

Rebecca Adams' Model of "Loving Mimesis": An Overview and Assessment

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Abstract

Though René Girard's mimetic theory focuses on rivalry, conflict and scapegoating, there has long been an interest in "positive mimesis." Girard's comments on "good mimesis" were scattered and ambivalent, making it difficult for Girard scholars to define it concretely. Rebecca Adams proposed a very striking model of positive mimesis, "loving mimesis," that shows how it might operate in the context of "internal mediation." Adams redraws the mimetic triangle using the intriguing example of the *coquette*, Girard's classic "pseudo-narcissist." Adams suggests an alternative process through which this mimetic relation becomes a truly "intersubjective" one, meaning that no "objectification" takes place.

Unfortunately, her explication is divided between a somewhat opaque formal exposition, and a supplementary personal vignette which is lucid but largely unknown. Adams' scholarship was also interrupted, leaving her model undeveloped. I revisit and explicate Adams' model of positive mimesis by grafting her separate accounts together. First, I review Adams' personal vignette, then I review her formal exposition. I also assess what I see as the strengths and shortcomings of each as I proceed.

In the leadup to her formal model, Adams undertakes an ambitious "deconstruction" of Girard's system, making valid and insightful points. However, her own results could arguably be deconstructed in the same way. The dynamic model of loving mimesis is by far the most intriguing and innovative component of Adams' project, but it needs more concrete examples and much more elaboration. Nevertheless, Adams' model may be the most promising of the attempts to understand positive mimesis.

Keywords: Rebecca Adams, positive mimesis, René Girard, mimetic theory, loving mimesis, intersubjectivity, internal mediation, pseudo-narcissism

In René Girard's mimetic theory, we are constituted "interdividually" by our imitation of the desires of others (mimesis), which leads to rivalry and, unchecked, to violence and scapegoating.[1] Yet, central as rivalry and conflict are for Girard, there must be a non-conflictual aspect of mimesis that is also part of our makeup. Hence, there has been an ongoing effort—propelled by this premise in mimetic theory itself—to explore positive mimesis, which has also been called "good mimesis," "loving mimesis," or "creative mimesis." [2]

Girard's scattered and unelaborated comments on the subject, though always interesting and insightful in their given context, are both suggestive and confusing, both encouraging and ambivalent. Sometimes Girard asserted that positive mimesis was fundamental, other times that it was not particularly important, and still other times that it could hardly exist in any practical sense at all.[3] These conflicting statements make it difficult for Girard scholars to make sense of positive mimesis, so apparently essential in the mimetic scheme of things but so elusive or contradictory when it comes to defining it.

Positive mimesis tends to be explored in general, abstract and theoretical terms. Like "dark matter" in astrophysics, it must be there because physics demands it, but no-one can actually see it, beyond the relatively tame non-rivalrous relation in "external mediation," or role-modelling.[4] Yet it is in "internal mediation," where subject and model occupy the same domain of desire (i.e., two hands reaching for the same object) that mimetic theory gets most of its psychological traction and establishes its "deep" anthropology.[5]

Rebecca Adams has proposed a model of positive mimesis—or as she terms it, "loving mimesis"—that has the great merit of spelling out more precisely what such a thing might be, and how it would operate in the context of internal mediation.[6] Adams redraws the mimetic triangle using the intriguing example of the *coquette*, Girard's classic "pseudo-narcissist." Adams suggests an alternative process through which this mimetic relation becomes a truly "intersubjective" one, meaning that no "objectification" takes place. If Adams' model proves viable it would be a substantial development in mimetic theory.

Yet, though Adams herself is well known among Girard scholars, the specifics of her model are much less so. And though her model has been referenced admiringly by some (including myself), it has yet to be elaborated concretely, even by Adams.[7] Part of the problem is her own presentation, which is divided between a somewhat opaque formal exposition in one book, and a very lucid personal vignette which explains the model's origins in another. Moreover, in my opinion, Adams pronounces prematurely on the viability of her model before it is even minimally fleshed out. Because of this, her model—so concrete and compelling—seems to get lost in generalities. Furthermore, Adams had to withdraw from active scholarship soon after her expositions appeared, leaving this project unfinished before it had properly gotten off the ground.

Adams' model is too promising to suffer either from benign neglect on the one hand, or premature generalities that obscure its substance on the other. It seems to me that Adams' model should be reviewed, laid out more clearly, engaged, and assessed. This is the goal of the present study. I will attempt to revisit and explicate Adams' model of positive mimesis by grafting her separate accounts together. First, I will review Adams' personal vignette, then I will review her formal exposition, referring frequently back to the vignette. I will also assess what I see as the strengths and shortcomings of Adams' model as I proceed.

The Background of Adams' Model of "Loving Mimesis"

Adams' model developed out of her personal and intellectual struggles but is also closely connected with her seminal interview of Girard, best known in its excerpted form in *The Girard Reader*.^[8] In this interview, Adams elicited several definitive statements from Girard on positive mimesis that continue to inform the discussion, probably more than any other single source. We learn from Girard that "good mimesis" not only exists, but is even fundamental, more fundamental in fact than rivalrous mimesis.^[9] At the same time, Girard emphasizes (with some regret) that "good mimesis" is not *salient*. It does not address the great problems of human co-existence. Religion and the great literature are about "bad" mimesis.^[10] Nevertheless, on an ethical and spiritual level, one can still positively imitate Christ (external mediation) and convert away from bad mimesis through inner and outer acts of renunciation, a consistent theme in Girard's work.^[11]

As she recounts in her compelling personal vignette (published as a sidebar of Vern Redekop's book *From Violence to Blessing*), Adams' dissatisfaction with these conclusions spurred her to develop her own model of positive mimesis (formally presented in William Swartley's collection *Violence Renounced*).^[12] The vignette in Redekop's book merits detailed recapitulation. Though written later, its insights are central and unfortunately somewhat lost in the more theoretical paper.

Part of Adams' dissatisfaction came from the fact that Girard's system is tied to the unique claims of Judaism and especially Christianity. Though Christian, Adams felt Girard's insights were more universal. However, her deepest difficulties were personal. Adams recounts how, because of her own experience, she had been greatly helped by Girard's analysis of mimetic doubling and scapegoating:

I could see examples in my life and all around me. Yet I could still find no adequate positive model for human beings and human relations that worked philosophically.^[13]

This made me feel split between my intellectual and emotional life, and worse, that the world itself might be structured against me, with my need to believe in the reality of love mere wishful thinking.^[14]

Adams felt the need to locate and affirm an authentic "subjectivity." Yet it was not possible

in Girard's scheme, which like Freud's has the subject born (that is, has desires originate) through rivalry. This necessitates in both systems (though inadvertently on Girard's part) suppression and a distortion of the psyche. In Freud, "subjectivity is formed through the infant's imitation of the father's desire for the Mother" and with its sublimation of the Incest Taboo it "ends [in] self-hatred and mutilation."[\[15\]](#) Girard introduces a more gender neutral and generalized double bind, but his seemingly more benign solution, to "take God as an object of desire, or imitate only God's desire (that is, non-violent Love)" ends up "forcing us into rivalry with God or other for 'possession' of [our] own wills, subjectivity and very selves as the object."[\[16\]](#)

Freud's and Girard's assumptions . . . were especially problematic for me as a woman who had actually experienced psychological deformation. While I no longer wanted to be a slave to others' desires, neither did I want to become one who could now wield power over others, or a Model whom others would envy and violently imitate. *Neither did I think I should have given up my own legitimate desires to be an agent or a Subject in my own right*, because that was exactly what I had been denied in an unjust situation.[\[17\]](#) (emphasis mine)

Positive mimesis for Girard, which is, essentially, external mediation of God and renunciation of desire, can lead to acquiescence to an unjust situation, and a warping of consciousness by which one is *deprived of legitimate desires*. The problem was an especially acute and personal one for Adams.

I knew too much to simply go back to the naïve belief that I could just become "independent," not mimetically related to others, as a way to be empowered as an agent who could think and act. Yet I didn't know how not to be a victim, because I didn't have an adequate conceptual model to tell me how to change.[\[18\]](#)

Adams' breakthrough came from an epiphany she had while watching *Star Trek: The Next Generation*.[\[19\]](#) (Adams is a *Star Trek* fan.) The central figure in the episode ("The Perfect Mate") is the "metamorph" Kamala, a telepath "literally with no mind of her own."[\[20\]](#) Kamala has been genetically engineered to mold herself perfectly to the desires of a designated partner; she is a "gift" that will help bring peace between warring planets. (In a suitably Girardian twist, the war originated over two brothers' rivalry for the same woman.) Kamala lies in a dormant state, her presence undisclosed to the Enterprise, but some shifty Ferengi on board have inside information about her and cause Kamala to be awakened prematurely. Captain Picard, outraged that he has been unknowingly transporting someone who is essentially a slave, gives Kamala free access to the ship. However, Kamala stirs up disorder since she cannot help being sexually irresistible to the males she encounters on board. Therefore, she needs to be sequestered.

Picard, concerned about Kamala's fate, begins encouraging her to choose her own path in

life, but as a result of these conversations, Kamala permanently bonds with him.

However, because Picard has no desire to possess her, or even to serve as a model for her at all, but has only expressed a wish that she could be an independent agent capable of making a free choice and choosing a noble destiny . . . from within the strict confines of her mimetic nature she indeed becomes an independent agent. This was the surprise twist of the story. . . . I had my answer to my theoretical problem with Girardian theory.[21]

As Adams elaborates, “Unable to desire this freedom for herself or even understand it until it was made possible by the desire of another, she has been transformed from an object, something which is desired and acted upon by others, into what philosophers call a Subject.”[22] Adams expands upon “subjectivity” as follows:

. . . we sense there is something inauthentic about having a subjectivity purely derivative of someone else’s point of view . . . The only alternative has traditionally appeared to be conceiving human beings as ideally totally free, autonomous agents, an idea central to pure Enlightenment individualism but which I suspect we also know to be untrue, because people are clearly social and interdependent beings. The Star Trek episode offered a way to think about a third alternative: human beings might be understood as deeply mimetic and thus as profoundly relational (as Girard and many postmodernist thinkers have stressed), yet this would not preclude the possibility of authenticity, defined not as absolute autonomy of action and consciousness, but as the capacity to participate fully in a loving dynamic of giving and receiving in relation to others.[23]

Adams’ mimetic analysis of Kamala is important:

The Models she looked to at first were various men on the ship, and she perfectly imitated and mirrored back to each the projected content of his own desire for “the perfect mate.” But when the model became Picard, he avoided her attempts to imitate his desire for her as a mate; he actually renounced possession of her as an object of emotional or sexual satisfaction for himself. Instead, all he wanted, he said, was for her to be independent and free. This is what would satisfy him. Naturally, but also strangely, since this was his truest desire, it was the one she imitated. Because Picard had taken as his “object” the freedom and well-being of the other, the metamorph was able suddenly to acquire this own desire for herself. Stated in terms of Girard’s triangle, my insight was that when Picard as the Model desired the subjectivity of the metamorph (the Proto-Subject) [Adams introduces the term “Proto-Subject” because the metamorph, lacking desire, is not yet a proper subject], and the Proto-Subject then imitated that desire, then the Proto-Subject ended up desiring her own Subjectivity![24]

Adams is not hypothesizing about an implausibly disinterested human love that relies on a “white knight” like Picard; she is actually characterizing our relationship with God. This is a powerful insight, possibly the most potent in her model.

. . . I realized that although Girard advocated taking God as a Model, Girard had never asked what God desired! The *Star Trek* episode suggested the answer to this question: God desired my Subjectivity! God did not desire that I negate my will, my own desires, or myself, even for my “own good,” as I had been taught.[\[25\]](#)

Whether or not Adams’ is right about God wanting our “Subjectivity,” it is highly significant that she brings the relationship with God from the realm of external to the realm of internal mediation. This reversal alone—focusing on *what God desires for us*—radically changes the equation and opens a door for a kind of positive mimesis which plausibly overcomes Girard’s apparent deep pessimism on the subject, because it shows how it is possible within the mimetic system to imitate God as internal mediation, to catch desires from God, and to propagate those desires re: others.

The other radical insight here is that *the subject desires his or her own subjectivity*. Since it is “self-love,” even “selfish,” it is not implausibly idealistic. Since it is derivative it is not implausibly “autonomous.” And since it is openly dependent on God who wills good for us, it is not warped or “objectifying”; God does not desire us as objects but as freely desiring subjects. God *wills us to desire God’s own desire for us*, which is our freedom and subjectivity, not our objectification. Again, this is quite compelling. By comparison, Girard’s system can sometimes seem almost deist in the remove it puts between God’s perfect will and our corrupted desires.[\[26\]](#)

At any rate, Adams concludes on a triumphant note, as if the problem of positive mimesis has been solved and the result can be put into action, initiating a great chain reaction of loving mimesis:

More generally, it would then follow that if the Model were reciprocally to imitate the desire of the Proto-Subject, the Model would begin to desire his or her own subjectivity, too. Then both might start desiring not their own and each others’ subjectivity, but the subjectivity of others as well. Once begun, there was no telling where this positively contagious chain-reaction of mimetic desire might lead.[\[27\]](#)

It is here, in my view, that Adams seems to get ahead of herself, so this may be a good place to circle back and subject her model to critical scrutiny. Kamala can establish some things, but not as much as Adams proposes (no doubt why she was abandoned in the formal explication). Obviously, Kamala is an idealized, perfectly mimetic being. This helps Adams work through the problem schematically and achieve a genuine breakthrough, but having worked it through, how realistic is she? Essentially, Kamala represents a kind of prelapsarian human. Adams can start with human innocence, but without real-world

examples, or literary ones in Girard's "novelistic" tradition,[\[28\]](#) we cannot really understand how positive mimesis will work out in the context of the rivalry and doubling of mimetic desire.

God has to address our brokenness and warped consciousness—the very things that concern Adams and spurred her exploration to begin with. This is not to discount Adams' reconfiguration of desire, which helps us conceive of our relationship with God as taking place within the realm of internal mediation, but Adams has yet to translate this to the framework of our brokenness. It is this, after all, that contributes to the blocking of our subjectivity, whereas with Kamala it is simply her default genetic makeup.

Picard is likewise a highly idealized model of non-appropriative, non-objectifying desire. Though Adams assumes the general principle of "pay forward," and proceeds to her triumphant conclusion, she misses a step. Practically speaking, if Picard imitates the desire of Kamala, he will imitate the desire for her subjectivity, not his own. They will rejoice together in Kamala's subjectivity, but at no point does this technically translate into mutuality, *unless* Kamala admires Picard's selflessness and altruism and wants to imitate *that*. However (this will become clearer in her formal presentation), "altruism" and "selflessness" are elements in Girard's system that Adams specifically criticizes. It is part of the "splitting" Girard performs, which makes everything about positive mimesis "divine" and everything about rivalrous mimesis human and utterly not of God.

That criticism of Girard is quite cogent, however, in this instance altruism and selflessness slip in through the back door. Personified in Picard, the only way they can be reciprocated is for Kamala to imitate these noble qualities, which in fact she does; by the end of the episode Kamala has learned from Picard to put "duty" over desire—she has mimetically learned *renunciation*. Adams understands this, and notes that this decision by Kamala surprises Picard and seems to disappoint him. So he is, in the end, an imperfect (though well-meaning) model. Kamala gains significant degrees of freedom but, as Adams notes, she "never makes it to a fully loving relation with the world or her own well-being."[\[29\]](#)

Picard is not God, after all, and the *Star Trek* episode has its limitations, however useful it was as a template for "loving mimesis." However, recalling that Adams' goal is reciprocity, mutually enhancing loving mimesis taking place within the context of internal mediation, she still has to show us how this works. Her model needs to be fleshed out with more analysis, and again, with more examples. Girard, after all, gained his insights on mimesis through the analysis of countless examples from literature, myth, ritual, society, psychology, and scriptural text. By contrast, Adams performs precisely one analysis, which, though brilliant and innovative, is not confirmed by further examples. Her work is just beginning when she declares it complete. In her formal model, Adams omits even the example from *Star Trek* (though for valid reasons).

Far from thinking Adams' model is weak, I feel it is frustrating precisely because she stops short of validation that would make it much stronger. This validation seems well within reach.[30] Much more should be done to flesh out Adams' model. At any rate, the stage is now set for Adams to develop her formal model of positive mimesis. Both the strengths and shortcomings of Adams' model in the personal vignette will carry over into the formal exposition.

Adams' Model of Positive Mimesis

Adams' formal exposition appears in "Loving Mimesis and Girard's 'Scapegoat of the Text': A Creative Reassessment of Mimetic Desire." Adams' paper appears toward the end of Swartley's collection *Violence Renounced: Rene Girard, Biblical Studies, and Peacemaking*. [31] Girard himself responded to some of the papers in the volume, but not all, pleading lack of space. Unfortunately, he did not respond to Adams' contribution. Adams' own rhetoric may have made it difficult for Girard to respond; a key assertion is that Girard, for all his achievements in revealing the deep structure of victimization, remains himself caught in the structure of violence and scapegoating. This characterization, though part of her overall thesis, seems needlessly incendiary.

Adams divides her chapter into four key sections. The first two, which I will review together, elaborate her constructive critique of Girard (his "scapegoating of the text" and his "imitation of Christ," respectively). The third section presents her formal model of "loving mimesis" (which had its genesis in the *Star Trek* episode), with detailed exposition and graphics that extrapolate from Girard's "mimetic triangle." The concluding section, along with which I will also conclude, discusses the ramifications of her model for "theology, politics and peacemaking." [32] As also with her vignette, Adams' conclusion goes straight from exposition to application, which, again, I find problematic. Nevertheless, since practical ramifications are the theme of Swartley's collection, Adams may have felt the need to sketch them out. Adams also includes seven pages of endnotes with astute observations that often clarify what is treated more opaquely in the main text. (Adams has a consistent tendency to hide helpful and elucidating material in non-obvious places!)

The Critique of Girard

Adams introduces a new element in her constructive critique of Girard ("new" relative to the personal vignette just reviewed): the "scapegoating of the text." Adams means the scapegoating of concepts and categories. Here she is attempting to work out theoretically what she had discovered experientially re: positive mimesis. For this, Adams relies on an ambitious hermeneutic, taking mimetic theory as a complete, airtight epistemological system, or one that will become so once she has introduced the necessary corrections.

Adams acknowledges that Girard has "developed a powerful hermeneutic of suspicion and a compelling theory of culture," [33] but takes issue with Girard's

tendency to conceptualize and speak in a way that remains in the very violent system of representation he seeks to undo. In doing so, he inadvertently relegates love, and thus ethics, and ultimately even his own concept of mimetic desire, to the realm of what he calls *the Sacred*.[\[34\]](#) (Adams' emphasis)

To be consistent and complete, mimetic theory needs to be applied to itself: Adams aims to save Girard from Girard. With its internal inconsistencies elucidated and overcome, Adams hopes mimetic theory will truly rise to its potential as a consistent, coherent, comprehensive system and agent of transformation.

According to Adams, Girard "splits" mimesis into good and bad. Adams presents a table with "bad" and "good" elements of mimesis contrasted left and right. Girard scapegoats and "expels" everything on the left (e.g. "acquisitive," "rivalrous," "internal mediation," "human reason," "myth," "violence," "human culture (+ nature).") What is good (e.g. "nonacquisitive," "nonrivalrous," "external mediation," "imitation of Christ," "Agape," "divine nature," "truth of victim," "Christ") remains, but it is "inhumanly" good.[\[35\]](#) Girard's system inadvertently scapegoats and expels the human, leaving us with an impossible model. Hence, in a sense it expels mimesis and desire itself.

. . . escape of "salvation" from the victimage mechanism and sin as violent desire in Girard's current theological framework is always conceived as *conversion* to an entirely separate divine order represented by the right hand of this dichotomy. Because there is an insuperable metaphysical gap . . . mimetic desire . . . is propelled out of the realm of recognizable human life and understanding into the realm of the "sacred" (in Girard's negative sense) by being expelled at times as purely demonic (bad, acquisitive, and human) and elevated at others as purely divine (utterly good, nonacquisitive, and of God).[\[36\]](#) (Adams' emphasis)

Adams finds that her conclusions

. . . point toward the lack of a genuine creative sacred in Girard's work as well as toward theological conceptions of both sin and salvation which continue to fall into a mythical, scapegoating structure. In fact, the way Girard currently conceives a nonviolent religious orientation and social reality logically entails insisting on absolute difference between human and divine love, between human reality and divine revelation, then scapegoating everything human.[\[37\]](#)

These conclusions apply not only to Girard; in the main text as well as in the notes Adams includes several other Girardian scholars in this critique.[\[38\]](#)

This might be a good point to stop and examine Adams' conclusions. Adams' most cogent point is about the split between the human and the divine in Girard's system, and this is indeed compelling. In fact, I consider this a great breakthrough, one that leads to her other

conceptual breakthrough: asking what God desires, and then being able to reconceive our relationship with God as taking place in the realm of internal mediation.

But Adams, of course, wants to do a great deal more, and I am quite ambivalent about it. To argue that Girard splits mimesis problematically, even to argue that this problem is systematic, is not the same thing as saying (as Adams essentially does) that any such conceptual splitting is “violence” and “scapegoating.” She speaks of the linguistic and conceptual “violence” that mimetic theory commits when it is incorrectly applied, and how by reaching some conclusions Girard is excluding and “scapegoating” others. Yet one might legitimately ask whether violence itself is being substantially emptied of meaning if it is applied so readily to conceptual distinctions, and whether any intellectual endeavor is possible given these terms of engagement.

Thus, to the extent that this is *incorrect*, it seems to be theoretical overreach. Alternately, to the extent that it is *correct*, it leads to deep pessimism about any knowledge, including the knowledge obtained in Adams’ own system. Before examining the latter possibility, let us entertain the first, that it is theoretical overreach, and further, that in reflecting Girard’s own way of theorizing, it indicates something wrong with Girard’s “scapegoat” epistemology (that all logical and conceptual distinctions go back to the first human distinction: the scapegoat).

That this is Girard’s view is pointed out by Adams in the notes where she states that Girard’s project “is exactly in the business of analyzing such splitting and expulsion phenomena (particularly textually) as evidence of scapegoating.”^[39] Thus, it is Girard himself who conflates scapegoating with conceptual discrimination—with thought itself. In fact, I have never been able to determine whether Girard *really believed this*—that logic and rational distinction is scapegoating—or if it was rhetorical extravagance, a kind of Girardian hyperbole. Adams certainly takes him seriously. However, by “out-Girarding” Girard here to make mimetic theory internally consistent, Adams may be inadvertently highlighting its weakness. There is no escape from scapegoating if we engage in it whenever we distinguish one thing from another. Even a refusal to so distinguish, like a medical researcher’s refusal to distinguish “good” from “bad” bacteria, would scapegoat human beings, i.e. infected people.

As a tangential note, Adams makes some effort to rhetorically dampen appearances of exclusion and claims that her system transcends it. To her credit, she recognizes the difficulty of avoiding scapegoating later in the paper:

One challenge . . . will be not to scapegoat even those we perceive as perpetrators of violence. This will be the most difficult step in giving up our deeply-entrenched violent patterns of thought, because—for victims especially—it will be tempting to believe that in renouncing the false power to scapegoat we also jeopardize our appropriate power

to identify and resist evil.[\[40\]](#)

But the “challenge” might be more pervasive than Adams’ realizes, even in her own paper. The characterization of Girard’s categories as “violent,” “dualistic” and “scapegoating” concepts that need to be rejected do not inspire confidence in Adams’ goal of overcoming scapegoating, exclusion and violence. She might have done well to take her own advice and dampen the incendiary terminology.

But putting that aside, let us suppose that Adams’ assertion about “scapegoating the text” is not theoretical overreach, that it is true. What would then prevent us from saying Adams is engaging in her own splitting and “scapegoating” of any conclusions that are rejected within her own system? Surely Adams herself is selecting what is good and bad about mimetic theory and performing her own expulsions. By the end of her paper it will be clear what would be put on Adams’ left column (e.g. “object,” “objectifying,” “appropriative,” “violent,” “dualistic”) and on the right (“subject,” “subjectivity,” “authentic,” “genuine creative sacred”). It would in fact be easy for the next theorist to apply the same standard to Adams’ model and locate its hidden violence and scapegoating, and equally easy for the next theorist after that to discover the same thing about Adams’ detractor, and so on *ad infinitum*. To me, this “hermeneutic of suspicion” implies scapegoats all the way down. Rather than being an agent of transformation, it seems it would simply eat itself alive.

I should be clear about what I am objecting to in Adams’ critique. I feel that Adams’ highlights genuine problems with Girard’s conceptions of good and bad mimesis, and very cogently. Nevertheless, the proposition concerning Girard’s “scapegoating of the text” is problematic and tends to undercut not only her own arguments but mimetic theory itself. The fault may be ultimately Girard’s for encouraging this kind of conceptualizing, possibly through injudicious language. Yet, again, to the extent that Girard *really believed* in linguistic violence and conceptual scapegoating, it may indicate a problem not just with Adams’ system but Girard’s.

For Adams it would arguably be better to be less committed to Girard’s hypothesis as a total system and simply let her search for positive mimesis take her where it will. From the standpoint of my narrowly focused interest—how positive mimesis can manifest in the context of internal mediation—I would have been much happier if Adams had simply stopped there, following up the psychosocial implications of her outstanding insights. She seems to discover more when she follows this investigative intuition than when she tries to both preserve and reform mimetic theory *in toto*, forcing herself into what I see as theoretical contortions.

An alternative is suggested by Adams in the context of “splitting”:

. . . it is easy to slip into the simple equation of mimetic desire with violence and something “bad.” This is why many people, to defend human ethics, have expelled the

concept of mimetic desire altogether and even the Girardian hypothesis itself.[41]

But dissent from Girard's hypothesis need not necessitate rejection of mimetic desire. For instance, adherents of generative anthropology (GA) reject the conflation of mimesis with violence, as well as the centrality of scapegoating in Girard's hypothesis of human origins, and in fact have a different conception of ethics. Yet GA does not reject mimetic desire, which is central to it. Since language and hence human thought for GA originate in the exchange of the sign, they do not inherently possess a deep structure of scapegoating.[42] If Adams had GA's premises available to her, she would not need to get into the difficult and it seems to me self-defeating project of trying to overcome cognitive scapegoating without at the same time engaging in it.

This leads to a deeper theoretical issue. I have argued elsewhere that the search for positive mimesis tends inadvertently to support GA's conception of human origins, and to undermine that of mimetic theory.[43] This is because positive mimesis presents a chicken-vs-egg dilemma, which applies also to Adams' pursuit of "loving mimesis," insofar as she agrees with Girard that scapegoating structures human consciousness all the way back to its origins. If that is the case, "loving mimesis" (either as a concept or as an experience) would be an epiphenomenon of scapegoating, hence not so loving after all, *unless* it existed in some form prior to scapegoating. But, if it existed prior to scapegoating, then human consciousness *also* existed prior to scapegoating, and if that is true, *scapegoating is not the origin of human thought*.

However, this discussion goes beyond the scope of the present paper, so let us let us return to Adams' study and the next part her critique: Girard's "imitation of Christ." This will be familiar from the review of the personal account, but it follows (and follows skillfully) from her critique of Girard's splitting and scapegoating. Those aspects of mimesis which were split onto the left side of the mimetic equation, and excluded/scapegoated ("acquisitive," "internal mediation," etc.) leave the other half still remaining (e.g. "nonacquisitive," "nonrivalrous," "external mediation," "imitation of Christ," "Agape," "divine nature," "truth of victim," etc.). This is Girard's "good desire," which we absolutely must imitate yet, practically speaking, cannot imitate, unless it is by renunciation and abject humility.

As outlined previously, Adams' personal experience makes her sensitive to this weakness in Girard's system; her critique remains compelling and she articulates it very well here. Girard sees the imitation of Christ

as simply the "giving up" of power, agency, and desire, or, conversely (and more subtly), as voluntarily taking on the position of the victim *in the sense of giving up one's position as a persecutor/perpetrator of violence*. This injunction paradoxically leaves *actual* victims disempowered, with no possibility of agency or desire of their own, and reifies them in exactly the same social, political, and metaphysical position as

before—in the position of *victims*. The particular problems of actual victims of violence therefore go unrecognized in this formulation, because it fails to see their genuine difference within historical experience in relation to violence, and thus their different subjectivity.[\[44\]](#) (Adams’ emphasis)

One could characterize Adams’ arguments here as “playing the victim card,” asserting epistemological or other status by virtue of one’s victimization. However, I find Adam’s concerns legitimate. They address a real problem in mimetic theory.

Girard’s subjects are mimetically tangled people with comparative advantage in society, even petty officials like Dostoyevsky’s underground man. Their mimetic torments are very real, but such are experienced very differently by those on the “receiving end” in society. I have found in my own reflections on extreme social isolation that mimetic theory fails to address or even describe the plight of such people, though it is clearly mimetic in nature.[\[45\]](#) Rather than struggling from *within* the mimetic system (like most of Girard’s subjects) these people have instead already internalized their defeat. This is precisely what Adams is trying to address, and I am quite sympathetic.

The Model

We come finally to Adams formal model of “loving mimesis.” Positive mimesis is necessary for Adams precisely because mimetic theory fails to encompass the possibility of “good” desires, especially (but not only) for those most in need of a positive “subjectivity.” Adams presents a series of schematic diagrams, leading from Girard’s original mimetic triangle to Adams’ model (derived from the Star Trek episode).

This segment is both the best and the worst part of Adams’ project. It is best because Adams mostly succeeds in working out a dynamic model of positive mimesis operating in the context of internal mediation, which to my knowledge no one else has done. It is worst because the presentation is frustratingly opaque, overly dense conceptually, and full of new terms (like “proto-subject”) that are barely explicated. The presentation lacks *any* demonstration through concrete example—as noted earlier, even the Star Trek episode is not referenced. Even Girard’s basic mimetic triangle becomes suddenly hard to comprehend, since the Mediator is doubly identified as “Mediator(Subject)” and the Subject as “(proto)Subject” (to indicate that he or she does not yet have agency).

Summarizing this part of Adams’ project, which is of course the most important part, is no easy task. I elect to do so by bypassing Adams’ schematic demonstration, cutting out some complicating factors and novel terminology, and reintroducing the *Star Trek* episode, however imperfect, for without it the model is genuinely baffling.

Adams’ first step it to move from Girard’s classic triangle to a specific variation of it: the “coquette” or “pseudo-narcissist.” Conceptually, the mimetic structure around the

“coquette” or pseudo-narcissist is revealing for Adams because Mediator and Object are collapsed into one: the subject desires the Mediator’s desire for his or her self. This is one of Girard’s most brilliant analytical concepts and merits recapitulation.

In Girard’s system, one can never be a *real* narcissist, because one cannot desire anything (including oneself) independently. However, one can *appear* to be a narcissist by representing the desire directed at oneself, e.g. in the form of confidence, placid self-assurance, and the like. The *apparent* narcissism thus becomes a technique or strategy (mostly unconscious) for attracting still more desire, with mutually enhancing feedback effects. The successful “pseudo-narcissist” floats in a field of derivative desire that appears to be autogenerated.[46] Girard sees pseudo-narcissists in Shakespeare’s comedies, notably Olivia in *Twelfth Night*. Her aura of complacent self-love, sustained by fawning sycophants, is instantly punctured by a critical interloper (Viola, disguised as a man), to great comic effect.[47]

Adams goes on to ask, “How could the coquette (here, for convenience, considered female) desire herself as an object if she had not already imitated someone else’s desire for her as an object?”[48] Adams then introduces what she calls the “colonization” of mimetic desire. This is the antecedent working of desire (not treated by Girard), wherein the mediator first desired the coquette as an object: the initial objectification of the coquette. “The proto-Subject then imitates the mediator’s desire and desires him or herself *as an object*. This responsive action simultaneously creates the coquette phenomenon and a split, inauthentic, and/or derivative subjectivity ‘colonized’ by the subjectivity of the mediator” (emphasis Adams’).[49]

To make this more concrete, it is useful to re-introduce the metamorph: Kamala adopts what Adams would call an inauthentic desire with every man she encounters. Until Picard, all of her subjectivity is by definition “colonized.” (It is not quite “narcissistic” in the same way, because it feeds the narcissism of the admirers rather than that of Kamala—another possible reason why the example was abandoned for the formal presentation.) Both Kamala and the males who become obsessed with her are caught in this colonization, in inauthentic subjectivity.

This is important to Adams because it shows “the process through which internalized oppression is actually generated and propagated, via the specific mechanism of mimetic desire.”[50] That is, people objectify themselves by imitating their objectification by others. Since mimesis is inescapable, this very description appears “more than ever to leave historic victims stranded in the persecutor/victim dichotomy, seemingly with no way out.”[51] But it is here that Adams introduces her positive model.

It is not mimesis per se which colonizes the desiring subject, but *objectification*. Her treatment of “colonized” desire suggests that “violence is somehow bound up with *objects*,

or the nature of *turning things into objects*" (Adams' emphasis).[\[52\]](#) Adams then goes on to ask, "Under what conditions do we genuinely get something without appropriating it (as an object)? In the language of the double bind, how do we acquire an object *without* acquiring it?" (Adams' emphasis).[\[53\]](#)

Adams proposes a scheme in which "the object desired by the mediator is the *subjectivity* of the proto-subject" (Adams' emphasis).[\[54\]](#) "Proto-subject" is to me an awkward phrase that confuses the explication, so it useful once again to recall the *Star Trek* episode, which is actually what she is describing here. For clarification, we can mentally substitute "Kamala" for proto-subject, and "Picard" for the mediator:

. . . if the proto-subject [Kamala] were to imitate the desire of the mediator [Picard], then the proto-subject [Kamala] would desire his or her own subjectivity. [This model] *thus creatively fulfills both conditions of the double bind* (Imitate me! Don't imitate me!), *which are really a seamless simultaneous command*. That is, if proto-subjects [like Kamala] fulfill the first half of the command and desire their own subjectivity, they also by definition fulfill the second: They will not merely imitate the mediator's [Picard's] subjectivity.

Furthermore, no rivalry ensues . . . since the object of desire by definition is that which cannot be appropriated by (reduced to the subjectivity of) the mediator [Picard]. Yet the mediator [Picard] and proto-subject [Kamala] both get or acquire something through this act of mimesis—that is, greater subjectivity, desire and relationship than either had before. Also in this case, if the mediator [Picard] reciprocally imitates the proto-subject's [Kamala's] desire, once again they both end up desiring the proto-subject's [Kamala's] subjectivity.[\[55\]](#) (Adams' emphasis)

Adams continues,

. . . if I am the mediator, I will be inclined to desire another's subjectivity (even assuming that desire comes out of my own lack or self-interest) because it enriches both of us to do so. It is both selfless (altruistic) and self-interested (selfish, narcissistic) to desire the subjectivity of the other, since I also desire my own subjectivity in the process. By definition, in desiring your subjectivity I get or acquire an intersubjective relationship with you, the proto-subject, but I do so without acquiring you as an *object*.

This paradigm of intersubjective participation through self-reflexive mimetic desire . . . transforms our understanding of classic triangular desire. If I as proto-subject imitate the mediator's desire more generally (i.e. imitate the mediator's desire for the subjectivity of third, external objects), I end up desiring not only myself but others and indeed potentially *everything around me* as a subject—as something alive with its own irreducible being, yet in dynamic, loving, intersubjective relation to me. Entering into

and participating in this dynamic relation could be understood theologically as adopting the same unconditional relation of love that Christ exemplifies in relation to the Father, or imitating him.[\[56\]](#) (Adams' emphasis)

This is nearly all quite brilliant and groundbreaking. To use Adams' own words, her model,

. . . fully meets the criteria Girard exhaustively sets out as characteristic of mimetic desire: it is "acquisitive"; it leads to doubling; it escalates in a feedback loop; it transforms subjects and objects; it has a metaphysical character; and it even describes a "twin narcissism" (wherein desiring you is really desiring myself). Yet in this case all these characteristics are not only nonviolent but actively constructive.[\[57\]](#)

Nevertheless, Adams rushes ahead again, without subjecting her results to scrutiny. The question already brought up in relation to Adams' personal account reappears: what will the mediator get out of all this, except the self-flattery of having his or her desire for the proto-subject's subjectivity imitated? There is no point in this model at which the proto-subject (i.e., Kamala) or the mediator (i.e., Picard) explicitly desires the subjectivity of the mediator. They both get "greater subjectivity, desire, and relationship than either had before" but left unspecified that implies that both get to rejoice together in the proto-subject's (Kamala's) subjectivity. It did not go beyond that with the *Star Trek* analogy, and to be fair Adams does not include it here, but no other example has been supplied in which it does. Thus, this part of Adams' thesis greatly needs elaboration.[\[58\]](#)

Adams also leaves unspecified the mechanism of desiring "*everything around me* as a subject—something alive with its own irreducible being, yet in dynamic, loving, intersubjective relation to me." We have gone from objectifying humans (bad) to subjectifying non-human entities (good), but Adams does not explain how we got there or what this means. This *sounds* compelling, in the way that St. Francis is a very compelling saint, but when Francis loved birds, flowers, sun and moon did it mean that he desired their subjectivity? If Adams is talking about imitating God's love for creation, by sharing in this love with God, this makes more sense. But since she doesn't explicate it that way, she appears to anthropomorphize nature as a desiring subject without explaining *how* creation can be a desiring subject.

Conclusion

As noted, Adams gets ahead of herself once her model is in place, and proceeds to discuss it as a paradigm of change before it has been (in my opinion) even minimally fleshed out. I believe that her work has just begun when she declares it complete. Her paper concludes with transformational generalities, which is understandable since this is the theme of Swartley's volume. Nevertheless, Adams' model would surely be more transformative if we could see how it worked, at least with concrete examples.

Among Adams' initial concerns was that the Christian focus of Girard's ideas leaves them unavailable to people from other faiths. Adams returns to this:

What of Girard's claim that the Christian gospel uniquely reveals the scapegoating basis of human culture? As I have said, mimetic desire reconceived as love overturns the claim that violence and scapegoating form the basis of human experience. It is not hard to see theologically that love of this type cannot be confined to the special revelation of Jesus. Thus it cannot be, as Girard currently claims, *the* unique claim of Christianity to unmask the violent victimage mechanism and reveal nonviolent love in its place, though of course Christianity does this.[59] (emphasis Adams')

Unexceptional in itself, this nevertheless seems something of a loose nod toward religious inclusivity. On the one hand, Adams probably overstates Girard's position, since he has at the very least pointed out that Greek tragedy problematizes the scapegoat mechanism.[60] On the other hand, she underplays, or perhaps seems oblivious to, the *deeply theistic* nature of her own project. It is Adams, much more than Girard, who cannot stop talking about God, and it seems to be a very Christian, Trinitarian God.

Her imperative is for us to experience the creative love of God in the context of internal mediation, and to recapitulate it in our interaction with others and creation at large. Though this is deeply compelling from my own religious perspective, frankly speaking, atheists, agnostics and at least some people of faith (depending on the tradition) might be more comfortable with the remote, stoic, even deistic impression of God one can sense sometimes when reading Girard. That impression of divinity is more neutral and, with a few adjustments, not necessarily distinguishable from agnosticism or atheism.[61]

As this overview concludes, I fear that the cumulative effect of my objections and quibbles with Adams' model create a misleading impression. It may not be obvious at this point how deeply I appreciate what Adams has done. My writing elsewhere on psychosocial pathologies, especially social isolation, have convinced me for years of the need to define and explore positive mimesis,[62] and no efforts in that directions have impressed me more strongly than Adams'. Her reconfiguration of Girard's "coquette" has also been indispensable to me for exploring positive mimesis in literary analysis.[63] Adams' model of "loving mimesis," however much it may need further elaboration, is groundbreaking and deeply insightful.

Though Adams is widely respected by Girard scholars, her model is less known, or when it is known, not known as clearly as it could be. It should not only be better known, but also further discussed, explored and elaborated. It is one of the most promising models, if not *the* most promising model, of positive mimesis.

Notes

[1] Developed over nearly all of Girard's work but most notably *Deceit, Desire and the Novel*, trans. Yvonne Freccero (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1976); *Violence and the Sacred*, trans. Patrick Gregory (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1979); *Things Hidden Since the Foundation of the World*, trans. Stephen Bann and Michael Metteer (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1987); *The Scapegoat*, trans. Yvonne Freccero (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1992); *I See Satan Fall Like Lightning*, trans. James G. Williams (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2001); *Battling to the End*, trans. Mary Baker (East Lansing: Michigan State UP, 2010).

[2] The literature in mimetic theory is extensive. There is a useful review in Petra Steinmair-Pösel's, "Original Sin, Grace, and Positive Mimesis," *Contagion: Journal of Violence, Mimesis, and Culture*, 14 (2007) 1-12. See also the essay collections edited by Vern Neufeld Redekop and Thomas Ryba: *René Girard and Creative Reconciliation* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2013) and *René Girard and Creative Mimesis* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2016). Some scholars I have spoken to have resisted the idea of positive mimesis, either because they think mimesis is inescapably conflictual, or because they think it is fruitless to think of mimesis in itself as "good" or "bad." Unfortunately, I cannot engage that discussion here.

[3] See most famously Girard's excerpted interview with Rebecca Adams, "The Goodness of Mimetic Desire," *The Girard Reader*, ed. James G. Williams (New York: Crossroad, 1996) 62-65. Girard's views on positive mimesis have remained fairly consistent (and consistently ambivalent) up to and including his last great work, *Battling to the End*: see pages 43-44, 122, 133-134, 177.

[4] Elaborated concisely by Girard in the chapter "Triangular Desire," *The Girard Reader*, 33-44.

[5] Ibid.

[6] The two primary sources for this overview are Adam's "Loving Mimesis and Girard's 'Scapegoat of the Text': A Creative Reassessment of Mimetic Desire," *Violence Renounced: René Girard, Biblical Studies, and Peacemaking*, ed. Willard M. Swartley (Telford, PA: Pandora Press, 2000) 277-307, and Adam's personal vignette, untitled and inset as a sidebar in Vern Neufeld Redekop's *From Violence to Blessing: How an Understanding of a Deep-rooted Conflict Can Open Paths of Reconciliation* (Toronto: Novalis, 2002) 260-269. The raw version of the present paper which I put up on Academia received an unusually high number of views, indicating substantial interest in positive mimesis in general and especially in Adams' model.

[7] See for instance Martha J. Reineke, *Intimate Domain: Desire, Trauma and Mimetic Theory* (East Lansing: Michigan State UP, 2014) 9, and Tim Howles in his fine but

unpublished study, "A Genealogy of Atonement Theology in the Work of René Girard," https://www.academia.edu/3990401/A_Genealogy_of_Atonement_Theology_in_the_Work_of_Rene_Girard, 20. I have favorably referenced Adams' model in "Not with a Bang but a Whimper: *Muen Shakai* and Its Implications," *Anthropoetics*, 18, no. 2 (Fall/Winter, 2012), paragraphs 59-61, <http://www.anthropoetics.ucla.edu/ap1801/1801taylor.htm> . I have also used Adams' model as a basis to analyze Austenian characters in "Beholding the Beholder's Eye: Beauty and Mimetic Effects in Jane Austen." *Anthropoetics*, 25, no. 1 (Fall, 2019), <http://anthropoetics.ucla.edu/ap2501/2501taylor/> .

[8] The excerpted interview in *The Girard Reader* (Note 3). The original interview in its entirety was "Violence, Difference, Sacrifice: A Conversation with René Girard," *Religion and Literature*, 25, no. 2 (1993), 9-33. The full interview has since been republished in *Conversations with René Girard: Prophet of Envy*, ed. Cynthia L. Haven (New York: Bloomsbury, 2020), 51-72.

[9] Page 64 in Haven (note 8 above).

[10] *Ibid.*, 62-65.

[11] *Ibid.* See also *Battling to the End*, 122-123.

[12] "Loving Mimesis and Girard's 'Scapegoat of the Text'" and the personal vignette in Redekop (note 6 above).

[13] The personal vignette, 261.

[14] *Ibid.*

[15] *Ibid.*, 264

[16] *Ibid.*, 265

[17] *Ibid.*, 266.

[18] *Ibid.*

[19] "The Perfect Mate," written Gene Roddenberry and Reuben Leder, *Star Trek: The Next Generation* (Paramount Television, 1992).

[20] Vignette, 261.

[21] Personal vignette, 262

[22] *Ibid.*, 263

[23] Ibid.

[24] Ibid., 266-267.

[25] Ibid., 267.

[26] Eric Gans (personal communication, March 19, 2015), after reading an initial draft of this paper, found this characterization of Girard unjust: “. . . although certain of his works show God as distant, I think Girard is a better Christian than you give him credit for; ending *Mensonge Romantique* [*Deceit, Desire and the Novel*] with Alyosha [in Dostoyevsky’s *The Brothers Karamazov*] shows that human love is indeed possible, the mimetic self can be transcended even in the ‘diabolical’ context of the novel.”

[27] Vignette, 267.

[28] In *Deceit, Desire and the Novel*, “novelistic” (*romanesque*) fiction characterizes the literary masterworks that Girard thinks are revelatory of mimetic desire.

[29] Personal vignette, 263. Adams (personal communication, July 8, 2015) also informed me of a feminist objection to Picard along the same lines. I have suggested (“Beholding the Beholder’s Eye,” note 7) that Richard Gere’s character in the movie *Runaway Bride* (Paramount Pictures, 1999) plays a role similar to Picard’s, in relation to Julia Roberts’ character. Though I initially thought the reciprocal romance in the movie weakened the example somewhat in comparison to Picard, on further reflection, the reciprocity actually makes Gere’s character a *better* model for Adams’ purposes.

[30] I have attempted to extend Adams’ model in an earlier essay for *Anthropoetics* (“Beholding the Beholder’s Eye,” note 7 above), using it to analyze Jane Austen’s characters Anne Elliot and Fanny Price.

[31] Note 6.

[32] “Loving Mimesis,” 297.

[33] Ibid., 277

[34] Ibid., 280.

[35] Ibid., 283.

[36] Ibid., 285.

[37] Ibid., 286.

[38] Ibid., 282 and 305-306 (note 35).

[39] Ibid., 304 (note 17).

[40] Ibid., 296.

[41] Ibid., 284.

[42] See Eric Gans, "A Brief Introduction to Generative Anthropology," *Anthropoetics* (February 16, 2017), <http://anthropoetics.ucla.edu/gaintro/> . Also, Peter Goldman, "Why Generative Anthropology?" *Chronicles of Love and Resentment* 445 (July 3, 2013), <https://web.archive.org/web/20160401153850/http://www.anthropoetics.ucla.edu/views/vw445.htm> .

[43] "Not with a Bang but a Whimper" (note 7 above) paragraphs 48-56, the section "Positive Mimesis and the Originary Scene."

[44] "Loving Mimesis," 287.

[45] "Not with a Bang but a Whimper" (note 7 above). See also "Strategies of Dissociation: A Mimetic Dimension to Social Problems in Japan" *Anthropoetics* 12, no. 1 (Spring/Summer, 2006), <http://www.anthropoetics.ucla.edu/ap1201/index.htm> , and "Scene of Distress: Reflections on Francis Fukuyama's 'End of History'" *Anthropoetics* 22, no. 2 (Spring, 2017), <http://anthropoetics.ucla.edu/ap2202/2202taylor/> .

[46] Well developed by Girard in *Things Hidden Since the Foundation of the World*, 367-393.

[47] *A Theater of Envy* (Leominster, Herefordshire: Gracewing, 2000) 106-120.

[48] "Loving Mimesis," 292.

[49] Ibid.

[50] Ibid.

[51] Ibid.

[52] Ibid., 293.

[53] Ibid.

[54] Ibid., 294.

[55] Ibid., 294.

[56] Ibid., 294-295.

[57] Ibid., 262.

[58] See note 29, with *Runaway Bride* as an analogy (the main characters actually model reciprocity better than Picard and Kamala). See also note 30: I have analyzed Jane Austen's characters using Adams' model.

[59] Ibid., 301.

[60] See for instance *The Scapegoat*, 122-123.

[61] However, see note 26 for a more generous view of Girard.

[62] Notes 7 and 43.

[63] Notes 7, 30 and 58.