (1991, 147)

In a sense, then, the issue turns on Bloom's assertion that Shakespeare's "energies are not primarily social" (9). This leads us to ask why he wrote theater at all, to which Bloom's answer is for the presentation of character, requiring a context—or a mere pretext—from which to emerge saliently and soulfully.

At one point Bloom asserts that "Western culture, if it is to survive its current self-hatred . . . must become only more Hamlet-like. We have no equally powerful and influential image of human cognition pushed to its limits" (419). Girard's argument about the melancholy Dane is that we have indeed become more Hamlet-like in our misgivings about revenge, if only because we are rightly terrified by our own weaponry (1991, 284), as we find ourselves in a scene in which violence itself usurps agency, occupying center stage as "king and father of all," according to Heraclitus (fragment 60), whom Girard cites as "a clear summation of the origins of myth" (1977, 88). "Some," the fragment continues, "it makes gods, others men, some slaves, and others free." In his analysis of Greek tragedy, Girard identifies violence as the "true subject" of mimetic conflict. In elaborating his generative anthropology, which is an expansive articulation of Girard's inchoate comments on language, Gans has further argued that it is resentment itself, as a deferral of violence, that opens up a space, a temporal interval, for reflection, to which we owe our greatest cultural achievements.

Between *Hamlet* and *King Lear* there appears a chasm of differences, unless we conceive them in the figure of chiasmus, as I suggested earlier, that is, as an inverted repetition. And here too, the grandiloquence of the aged king's tirades can, like the brilliance of Hamlet's soliloquies, blind us to the situation, the structural dynamics that occasion them. Bloom remarks that "Goneril and Regan have usurped authority" (514), but just the opposite is the case. The first scene opens with an announcement of a royal abdication, while foreshadowing the fraternal rivalry between Edgar and Edmund in Gloucester's impolitic insistence on the latter's bastardy to Kent. All the notoriously "falling action" of the play derives from the terms of Lear's decision to divide his kingdom. First stated as a wish to prevent his heirs fighting over it, his fanciful pledge to divide it in proportion to the expressions of his daughters' love for him triggers a rhetorical battle with ultimately lethal consequences. A mimetic *mechanism* kicks in as from a tripwire for competition.

As Girard notes (1991, 179-83), this aberrant decision sets the stage for rivalry among the three daughters, each of whose gain can only be the others' loss in what ultimately becomes zero/sum competition that plays out so devastatingly in the rest of the tragedy. The potential antagonisms of rival desires among nobles and heirs that the king and father is supposed to mediate from without, and sovereignly from above and beyond the sphere of contentious parties (see, for example, *Richard II* and van Oort on *Macbeth*, 134-61) are given free rein when the sovereign's munificence is made an object of desire, where the king's desire of their desire is set out before his children as an object of contention. The king induces the collapse of external mediation into internal mediation, the plunge from reference to a vertical authority onto the horizontal plane of mutual interference, which can only breed a contagion of internecine rivalries. To state the case in terms of generative anthropology, absent the royal center, the sisters on the periphery will go at each other, finding in the bastard Edmund an object of mutually murderous competition. As van Oort writes, "Tragedy reminds us that the convergence of desire on the object is but a hair's breadth away from the violent disorder of the mimetic crisis" (135).

The devil is in the details. The essentially mimetic, derivative, or decentered structure of the rivalry that is unleashed by this paternal whim is evidenced in the way that Regan can only *second* her sister Goneril's hyperbolic phraseology "I find she names my very deed of love;" adding "Only she comes too short" by way of declaring herself an "enemy to all other joys" (1.1.73-75). Cordelia *immediately* apprehends her dilemma as the third, youngest sister, who by her very position in the family and in speaking order is the person most susceptible to mimetic behavior, as Girard observes. Her very first words, "What shall Cordelia speak? Love and be silent" (1.1.64), express a conscious reflection on the mimetic role thrust upon her, as they mirror Goneril's words a very few lines earlier about "A love that makes breath poor and speech unable" (1.1.62). Thus Shakespeare sets language, rather than character, center stage in a way that is of interest for Gans's originary theory of language (1981): the sisters' ostentatious claims clearly qualify as *declarative* utterances but their showy rhetoric also bears an *ostensive, performative* stamp.

Why does Shakespeare have Cordelia utter those words, and those only, her very first, in an aside which effectively cues the audience to her dilemma, if it is not to indicate the reflexive nature of the action of the play and to expose reflexivity—action as reaction—at the motivational core of its characters? “Cordelia’s rugged personality is something of a reaction-formation to her father’s overwhelming affection,” Bloom writes (479), whereas, quite to the contrary, what we witness in this scene is a reaction-formation to her sisters’ bombast. What counts here is not personality but positionality (Girard 1991, 182).

Shakespeare’s conception of character is in every sense dialectical; it emerges in dialogue and it functions in relation to other characters rather in the solipsistic isolation in which it is cast by Bloom, along with most other critics. “Without Cordelia’s recalcitrance there would have been no tragedy, but then Cordelia would not have been Cordelia,” writes Bloom (485), a tautology that all but makes her, rather than her father, the cause of the mayhem. Here we have an example of the humanistic, psychological criticism that van Oort regularly and rightly warns us away from.

I do not arrive at this mimetic view of behavior and its consequently dialectical version of character by any source that is external to the dramatic interaction in the plays themselves, which is why Girard mostly ignores the critical contributions of the Shakespearean guild, which van Oort consults abundantly in favor of Girard’s ideas (while chiding Girard in a coda to his book about claims to originality). When Girard describes the author of *Troilus and Cressida* as “not merely a dramatic illustrator of mimetic desire but its theoretician” (1991, 121), he is identifying literary masterpieces as a “discovery procedure,” in Gans’s terms (1997, 140); they are agents of human self-understanding rather than objects of knowledge that we need theories about. The works explain one another and us better than we can explain them when we impose our belated theories and methods on them. *King Lear*, for instance, can be seen as a full-blown, five-act dramatization of the crisis of difference that Ulysses analyzes in his famous speech in *Troilus and Cressida* (1.3) on the “neglect of degree,” of hierarchical difference, and on the “envious fever of pale and bloodless emulation,” or mimetic rivalry, that perforce ensues from it and will lead to self-destruction. It is an archetypal passage about cultural collapse often cited by Girard (1977, 51-52; 1991, 160-63).

When “degree is suffocate,” we have “disorder,” “mutiny,” and “discord” (1.3.75ff.), the very same words used by Gloucester (1.2.155ff.) to describe his troubled times and which he superstitiously attributes to celestial dislocations. For Ulysses, cosmic disorder is only a metaphor for social dissolution that occurs “when degree is shaken,” which is just what occurs when Lear steps down as arbiter of potential rivalries. “Take but degree away, untune that string,” Ulysses declares,

And the rude son should strike his father dead;  
Force should be right; or rather, right and wrong,

Between whose endless jar justice resides,—  
Should lose their names, and so justice too.  
Then everything includes itself in power,  
Power into will, will into appetite;  
And appetite, an universal wolf  
So double seconded with will and power,  
Must make perforce an universal prey  
And last eat up himself. (1.3.115-124)

These last six verses fairly summarize *King Lear*. It is not the royal vacancy alone that initiates disorder, but the “envious fever of pale and bloodless emulation” that Lear infects his daughters with by the terms of his resignation.

Shakespeare cannily hints very early on at the devastation to come when, alone together for the first time, Goneril and Regan agree to “hit together” (1.1.306), which some of our notes tells us means to “agree,” but the verb cannot fail either to mean “strike.” The sisters mean to act in concert against the old king, and they later collaborate mimetically in bidding down to zero his knightly retinue; but, with him literally left out in the cold, their blows cannot fail to strike each other. It is only little after the abdication that Goneril, bridling at the unruly behavior of the king and his knights in her palace, unwittingly enunciates the paradox of desire that will make a rival and an enemy of her sisterly accomplice in expelling the king. Ordering her servants to be discourteous to Lear, she states:

If he distaste it, let him to my sister,  
Whose mind and mine I know in that are one,  
Not to be overruled. (1.3.15-17)

The sisters are of one mind, a unity underlined phonemically, phono-logically, by the near rhyme of “mind” and “mine,” and by the “one” ending the line, harping on “n.” It is one mind that brings them together in degrading the king and will just as surely set them against each other thereafter. Thus ever the conflictual law of mimetic desire:  $1 + 1 = 1$ .

Here it is that the prophecy of Enobarbus, in *Antony and Cleopatra*, concerning the foredoomed alliance between Octavian and Antony, forecasts the rivalry between the two sisters: “But you shall find the band that seems to tie their friendship together will be the very strangler of their amity” (2.6.128). It is a remark that Girard takes as definitive of the double bind of mimetic desire (1998, 131-32), and Goneril’s closing words in this scene can remind us of its skewed, recursive dynamic: “I’ll write straight to my sister/ To hold my course” (1.3.26-27). That is good advice for expelling an enemy, and Regan will make good on it as well when she follows the same course as her sister for the possession of Edmund and entire rule of the kingdom. When Albany rebukes his wife, we find him repeating Ulysses’ analysis of de-gradation leading to universal predation:

That nature which contemns its origin  
Cannot be bordered certain in itself;

.....  
Humanity must perforce prey on itself,  
Like monsters of the deep. (4.2.32-33, 49-50)

It is no accident either, I think, that the very names of these two rival doubles are literal transpositions of each other, even more so than “Edmund” and “Edgar,” with “Regan” all but replicating “Goneril,” but for some vowel changes and an extra syllable. (I often confuse these mirror doubles myself.) By the beginning of Act 2 there is word of impending war “twixt the Dukes of Cornwall and Albany,” a fact underlined twice in Act 3 (3.1.19; 3.3.8). Civil war is the inevitable next step in the gradual degeneration of order, of which the king’s mental disorder is the psychic embodiment, the reduced model, with the storm as objective correlative. Such storms are blowing all around the world today, with a concomitant deterioration in political rhetoric, which should remind us of the prophetic vocation of literary masterpieces. More on that later.

Holed up in a cave, a delirious Lear asks of the destitute, mad-mimicking Edgar: “[T]was this flesh begot/ Those pelican daughters?” to which Edgar rejoins: “Pillicock sat on Pillicock Hill. Alow, alow, loo, loo”(3.4.75-76). Edgar’s words, simulating madness, pick up only on the syllables of Lear’s “pelican,” and thereafter decline progressively into mindless phonemic repetition, as Shakespeare dramatizes the *desymbolization* (Girard 1977, 62) that issues from the omnivorous violence of doubles. In sum, a world of “sound and fury signifying nothing” in which words devolve into meaningless signifiers.

When Cordelia laments Lear’s madness in Act 4, we find she has recourse to the same musical figure of the untuned string that must be wound up or rewound that we encounter in Ulysses’ speech:

Cure this great breach in his abused nature  
Th’untuned and jarring senses. O, wind up  
Of this child-changed father. (4.7.15-17)

In Lear’s jarring senses we may hear, too, an echo of Ulysses’ “endless jar where justice resides,” since his “Reason in madness,” as Edgar calls it, is all about thwarted justice.

I do not say that these echoes are deliberate, but that the playwright’s immense image repertory, by which we recognize his poetic genius, are the resource for structural intuitions, for insights into the dynamics of order, of social organization and disintegration as a whole. Graham Bradshaw makes a case for this kind of *poetic* thinking, which he distinguishes from the “step-by-step process of logical, discursive thought” (72), in revisiting the Renaissance notion of “conchetto” as it retains connotations of “thought” or “idea,” while especially denoting a thinking in forms or images. Bradshaw quotes from Alma Altizer’s

study of Renaissance rhetoric:

A “conceit” in the later narrower sense, is an “ingenious or witty imaginative conceptual figure”; a *conchetto*, in the older, richer sense, in “an imaginative-intuitive figure that brings together seemingly disparate images or ideas” in an act of intuition, a direct apprehension of underlying forms of experience. (73)

Shakespeare’s conceits, his figures and images, his “quibbles” as Dr. Johnson famously labeled them, are not decorative but dynamic; they are not an adornment of thought, but his way of thinking, of developing connections and uncovering patterns that are unavailable to the conceptual language of abstract reasoning to the extent that the latter trusts in the stability of entities and concepts which for the playwright are only ever in relation, dialectical, unstable, and fragile. That does not make him any less, but, to the contrary, all the more a thinker “than,” to use Hamlet’s famous quip to Horatio, “is dreamed of in our philosophies.” The process of metaphor, as seeing one form (Achilles...) in another (...= lion), to use Aristotle’s model, is conducive to the perception of structures, continuities and likenesses, of analogies and homologies that stretch the imagination and stress the boundaries of concepts to the breaking point. Once committed to this imaging process, the opportunities for structural intuitions are vastly increased, and not least regarding institutions like monarchy—and their collapse. There are authors who think in images, and Shakespeare is clearly one of them; or to put it in Gansian terms, authors whose thinking is strategically and rhetorically *scenic* (2007).

As Girard writes at the beginning of the English translation of *Mensonge romantique et vérité romanesque*,

Literary interpretation must be systematic because it is the continuation of literature. It should formalize implicit or already half explicit systems. To maintain that criticism will never be systematic is to maintain that it will never be real knowledge. (3)

“Cognitively feeble” is the way the social anthropologist Ernest Gellner (cited in van Oort, 4) has characterized humanistic studies, by contrast with the rigor and precision, and the real-world predictability, iterability, and efficacy of the hard sciences. This judgment no longer applies, as van Oort shows, when we see how mimetic theory and generative anthropology draw their conclusions about human interaction and institutions from recognized masterpieces of literary *realism*, narrative and dramatic.

It is van Oort’s argument that Shakespeare’s real knowledge of human subjectivity and social organization is one that deconstructs, decentralizes, and relativizes the notion of character and consciousness that Bloom, along with myriad humanists, holds up as the register of his genius. Gans’s defining or emblematic model is the circle whose more or less sacralized center convenes the ambivalent attention of those on the communal periphery; mark out any segment of the circle and you have Girardian triangles of rival subjects on the

periphery as models and/or obstacles for real or imaginary objects. As van Oort shows, modernity is marked irrevocably by the stresses among those on the periphery that define the center (130). In what van Oort calls “the classic aesthetic,” the focus is on the center. Beginning with Shakespeare and all through modernity the focus is on the rivalries among those all along the periphery. Van Oort’s remark about *Othello* points to the historical shift from external to internal mediation. “Rather than the center defining the periphery, it is the periphery that defines the center”(130.) Thus Gansian emphasis on resentment and Girardian on envy overlap, intersect.

Bloom’s Shakespeare is “inconceivably wise,” a phrase he draws from Emerson’s encomium of the poet in *Representative Men*:

Shakespeare is as much out of the category of eminent authors, as he is out of the crowd. He is inconceivably wise; . . . For executive faculty, for creations Shakespeare is unique. (1995,40)

Bloom’s fondness for the heresiarch of American individualism is true to form, whose proclamation of the bard’s uniqueness rivals in banality the companions of Zverkhov, the underground man’s rival for centrality, who boozily concur that “Shakespeare is immortal” (185). Unmoored from a coherent anthropology, inanities and clichés are bound to proliferate. As to the role of the crowd in social organization, Girard has shown the author of *Julius Caesar* to be our teacher. And we stand to learn less about ourselves by harping on Shakespeare’s uniqueness than if we appreciate the structural insights he shares with Cervantes, Molière, and Dostoevsky, *inter alia*.

Claims for originality and unique interiority became the clarion call of Romanticism, with which Bloom identifies unabashedly, as he does with Hamlet, whose “inwardness is his greatest originality; the ever-growing inner self, the dream of an infinite consciousness” (416). Van Oort shows that this inwardness is plumbed *over against* the royal court’s fawning obeisance to Hamlet’s uncle; it is born of his resentment, hewn and hollowed out by it, as the mind’s recoil to “the law’s delay” and other contumelies.

I think we can say the same of Lear’s “sublimity,” which Bloom finds to be “surpassing that of the biblical Solomon’s” (513), the king’s “greatness,” his “grandeur” being his “patriarchal sublimity” (478). But the wretched figure’s sublimity is not there at the outset—*au contraire*; it is not deployed as a property of his personality, still less of his divine election, but wells up as a consequence of his sordid rejection by his conniving daughters. What Bloom describes as the “ultimate nihilism of the play” (492), as so eloquently portrayed in its two mock trials (3.4; 4.6), is the king’s, not the play’s. Lear’s insights into the arbitrariness and fragility of the social order have nothing primordial about them; they are the Juvenalian discharge of his vengeful helplessness, his impotent rage. They are his rhetorical revenge upon the world, as he extrapolates hysterically from his own fate to our

delusions of social order. And they bear on positionality, placement, rather than persons: "...see how yond justice rails upon yond simple thief. Hark, in thine ear: change places, and handy-dandy, which is the justice and which is the thief?" (4.6.153-56). "Handy-dandy" is a nice conceit, clearly implying arbitrary, merely phonemic, difference between mirror doubles.

This is not to deny the validity of Lear's insights—"a dog's obeyed in office"—or to demur from Bloom's assertion that that "there is no universal moral order" (732). Any such order is just what Ulysses' speech belies, calling instead for an arbitrary respect of degree, of difference, in its place. But Lear's nihilism is not Shakespearean wisdom, of which we must speak instead in terms of a thoroughly achieved realism, a coherent anthropology; van Oort argues for a "Shakespearean anthropology" (199) and I shall argue shortly for a wider, biblical scale.

The play's bleakest perceptions—"the worst is not/So long as we can say 'This is the worst'" (4.7.27-28)—might encourage retreat to a sublime solitude, but they must be set off against a heartening and hopeful correction, against a vision of possible transcendence, though of a different, real-worldly kind that is unavailable in isolation or solitude. Lear's nihilism is expressed from a point of view within the play, to borrow from Van Oort's configuration concerning Macbeth's "signifying nothing" (160). There is another perspective expressed from without its mimetic traumas that the old man, restored to sanity, invites us to entertain.

When Cordelia, now captive of Edmund, seems prepared to give vent to her own well-founded resentments—"Shall we not see these daughters and these sisters?"—Lear can reprove even this daughter, with a mind fully alive to the true value of things, and giving voice to a vision of bliss, of heaven on earth, where a prison will serve as ironic sanctuary of communion against the outer world's inanities and vainglories:

No, no, no! let's away to prison:  
We two alone will sing like birds i' th' cage:  
When thou dost ask me blessing, I'll kneel down  
And Ask of thee forgiveness: so we'll live,  
And pray, and sing, and tell old tales, and laugh  
At gilded butterflies, and hear poor rogues  
Talk of court news; and we'll talk with them too,  
Who loses and who wins, who's in, and who's out;  
And take upon's the mystery of things,  
As if we were God's spies: and we'll wear out  
In a walled prison, packs and sects of great ones  
That ebb and flow by the moon. (5.3.8-19)

That this irenic prospect is ruined by Cordelia's murder should not blind us to its real this-worldly sublimity, which Shakespeare can entertain because it describes in a global way his own theatrical achievement, from the courtly comedies and romances through the many violent interregna that are the scenes of his tragedies and history plays; they all exhibit the same mimetic pathologies. In this moment of "moral awakening," to use van Oort's phrase regarding Coriolanus (177), we find a giddy caricature of the author's own creative euphoria. In sum, among "god's spies" we can count Shakespeare, whereby he rejoins the optics of Israel's prophets in their myriad satires of idolatry (e.g., Isaiah 44.9-20), their grounding in forgiveness (Isaiah 1.10-18), not to mention Ecclesiastes: "Vanity of vanity, all is vanity,"; "The race is not to the swiftest," etc.

Granted that this play, with its invocations to gods and Apollo and such, is emphatically cast in a pre-Christian culture, the author does not need the church's institutional trappings to include a glimmer of its salutary vision. Van Oort reminds us that Shakespeare's ethics and aesthetics are framed by "Christian anthropology" (58, 176). That is true enough, indeed a commonplace in Shakespearean criticism, but Girard's biblical anthropology sharpens the focus when it shows how Shakespeare sees the social world through mimetic lenses.

Blessing and forgiveness, and prayer and song, are the deritualized speech acts of Lear's jubilation, a vision of this-worldly transcendence as immunity to the contagion of rivalries governing society. We have no reason to disdain, deride, or underrate this vision, as its elements are among the very last notions that Shakespeare bequeathed to his stage audience, namely, in his farewell to the theater as spoken by Prospero in the epilogue to *The Tempest*; this farewell is uttered from a point of view from without the comedy of revenge Prospero stages for his captives. It is a text that even Bloom, for all his desire to rescue the playwright from the intellectual discredit of traditional Christianity, concedes as "recognizably Christian" (688):

And my ending is despair,  
Unless I be reliev'd by prayer  
Which pierces so, that it assaults  
Mercy itself, and frees all faults.  
As you from crimes would pardon'd be,  
Let your indulgence set me free. (5.1.15-20)

For Bloom, Prospero too is a nihilist (681), but he is so perhaps only in the sense that Jesus, who is the textual model for these last words, was for Nietzsche, who is Bloom's mentor in nihilism, and whose *Twilight of the Idols* vaunts Jesus as one indifferent to the differences valued by worldly powers-to-be. The figure recalled here is the one who taught his followers to ask forgiveness of God as they forgive others. For Bloom "'indulgence' is audacious wit as it aligns the church's pardon with the audience's applause" (688). But this theme must be reconnected with the entire dynamics of the play. Prospero's request for pardon follows

upon his manifold pardon of his real-world enemies, his usurpers and would-be assassins, and this at the suggestion of Ariel, his *model* here, a fact that critics rarely notice.

The conclusion of *The Tempest*, with its epilogue, completes an arc which was sprung from the very beginning of the play, from the first scene, where the storm evokes *curses* among its noble passengers, Sebastian and Antonio—"A pox o' your throat you bawling, blasphemous, uncharitable god," and "hang cur, hang you whoreson, insolent noisemaker"—and *prayer* from the seamen: "All lost! to prayers, to prayers. All lost!" (1.1.40,43,50). The symmetry of prayers and curses, which are anti-prayers, is emphatic. The violent scene of disorder, with noble passengers disrupting, usurping the work of the crew ("you mar our labor!"), ends with Gonzalo's "Thy will above be done, but I would fain die a dry death," a nice conceit of its own, as well as announcing the paraphrased *Pater* at the end.

We can grant with Bloom that Shakespeare has no illusions about a divinely sanctioned universal moral order without conceding anything to illusions about an autonomous self or self-sustaining inwardness which might transcend it, and which *King Lear*, among other plays, reveals as the by-product of unresolved conflicts with others. These are conflicts to whose repentance/forgiveness solution Shakespeare more than hints at, and more than only once, as Girard argues in his chapters on the later romances. Such positive wisdom as we get from him is about reciprocity and loving exchange, not exile. His anthropology is fundamentally social and relational, and I don't hesitate to say biblical, in the sense that I derive from the chapters on Mosaic and Pauline revelations (3 and 4) in Gans's *Science and Faith*, and as confirmed by prominent exegetes of the Hebrew bible, whose God is relational through and through and all round (Birch et al, 36-37; see Goodhart for a Girardian reading of the prophets). Shakespeare's wisdom is not "inconceivable," as Emerson and Bloom aver; it's just that we have no single-minded concept, such as character or personality, or psychology, to describe it accurately. So for the time being at least, absent the superb resources of his conceits, we are better off with a neologism, like Girard's interdividuality, which nicely condenses Gans's observation about real human (self)knowledge that "human interaction is a more fundamental category than being." The play's the thing after all.

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## Notes

[1] Portions of this essay have been adapted from an article published in Italian as “Shakespeare: teoria e pratica,” *Studi perugini* 5:10:123-146 (Spring 2002), and so without the benefit of Richard Van Oort’s luminous reading of Shakespearean tragedy incorporated herein.

[2] Chronicle 141, “On Looking Into Branagh’s *Hamlet*”, <http://anthropoetics.ucla.edu/views/vw141/>. See also *The End of Culture*, ch. 1.