

René Girard's Shakespeare

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In what sense was Shakespeare an anthropologist? Harold Bloom credits Shakespeare with having “invented” the human.⁽¹⁾ This may be an overstatement. Anthropologists are supposed to study humans, not invent them. Of course, when Bloom says such things he is being deliberately belligerent. He presents himself as the last romantic, the last believer in the transcendence of art. As far as Bloom is concerned, Shakespeare provided us not merely with entertainment but also with ethical models for how to live the good life—good life here meaning above all an aesthetic life. “Shakespeare,” Bloom writes, “teaches us how and what to perceive, and he also instructs us how and what to sense and then to experience as sensation.”⁽²⁾ Shakespeare teaches you how to see the world aesthetically.

The flip side to Bloom's unabashed romantic aestheticism is what Bloom calls “French Shakespeare,” or the Shakespeare of the “school of resentment.”⁽³⁾ French Shakespeare is really a corollary of the romantic Shakespeare in which Bloom so fervently believes. For if Shakespeare did indeed invent the human, as Bloom claims, then presumably we can un-invent or deconstruct this invention by showing the ideological assumptions behind the idea of Shakespeare himself. This “hermeneutic of suspicion” has been the dominant mode of criticism for almost half a century. Michel Foucault argued in his 1966 *Les mots et les choses* that “man” is an invention of nineteenth-century anthropology.⁽⁴⁾ The sooner we realize this, the better. It's not clear to me exactly what we are supposed to do after we have established the fact that man is a recent invention. Bloom clearly is happy with the idea. He just disagrees about who should be credited with the invention. It is not nineteenth-century anthropology that invented man but Shakespeare. Moreover, Bloom believes that since Shakespeare's intelligence vastly outmatches ours, we are better off accepting his version of humanity, at least for the time being. For all Bloom's romantic bombast, there is a certain humility in his belief that Shakespeare is the definitive anthropologist. But this humility before the aesthetic master (Shakespeare) is won at the cost of anthropology itself. Bloom's anthropological

universe is a purely aesthetic one. You pay homage to the bard in the hope that some of his genius will rub off on you.

Like Bloom, René Girard believes in Shakespeare's transcendent status among literary authors. But unlike Bloom, Girard interprets Shakespeare's greatness in explicitly anthropological rather than purely aesthetic terms. Shakespeare is great not because he taught us how to perceive the world aesthetically, but because he discovered an otherwise nonobvious anthropological or sociological truth. If the social order is to survive, it needs to constrain the contagion of mimetic desire. So for Girard, Shakespeare is quite literally an anthropologist or sociologist. Presumably the only reason he didn't get his PhD in anthropology or some other related theoretical discipline, such as sociology, philosophy, or critical theory, was that these fields of study didn't exist in his day. Instead he was forced to make do with the medium he knew and loved best, which was the theatre.

The idea that Shakespeare was a keen student of human behaviour, a philosopher or anthropologist of sorts, is not new. But the more one emphasizes the idea that Shakespeare was a social theorist, the more tricky it becomes to explain the fact that he was also, quite obviously, a dramatist, an entertainer of the people. Bloom gets around this problem by making the strong romantic claim that human beings are fundamentally aesthetic creatures. Shakespeare teaches us how to perceive and feel. Hence for Bloom there is no contradiction between the two conceptions of Shakespeare. Dramatist and anthropologist are one. The two are the same because poetry defines—indeed creates—humanity. We are *homo aestheticus*, not *homo politicus*. As Bloom well knows, this stance puts him at odds with his anti-romantic contemporaries, which is precisely why Bloom's heroes don't go beyond the mid-twentieth-century Shakespeare critic Harold Goddard. Believers in *homo aestheticus* are a dying breed in the universities.

Still, at least Bloom has a tradition he can refer to, even if he is perceived as quaint and outmoded by the more advanced—postmodern—members of this tradition. In contrast, when Girard writes on Shakespeare, he appears to be writing in a vacuum. Let me quote from the introduction of his major work on Shakespeare, *A Theater of Envy*:

My goal in this study is to show that the more quintessentially “mimetic” a critic becomes, the more faithful to Shakespeare he remains. To most people, no doubt, this reconciliation of practical and theoretical criticism seems impossible. This book is intended to demonstrate that they are wrong. All theories are not equal in regard to Shakespeare: his creation obeys the same mimetic principles I bring to bear upon his work, and it obeys them *explicitly* . . . The mimetic approach solves the “problems” of many a so-called problem play. It generates new interpretations of A

Midsummer Night's Dream, Much Ado about Nothing, Julius Caesar, The Merchant of Venice, Twelfth Night, Troilus and Cressida, Hamlet, King Lear, The Winter's Tale, and The Tempest. It reveals the dramatic unity of Shakespeare's theater and its thematic continuity. It discloses great variations in his personal perspective, a history of his oeuvre that points to his own personal history. Above all, the mimetic approach reveals an original thinker centuries ahead of his time, more modern than any of our so-called master thinkers.⁽⁵⁾ To the question, "Why do we need another book on Shakespeare?" Girard has a bulletproof reply: Because you've never seen a Shakespeare like this before.

But the persuasiveness of the reply really depends upon whether you accept the premise. Is Girard as original as he claims to be? What is to distinguish Girard's reading of Shakespeare from, for example, Francis Fergusson's reading of the ritual origins of Greek and Shakespearean tragedy, or John Holloway's remarks on the sacrificial origins of Shakespearean tragedy?⁽⁶⁾ More generally, can't we see a connection between Girard's ideas about sacrifice and the work of James George Frazer or Émile Durkheim in the early twentieth century, both of whom were highly influential among critics of the early and mid-twentieth century? What about the ironic, late-romantic readings of Shakespeare by Wilson Knight or Harold Goddard? Finally, don't Girard's ideas about tragedy sound very similar to Kenneth Burke's?

But Girard's *Theater of Envy* is almost totally devoid of references to previous scholarship, and this has understandably upset Shakespeare specialists. Girard explicitly rejects the idea that he is just another "Shakespearean" humbly providing another interpretation to the ever-growing mountain of Shakespeare scholarship. "*Interpretation*," Girard writes, "is not the appropriate word for what I am doing. My task is more elementary. I am reading for the first time the letter of the text that has never been read on many subjects essential to dramatic literature: desire, conflict, violence, sacrifice."⁽⁷⁾ Interpretation is an inadequate word for Girard because interpretation is what everybody else is doing. His task is, as he says, "more elementary."

When Girard says his task is more elementary, one is reminded of Durkheim's use of the word in the title of his magnum opus, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*. Girard's other key phrase, "for the first time," is also noteworthy. Girard is saying he is the *first* interpreter of Shakespeare to read him in this *elementary* fashion. Where others have merely interpreted Shakespeare in terms of the content of his works, Girard proposes to go beyond this content to explore the elementary anthropological conditions of the theatre itself. Girard proposes to trace literary content back to its elementary form in ritual sacrifice.

Let me briefly rehearse Girard's argument about the elementary structure of

sacrifice. Sacrifice is necessary because desire is contagious. Desire, because it is always imitated from others, tends to get out of hand. If we all imitate each other, sooner or later a crisis of “undifferentiation” occurs, when all hands reach for the same object. To constrain the contagiousness of mimetic desire, it is necessary every now and again to punish those who seem to be responsible for it. It is not necessary that these victims really are the cause of the disorder. What is absolutely necessary, however, is that they are believed to be the cause. This “mimetic” account of desire leads Girard to his famous scapegoat hypothesis of culture outlined in his 1972 book, *La violence et le sacré*.⁽⁸⁾

With this simple theory Girard explains numerous puzzling facts in Shakespeare’s plays. Consider, for example, his discussion of *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*. Proteus and Valentine are best friends. Proteus is in love with Julia, but he is torn between staying in Verona with Julia and following his best friend to Milan. Valentine goes to Milan and falls in love with Silvia. When Proteus decides to follow him there, he also falls in love with Silvia. Girard points out that Proteus, the more mimetic of the two friends, doesn’t really have a choice. Valentine so praises Silvia that Proteus imitates his friend’s desire and falls in love with the same woman. At the end Proteus tries to rape Silvia. She is saved only by the sudden appearance of Valentine, whose main concern seems to be that he has been betrayed by his best friend: “Oh, time most accurst, / ’Mongst all foes that a friend should be the worst!” (5.4.71–2). Proteus, embarrassed by his poor behaviour, begs forgiveness of his friend: “My shame and guilt confounds me. / Forgive me Valentine” (5.4.73–4).⁽⁹⁾ In a gesture that upsets audiences and critics alike, Valentine responds by offering Proteus the woman he (Proteus) has just attempted to rape: “And, that my love may appear plain and free, / All that was mine in Silvia I give thee” (5.4.82–3). Girard explains this apparently despicable action as a logical consequence of mimetic desire. Valentine feels guilty for having encouraged Proteus to desire Silvia in the first place. He realizes that he is partly responsible for what his friend has done. “The only peaceful solution,” Girard says, “is to let the rival have the disputed object.”⁽¹⁰⁾ Girard reads this moment as a classic mimetic double bind. To remain friends, Proteus and Valentine must give up their rivalry *for the same object*. Valentine learns this more quickly than Proteus, which is why he is the first to give up Silvia. The important point, Girard says, is not that Valentine abandons Silvia to a would-be rapist, but that he abandons the rivalry of mimetic desire. By giving up the object, he gives up the rivalry. Luckily this spirit of renunciation is catching. Proteus refuses to accept Silvia. Instead he returns to the girl he originally loved, Julia. The play ends happily with Valentine marrying Silvia, and Proteus marrying Julia.

Girard’s book is full of examples like this. Often the readings are quite brilliant. Highlights for me include his reading of *The Winter’s Tale*, especially the final act in which Girard describes Leontes as a man tempted by the sight of Florizel and

Perdita holding hands just as Polixenes and Hermione had sixteen years earlier. Will Leontes be able to withstand this second test of mimetic desire? Happily, sixteen years of repentance allow him to triumph over the temptation. He agrees to be a friend to Florizel without also falling in love with Florizel's fiancée, the beautiful Perdita, who is the mirror image of her mother, Hermione, the woman whom Leontes believes he has killed in a fit of jealous rage. As Girard says, "The entire past seems resurrected."[\(11\)](#) But this time there is a difference. Leontes does not make the same mistake the second time. Instead of treating Florizel as a rival, he treats him as a friend. The key lines for Girard occur when Leontes says to Florizel, "Your honor not o'erthrown by your desires, / I am friend to them and you" (5.1.230-1). Leontes has mastered his desire, and this is why he can be a friend to Florizel. Unlike his earlier self, or the Proteus of *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*, Leontes has renounced the object of mimetic desire.

I could easily cite more examples of Girard's reading of Shakespeare. But rather than simply repeat what Girard has said, I want to return to the question I began with. How does Girard justify his "mimetic" approach to Shakespeare? We have already seen that Girard claims that he is not simply offering another interpretation of Shakespeare. But if that is the case, then he can't justify himself by citing the self-evident plausibility of his reading of Shakespeare, because that would be to concede precisely what he finds objectionable: that is, the assumption that there is no way to go beyond the aesthetic.

For many critics, of course, criticism is criticism of aesthetic texts, and that's the end of the matter. Critics differ on how much latitude they're willing to give to this idea of textuality. Bloom is a traditionalist because he restricts the text to Shakespeare, but many critics are willing to spread the wealth around a bit more. For this reason, I think it is wrong to read the new historicism as antithetical to aesthetic formalism. On the contrary, the new historicism is an attempt to expand the categories of aesthetic criticism beyond the canonical work to the surrounding cultural context. I think this is quite obvious, for instance, in the case of Stephen Greenblatt.[\(12\)](#)

Like the new historicists, Girard also claims that he is new. Implicit in this claim of newness is the sense that the aesthetic tradition has worn itself out and therefore needs renewing. Bloom's representation of contemporary cultural criticism as an exercise in resentment may be a caricature, but it has the virtue of identifying our general disenchantment with the aesthetic. Bloom compensates for this disenchantment by raising his voice and plugging his ears. He imagines himself transcending his contemporaries to take his rightful place in a tradition of criticism that stretches from Johnson and Hazlitt to Bradley, Wilson Knight, and Harold Goddard. Girard's claim to newness, however, is to present himself neither as the

last romantic nor as a certified member of the disenchanted postmodern vanguard. Rather, his claim is that he is transcending the aesthetic tradition altogether. Shakespeare is great because he sees exactly what Girard sees: the futility of using art to conquer mimetic desire.

This conception of the aesthetic leads to a curious paradox. On the one hand, Shakespeare is a great dramatist who uncovers the mimetic structure of desire. On the other, he is a poor theorist because as a dramatist he is not at liberty to explain his theory in the straightforward logical fashion of a philosopher or anthropologist. Philosophers are not known for their capacity to earn a living by their writing alone. People are understandably unwilling to part with their hard-earned cash just to hear a philosopher lecture about the truth of his theory. Shakespeare's solution to this dilemma, Girard says, was to be fiendishly clever. Knowing that merely stating the principles of mimetic desire in sober, logical fashion is unlikely to satisfy the crowds, who are expecting something with a bit more gore, sensation, and slapstick, Shakespeare disguised the theory by cloaking it in good old-fashioned tragedy and comedy. In other words, he wrote two plays in one. The first version of the play was for the regular audience, who were looking for pure entertainment. The second, ironic version was for the philosophers, hoping for something more profound.

In principle there is nothing wrong with this "two-audience" theory to describe Shakespeare's method. You can strive to entertain everyone all the time, but if you wish to keep the attention of the more refined you will have to go beyond mere slapstick and gore. What is problematic in Girard's use of the two-audience theory, however, is his apocalyptic application of it to modernity. Consider, for example, this remark from his discussion of *Hamlet*. After commenting that Hamlet is caught in the double bind between revenge and no revenge, Girard goes on to generalize Hamlet's condition to all modernity:

In *Hamlet*, the very absence of a case against revenge becomes a powerful intimation of what the modern world is really about. Even at those later stages in our culture when physical revenge and blood feuds completely disappeared or were limited to such marginal milieus as the underworld, it would seem that no revenge play, not even a play of reluctant revenge, could strike a really deep chord in the modern psyche. In reality the question is never entirely settled and the strange void at the center of *Hamlet* becomes a symbolic expression of the Western and modern malaise, no less powerful than the most brilliant attempts to define the problem, such as Dostoyevsky's underground revenge. Our "symptoms" always resemble that unnameable paralysis of will, that ineffable corruption of the spirit that affect[s] not only Hamlet, but the other characters as well. The devious ways of these characters, the bizarre plots they hatch, their passion for watching without being watched, their propensity to voyeurism and spying, the general disease of human

relations make a good deal of sense as a description of an undifferentiated no man's land between revenge and no revenge in which we are still living. (13) In his reading of Shakespeare, Girard remains blind to a key aspect of modernity: the capacity of its secular institutions to absorb resentment more effectively than its ritual precursors, including its precursors in Christian ritual. Girard tends to read modernity in a rather bleak either-or fashion. Either we must absorb the Christian lesson of forgiveness, or we must perish in a malaise of bad faith as we become increasingly disenchanted with the sacrificial institutions we no longer believe in but continue to use. The upshot is that the specifically aesthetic incarnations of modernity, in their various neoclassical, romantic, modernist, and postmodern guises, all get collapsed into one narrative of Christian demythologization.

Another way of putting this is to say that Girard subordinates his reading of literature to his reading of religion; in particular, to his reading of Christianity. The reason he can ignore the difference between classical, neoclassical, romantic, modernist, and postmodernist aesthetics is that next to Christianity, the difference between these aesthetic periods appears negligible. For Girard, the really significant difference, the one that trumps all others, is the difference between primitive religion and Judeo-Christianity. The role of literature in understanding this fundamental difference is at best ambivalent. Consider Girard's explanation of Shakespeare's turn to romance towards the end of the playwright's career. These last plays, especially *The Winter's Tale* and *The Tempest*, are (Girard says) resolutely self-undermining. *The Tempest* is an allegory of Shakespeare's career, beginning with Caliban who represents the monstrosity of mimetic desire, which Shakespeare had exploited to satisfy the audience's relentless appetite for mimetic violence. When Prospero breaks his staff and promises to leave off magic for good, this is Shakespeare's way of saying, "Enough already!" Tired of the mimetic games of the dramatist, Shakespeare announces his retirement. Presumably Shakespeare had learned his lesson; in particular, the lesson of the Gospels, in which forgiveness and love triumph over the violence and rivalry of mimetic desire. For Shakespeare, to continue to write drama would be merely bad faith.

I said just now that Girard doesn't really care about the difference between the various periods of literature because these seem insignificant when compared to the more fundamental anthropological problem of the origin of literature in sacrificial ritual. I think that the two-audience theory can help us unpack this problem. The theatre affords excellent opportunities for words to be supported by their actual flesh-and-blood contexts. This fact should not be underestimated. Despite what many philosophers believe, or used to believe, language is not primarily a means for communicating facts about the world. It is above all a means for producing what psychologists call "joint attention." (14) The most elementary form of language, the ostensive, is a pointing gesture. But what is worth pointing

at? Girard believes it is the scapegoat, the first cultural and historical object of joint attention. But paradoxically he also insists that this form of attention is nonsymbolic. In *Things Hidden Since the Foundation of the World*, Girard writes, “I think that even the most elementary form of the victimage mechanism, prior to the emergence of the sign, should be seen as an exceptionally powerful means of creating a new degree of attention, the first non-instinctual attention.”(15)

Here are the essential ingredients of sacrifice, all packed into a single primal scene. Again Girard stresses that he is looking at the most “elementary form” of culture, the very *first* moment of “non-instinctual attention.” But there is a problem. The scapegoaters are both conscious and unconscious of what they are doing. They are conscious in the sense that this is a new moment of attention in which instinct has been superseded by something else, by a new type of attention that is therefore by definition the very first of its kind, unique in all human history. But they are also unconscious in the sense that this new type of attention is only a very minimal form of awareness. Girard really wants to say that they are in a state of semi-consciousness, a sort of liminal state between waking and sleeping where one is not really sure what one is doing. Perhaps noticing this ambivalence, Girard’s interlocutor, Jean-Michel Oughourlian, asks a very good question: “Would this already be a sacred victim?” Girard responds:

To the extent that the new type of attention is awakened, the victim will be imbued with the emotions provoked by the crisis and its resolution. The powerful experience crystallizes around the victim. As weak as it might be, the “consciousness” the participants have of the victim is linked structurally to the prodigious effects produced by its passage from life to death, by the spectacular and liberating reversal that has occurred at that instant. The double transference will determine the only possible meaning to take shape under the circumstances, and this will constitute the sacred and confer total responsibility for the event on the victim. It is necessary to conceive of stages, however, which were perhaps the longest in all human history, in which the signifying effects have still not truly taken shape. One would have to answer your question by saying that once the victim has appeared, however dimly, the process leading toward the sacred has begun, although concepts and representations are not yet part of it. There is no need to assume that the mechanism of awakening attention works right away; one can imagine that for a considerable period it produced nothing at all, or *next to nothing*. Nonetheless, even the most rudimentary signifying effects result from the necessity of controlling excessive mimesis; as soon as we grant that these effects can be in the slightest degree cumulative, we will have recognized them as forerunners of human culture.(16)

I don’t think Girard has adequately answered Oughourlian’s question. The key point

is not the amount of violence in the scene, nor the tremendous contrast between violence and peace that Girard says the scene produces. Girard assumes that the sheer violence of the mimetic crisis is sufficient to generate an experience of the sacred. By bombarding your perceptual field with enough violence, you will eventually be compelled to see the sacred. But violence in itself is nothing new. On the contrary, nature is full of it. What is key is rather the *representation* of the violence and, more precisely, the *collective form of attention* that Girard says the violence leads to. For if the victim truly is to be represented as sacred, then this is already to say that the victim is an object of a collective attention, which is irreducible to the kind of indexical associations of purely individual perceptual experience.⁽¹⁷⁾ Collective attention—symbolic representation—cannot originate unconsciously. On the contrary, the function it performs is by definition a conscious one—that is, to order and constrain the chaotic and largely unconscious associations of individual sensory experience. The joint scene of attention requires the individual not merely to attend to the object qua individual, but to attend to it as part of an intersubjective, collectively shared experience. In the scene of joint attention I attend to *your* attention to the object. And this relationship is reciprocal. Just as I attend to your attention to the object, so you attend to my attention to the object. Our relationship to the object is an instance of shared, collective attention, and this—the origin of joint attention—is indeed quite revolutionary in the history of hominid evolution. In the oscillation between other-model and central-object the word is born. This intersubjective oscillation is also what distinguishes the act of pointing from the indexical signals of animal communication. Animal signals remain unmediated by the intersubjective, joint attentional scene.

Girard's ambivalence towards the uniqueness of this originary event is reproduced in his ambivalence towards modernity and Shakespeare's place in it. Girard's paradoxical claim that the originary scene is both conscious and unconscious, both a unique event in human history and an intermediate stage in a series of endless intermediate stages, applies equally to his understanding of Shakespeare. On the one hand, Shakespeare is a vast intelligence who exposes ruthlessly and definitively the myth of romantic desire. On the other, Shakespeare is a dramatist who must hide this mimetic awareness behind the mythologizing narratives of tragic and comic form. Shakespeare has the potential to be a unique event in human history, but unfortunately the medium he selected for sharing his discovery of mimetic desire inevitably meant that his anthropological insights would be buried behind a wall of conventional theatrical pieties. If we read for the theatrical pieties, we will miss forever the mimetic intelligence. This is the fate of all Shakespeare criticism before Girard. If we read for the mimetic intelligence, we are forced to dispense with the theatre altogether, which is why Girard argues that Shakespeare's farewell to the stage in *The Tempest* is so critically self-referential. It is a deconstruction of the aesthetic myth of Shakespeare by Shakespeare himself.

So what can we learn from Girard's reading of Shakespeare? I think we can learn a great deal from Girard, but I have to add a significant caveat. Girard's ambivalence towards Shakespeare is a direct consequence of his ambivalence towards language. This is most clear in his hypothesis of the origin of sacrifice, which he sees as the fundamental cultural institution pre-existing even language itself. By claiming that the first act of scapegoating was unconscious and unrepresentable, Girard can say that all subsequent historical evidence that seems to contradict his hypothesis is merely a misrepresentation, a ruse distracting us from the reality of scapegoating. The technique of using the unconscious as a clever ruse has been made familiar to us by Freud. Because the unconscious is by definition elusive, it is always up to the one who is uniquely qualified in *sniffing it out* to let you know whether or not you have correctly identified the problem. The same rule applies to Girard's theory of the scapegoat. If you don't see how Shakespeare's plays demonstrate the scapegoating hypothesis, then you just have to look harder. And you do that by training yourself in the technique of Girard's peculiar brand of mimetic anthropology.

In the end, all claims to originality are by definition problematic. If you are the first to see things this way, then by definition nobody else does. But Girard's claim goes one step further. Not only is he the first, he is also the last. By making scapegoating unconscious, he absolves himself of the inconvenience of ever being refuted. For how can you refute something of which you are unconscious? Any refutation can be immediately dismissed as yet another confirmation of the unconscious at work. One has been hoodwinked yet again by the ruse of scapegoating.

What is the solution to this conundrum? The solution is to admit that scapegoating depends upon representation, and that representation itself cannot originate unconsciously. Once we have conceded this, it remains up to the individual investigator to decide what to include in an anthropological hypothesis of origin. The real point of formulating such a hypothesis is not to be the first or the last, the most original or the most definitive. It is to provide a minimal starting point for dialogue on our fundamental humanity. That is the simplest way to define an anthropology. I hope that Girard's work on Shakespeare will be read in this sense: that is, as an attempt to initiate a dialogue concerning Shakespeare's contribution to human self-understanding—in other words, as a step towards a Shakespearean anthropology. [\(18\)](#)

Notes

1. Harold Bloom, *Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human* (New York: Riverhead Books, 1998). [\(back\)](#)

2. Ibid., 8. [\(back\)](#)

3. Ibid., 9. [\(back\)](#)

4. “Les mots et les choses” was translated into English as “the order of things.” See Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archeology of the Human Sciences* (New York: Vintage Books, 1994). [\(back\)](#)

5. René Girard, *A Theater of Envy: William Shakespeare* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), 5–6. [\(back\)](#)

6. Francis Fergusson, *The Idea of a Theater: A Study of Ten Plays: The Art of Drama in Changing Perspective* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1949); John Holloway, *The Story of the Night: Studies in Shakespeare’s Major Tragedies* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1961). [\(back\)](#)

7. Girard, *A Theater of Envy*, 5. [\(back\)](#)

8. *La violence et le sacré* was preceded by Girard’s 1961 study of the novel, *Mensonge romantique et vérité Romanesque*, in which Girard first proposed his theory of mimetic desire. In *La violence et le sacré* Girard applied the “mimetic” model of desire he discovered in the novels of Stendhal, Flaubert, Dostoyevsky, and Proust to the general anthropological problem of human origin, proposing a global theory of human society. *Mensongewas* translated into English in 1965 as *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel: Self and Other in Literary Structure*. *La violence* was translated into English in 1977 as *Violence and the Sacred*. [\(back\)](#)

9. All quotations of Shakespeare are from *The Complete Works of Shakespeare*, ed. David Bevington (New York: Pearson Longman, 2009). [\(back\)](#)

10. Girard, *A Theater of Envy*, 16. [\(back\)](#)

11. Ibid., 328. [\(back\)](#)

12. I discuss Greenblatt’s work in “The Critic as Ethnographer,” *New Literary History* 35 (2004): 621–61, and “The Culture of Criticism,” *Criticism* 49 (2007): 459–79. Both essays are reprinted in *The End of Literature: Essays in Anthropological Aesthetics* (Aurora, CO: Davies Group Publishers, 2009). [\(back\)](#)

13. Girard, *A Theater of Envy*, 284. [\(back\)](#)

14. See, for example, Michael Tomasello, *The Cultural Origins of Human Cognition* (Harvard, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), or his more recent book, *A Natural History of Human Thinking* (Harvard MA: Harvard University Press, 2014). [\(back\)](#)

15. René Girard, *Things Hidden Since the Foundation of the World*, trans. Stephen Bann and Michael Metteer (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1987), 99. [\(back\)](#)

16. *Ibid.*, 100. [\(back\)](#)

17. See Terrence Deacon, *The Symbolic Species: The Co-evolution of Language and the Brain* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1997). [\(back\)](#)

18. This essay is an excerpt from *Shakespeare's Big Men: Tragedy and the Problem of Resentment*, forthcoming from the University of Toronto Press, June 2016. [\(back\)](#)