

# A New Way of Interpreting Literature, Shakespeare, and Milton

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## Abstract

This essay argues that the connection between a literary work and its audience is dialogical and inhabited by desire or resentment. It follows that our relationship to literature—its figures, form, and implied author—is ethical, subject to similar concerns that inform our relationship to other people. From this perspective, the basic issue for interpretation is authority, including the potential resistance of readers and how a work responds to this problem. Modernity involves the shift of authority from the public, ritual scene to the private scene of representation. Christian egalitarianism builds upon Hebrew iconoclasm to create a widespread skepticism toward public figures both literary and political. As a result, literature needs to supplement itself to ward off the potential rivalry and resentment of the audience. Beginning with the Renaissance, literature does this by staging the scene of representation within the work. Self-reference, in various forms, functions to model the audience's relationship to central figures and defend against their potential resentment. Examples from Shakespeare's plays and Milton's *Paradise Lost* are used to develop and support the thesis.

**Keywords:** authority, René Girard, Eric Gans, resentment, rivalry, resistance, Renaissance, Reformation, iconoclasm, hermeneutics, Shakespeare, John Milton.

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How should we understand the relationship between a work of literature and its audience? To begin, we can observe that Aristotle's concept of catharsis and the classical dichotomy of "teach and delight" remain foundational for understanding how literature functions. But Aristotle has little to say about how the audience's response is affected by historical circumstances. For this question we need to turn to the Russian theorist Mikhail Bakhtin and his recognition that discourse, especially literary discourse, is essentially dialogical in nature. Whereas Aristotle views the audience as passive in reception, Bakhtin calls our attention to the two-way, dynamic relationship of audience and artwork. A literary work is necessarily formed in response to the concerns of a specific historical audience: their questions, interests, and resistance, so that a text can be said to be "looking" in several

directions at once and working on different levels simultaneously. Writers, of course, know that it's necessary to address a particular audience; but Bakhtin takes this insight to a deeper level by exploring how discourse is dialogical not just in address but in origin and formation, at every level. Bakhtin is notable for his understanding of language in structural terms: it's not just individuals who are in dialogue with each other but discourses, which condition what can and cannot be said.[1]

But it's not always clear what motivates the process of dialogue or heteroglossia in Bakhtin's theory, and to this extent he is rather confined by the framework of structuralism. As I've argued elsewhere, Bakhtin's theory needs Rene Girard's interpretation of mimetic desire to supplement his concept of the dialogical.[2] Mimesis or imitation is the force that brings different individuals and discourses into creative dialogue with each other, a process that may involve contradictions and struggle. Girard is fundamentally concerned with ethical issues including the foundational question of social order. Mimetic desire, Girard observes, often leads us into conflict. Our condition as social animals is desire, and this leads to the possibility of frustration and resentment in our relations at the personal and political levels.[3]

The connection between a literary work and its audience can be viewed in the terms I've just outlined: dialogical and inhabited by desire or resentment. Our relationship to literature—its figures, form, and implied author—is ethical, subject to similar (although not identical) concerns that inform our relationship to other humans. Writers are well aware of potential resistance because they are the first audience of their work and members of the same community, even if they are leading in a new direction. Authors must consider how to fashion their work so that it can overcome or avoid reader resentment. The basic issue for a new way of interpreting literature is *authority*, including the potential resistance of readers and how a work responds to this problem. This new method requires a new way of thinking about literary authority. But first we need to consider the larger question of cultural authority.

## 1. Language, Culture, and Social Order

We know from Darwin (and just common sense) that the basic condition for living creatures is competition for limited resources, food and desirable mates. Darwin (and before him, Adam Smith) shows that by a winnowing process competition can be productive of dynamic innovations. For social species, however, intraspecies competition can create dangers for the group. No one has elucidated the nature of this danger (in regard to humans) better than Girard with his theory of mimetic desire. Aristotle observes that humans are the most mimetic of animals. Our mimetic nature explains the delight we take in works of art that represent or imitate things or actions. Aristotle notes that we learn by imitation, and we enjoy learning new things, knowledge or skills (6-7). Aristotle amends Plato's concept of mimesis, by which mimesis has the tendency to dissolve necessary social distinctions; hence

Socrates' advice to banish the poets from his ideal republic.[4] I certainly don't think we can accuse Girard of reviving Plato's fear of mimesis. But Girard recognizes that our propensity for mimesis is not without danger, when individuals imitate each other's desires. Objects, or persons, that become the focus of convergent desires are often the putative cause for conflict, which can reach epic proportions, as with the case of Helen of Troy. Our predisposition for mimesis expresses the underlying imperative of competition for limited resources. Mimesis facilitates learning and consumption, both of which are necessary for survival.[5] Excluding a rival from appropriation may be just as adaptive as appropriation by itself, and Girard points out that mimesis is expressed more by rivalry than desire by itself (*The Girard Reader* 41-42). For this reason, mimesis can lead us to desire things that are actually destructive in various ways.

The instinct for mimesis is favored by natural selection, at least in the human line of primates. Considered as a form of learning and competition, mimesis is adaptive for the species, but it can lead to destructive conflicts that threaten not only individuals but the group as a whole, as the example of the Trojan war illustrates. Many Shakespeare plays illustrate how the rivalry among powerful aristocrats can lead to a crisis that threatens the country as whole. Such is the basic plot of many of Shakespeare's tragedies and histories.[6]

Mimesis has two basic meanings: imitation and representation. There is some overlap here. Some forms of representation, such as iconic signifiers, are directly imitative. And even symbolic signifiers that do not physically resemble their signified can be said to imitate their referents in a certain sense.[7] Representation is based on imitation, even as it goes beyond it.[8] Mimetic behavior is found among many animal species, but only humans have representation or language. Mimesis is the decisive common factor among humans and animals, the bridge between our primate ancestors and the human species. The problem then is to explain the transition from animal imitation to human representation. To do so requires a hypothesis of the origin of language. We need such a hypothesis to understand how language answers to the problem of social order. In what follows, I draw upon Eric Gans's originary hypothesis.[9]

All social species have some form of social order. For bees and ants, the social order is based on instinct, encoded in the genes. But purely instinctual behavior leaves little room for flexibility in responding to a changing environment. Other social species have the ability for learning (or at least conditioning), and primates in particular have considerable behavioral flexibility. Such species are typically organized in a dominance hierarchy with alpha animals (male and female), betas, and so on. One's place in the hierarchy is maintained by one-on-one encounters between individuals involving displays of strength (or submission). Coalitions that rely on mutual grooming and similar behaviors are also important. "Authority" in a dominance hierarchy is based on strength and the exchange of favors: direct tokens of help or harm. No language or culture is required. The distribution of food and access to mates is governed by an individual's place in the hierarchy. Human social

order is more complex by several orders of magnitude.

In formulating an originary hypothesis we need to account for all the available relevant evidence with a minimum of presuppositions. There are dozens of theories of human origin. But most such theories fail to account for relevant evidence and/or they make unwarranted presuppositions. We need to construct our hypothesis with the principles of parsimony and necessity at every step. We begin with a primate species in our far distant past (thousands or even millions of years ago) that, due to evolutionary pressures, is becoming more mimetic. Evolutionary pressures necessarily involve the environment in some way, a scarcity of food or the danger of predation, and they can result in competition within the group. Mimetic behavior is something we share with other animals, especially other primates. And we know that mimetic behavior evolves because it is adaptive.[\[10\]](#) In addition, language or representation is a form of mimesis; we can safely assume that the one (language) originated in the other (imitation). Everything in this scenario so far can be parsimoniously accounted for by the available evidence.

Because our primate group is becoming more mimetic, there are increased competitive pressures within the group that would result in potential and/or real conflicts. We can observe the dangers of mimetic behavior among existing primates and especially humans, the most mimetic of all animals. But why did only one primate species evolve language and not the others? Again, there must have been some difference in the environment and/or within the group that led to natural selection for an increased mimetic instinct. Evolution is parsimonious; it doesn't favor the development of anything not adaptive. The ancestors of chimpanzees and gorillas were well adapted to their particular environmental niche such that they didn't need language. We can assume that our primate ancestors originated language because they needed it to survive.

How did our ancestral primate group adapt to the competitive pressures I've described? Remember that mimesis is not just a propensity for imitation and competition but also a form of intelligence. Our primate ancestors were able to invent a new form of mimesis, language, according to the following scenario.

What makes the emergence of language necessary is a conflict that cannot be resolved by existing social order mechanisms (much less a genetic mutation).[\[11\]](#) This group has evolved to the point that, as a group, they are able to successfully hunt other animals. We have observed similar behavior among chimpanzees in hunting smaller animals such as monkeys. We hypothesize a small group of primates has surrounded a food object such as an animal carcass after a successful hunt. Normally, the alpha animal would take the most choice parts, followed by the beta and so on down the line. But the power of competitive mimesis is such that the central food object appears irresistible to the appetite. This is not just simple appetite, but appetite multiplied by the power of imitative rivalry. The power of mimesis compels each individual to reach out to appropriate the central food object,

overcoming the internal restraints normally imposed by the dominance hierarchy. At this point, destructive conflict threatens the group, what is called a mimetic crisis. The threat of violence combined with the power of mimetic appetite is such that the central object appears surpassingly desirable but also surpassingly dangerous. The imperative to imitate meets the imperative not to imitate: the only satisfactory resolution is to continue to imitate in another register, as representation. It seems the central object cannot be appropriated but only signified. The indexical movement of appropriation is converted into a sign, a gesture designating the object as taboo, as sacred, as significant in the human sense. This gesture is the first linguistic sign, an ostensive signifier representing a present object, indicating its significance for the group. The sign is “exchanged” by the primates surrounding the central object, deferring the violence threatening the group.[\[12\]](#) The first sign would be followed by a *sparagmos*, a discharge of aggression directed to the tearing apart and consumption of the animal carcass, equally shared. The originary event disrupts the dominance hierarchy; everyone is equal in terms of their relationship to the center, and in their ability to exchange signs. The nascent humans imitate each other in giving the sign, but they signify the central object consciously and intentionally, and they recognize the sign given by the others. Exchange and deferral are the originary and still essential functions of language. We can choose to trade words instead of blows. Of course, any exchange of signs does not resolve the problem once and for all, and violence remains an ever-present danger to the human species. Words can even be used to incite violence. Such instances do not invalidate our unique ability to defer violence by representation.

Humans are distinguished as the species with an extraordinary facility for mimesis, language, and sophisticated forms of cooperation. Language becomes the basis for a new form of social order. Language depends on repetition and convention, and it can be understood as the minimal form of ritual. On the originary scene and its ritual repetitions, the humans are present to each other as a group, an experience with no equivalent in the animal world. Humans are aware of conspecifics in a novel way, which constitutes the distinction of human consciousness. We are sensitive not just to others’ behavior but also their thoughts, so much so that we sometimes attribute thoughts to animals or even inanimate objects.

Our social order based on language and culture is unique in its flexibility and capacity for formal innovation, from egalitarian hunter-gatherer tribes, the ancient empires of Egypt and Babylonia, the feudal system, and finally democratic free-market societies.

For a long time the first sign was used only at times of real or potential crisis, to avoid the imminent threat of conflict. But eventually the sign would be repeated as a prophylactic in ritual, including the sacrifice and distribution of a food animal. The original ostensive gesture would then be supplemented with imperative signs, designed to summon the presence of god; and finally mature, declarative language, with the ability to discuss anything we can dream or reason about. The evolution of the mature language we have

today would be a relatively slow process over many generations.

There are a few important consequences of the originary hypothesis I want to emphasize. Our social order depends on cultural authority—which is communal and symbolic in nature—and not reducible to indexical tokens of support or threat. On the originary scene, social order involves the submission of the group to the central locus understood as powerful and dangerous: sacred. The repetition of the sign (whether in memory or practice) reveals that the central locus has a “being” that is independent of any particular content. In anthropological terms, this enduring “being” is the origin of the idea of god. The exchange of signs gives rise to a form of transcendence: violence is sublimated or *aufgehoben* through representation. The original form of significance is the sacred, which represents, on one level, the promise of peace, the peaceful presence of the community to itself.

The scene of representation is structured by a center and periphery, the humans who exchange signs about the center. Originally, the central locus is perceived as sacred and therefore forbidden to the humans on the periphery, but eventually it can be occupied by a human who takes on sacred status, such as the “divine” rulers common in human history. We should note the tension between human periphery and central locus. Our relationship to the sacred center and its authority is inherently ambivalent: feared but also desired. Sacred taboos are the epitome of what appear to be arbitrary prohibitions. What is most desired is irrationally forbidden (and vice-versa). We may be grateful to the being of the central locus for creating peace, but we also resent the central figure for excluding us. We see this ambivalence today in our attitude toward public figures such as politicians and celebrities: idolized and admired but also intensely resented. The public may worship a celebrity today and rejoice in their downfall tomorrow. The position of authority is also a position of vulnerability, as so many tragedies illustrate. Public figures are always subject to the resentment of the periphery, those excluded from the privileges of centrality. For these reasons, our cultural order has a certain fragility, since we rely on authority figures yet also resent them. Put positively, the human community strives for reciprocity in all social relations.

Each person at the originary scene remembers the event, in a way that goes beyond the simple conditioning we find in animals. Humans remember an event as an event, so that individuals internalize the scene, which becomes the locus of the self, or soul in religious terms. Each of us has a private scene of representation, the imagination or memory. But the scene of representation is originally public. The originary event functions to subordinate the individual to a higher authority that, as Emile Durkheim recognized, incarnates the power of the community.<sup>[13]</sup> But there is a latent rivalry between the private, internal scene and the public, ritual center.<sup>[14]</sup> As we’ll see, modernity involves the shift of the locus of cultural authority from the public ritual center to the private scene, a shift that makes necessary new forms of social order, such as the social contract, by which we grant authority to the government only on the condition that it protects individual rights. Thomas Hobbes and

John Locke proposed versions of the social contract as the origin of political order, but we can view it more accurately as presenting the logic that governs political systems, the reasons why we obey laws and cooperate with the government.

Given the human propensity for conflict, social order depends upon some kind of authority, whether divinely sanctioned or by general agreement. In the originary hypothesis, the authority granted to the center is perceived as divine and transcendent. The center, in effect, authorizes itself; it is naturally and/or supernaturally divine. But from our perspective, we can see that this perception is a mystification, since what gives the center power is the attention we give to it, focused by our mimetic desires/resentments. These two different ways of understanding centrality are found in history. For most of human history the authority of the ruling class, priestly and aristocratic, was legitimized as divine and (more or less) accepted on this basis; this was true as recently as Shakespeare's lifetime. But the seventeenth century gave rise to alternative theories of political legitimacy based on the idea of "natural" rights.

## **2. Literature and Social Order**

Now that we've outlined the larger problem of social order and authority from an anthropological perspective, we can look at how these issues are refracted in literature. Literature is rooted in myth, of course; and it is only with the ancient Greeks that we find what is properly called literature, written stories primarily about humans rather than the gods alone. The authority of myth is tied up with the authority of religion, which is the historical form of cultural authority. Religion is key to social order in all traditional societies, societies that respect divine laws and hierarchy. How and why did ancient Greece invent literature?

Literature as a relatively independent cultural practice begins with a problem of authority, which was the weakness of religion in ancient Greece.[\[15\]](#) The best evidence for the decline of religion is first of all the fact that only ancient Greece found it both possible and necessary to invent literature and philosophy. The Socratic dialogues reveal a society in which religious truth was openly questioned. Religion was still enormously important, but it was beginning to lose its unquestioned authority.

Compared to modernity, of course, the ancient Greeks were immersed in a religious world-view but comparing them to their neighbors in Egypt and elsewhere reveals important differences. For one thing, the Greeks were traders in the Mediterranean Sea, and as a result they were exposed to different cultures and not in a hostile way. The Greeks were able to see that the cultural distinctions that had traditionally been held as universal and natural were in fact mutable. This recognition led certain citizens to invent philosophy, as an attempt to pierce through the flux of appearances to what is truly essential and universal.

The relative freedom of Athenian society made possible the development of their singular culture, but that same freedom posed problems of social order. The development of art was not simply an expression of the human spirit but an attempt to remedy the weakness of traditional sacred distinctions that were the basis of their community. It was not accidental that tragedy originated in a religious/civic festival, the City Dionysia. Although their art had a degree of cultural independence, it was still grounded in ritual and myth, from which it borrowed its authority. Greek drama was not seeking to displace religion but to support it by providing a secondary path for pacifying resentment. Socratic philosophy was more radical in its relationship to religion.

Religion legitimates itself by recourse to the power of the gods, who require sacrificial rituals, offerings, and prayers to continue to bless the community. The authority of art is rather different. The problem was how to shift authority from the gods to humans, to humanize the divine. The Homeric epics find the struggles of humans just as compelling as those of the gods.

The subjects of Homeric epic and Greek tragedy were drawn mainly from myth and mythic-historical events like the Trojan war, and they were often concerned with semi-divine figures like Heracles and Achilles or kings like Oedipus. Because literature was so closely associated with religion, the authority of literature itself was not particularly problematic (Plato notwithstanding); what was primary were real life problems of social and political conflict, which typically formed the subject matter of their literature. As Gans has pointed out, the famous “rage” of Achilles, his “*menis*,” the first word of *The Iliad*, is best understood as his “resentment” of Agamemnon for pulling rank and taking away his captive Briseis.<sup>[16]</sup> The rivalry between warrior aristocrats is a serious problem for military hierarchies. What happens when the greatest warrior, Achilles, must submit himself to the war leader, King Agamemnon; when merit conflicts with status? Achilles learns finally that he must abandon his wrath and reconcile with the community, that even the greatest of warriors is subject to fate. In this sense, Homer’s epic is conservative in its message, although it still grants Achilles and his disruptive wrath great authority. But Achilles is finally a human and not a god, despite his divine mother. This was an important lesson for the ancient Greeks, and it was for this reason (among others) that *The Iliad* was given the authority of sacred scripture. For ancient epic and tragedy, the question is not primarily the authority of the work and its figures for the audience but rather the locus of authority within the work for its main characters, and the answer, generally, is with the gods and fate, despite the immense dignity of the human protagonists. In contemporaneous Near Eastern societies, such questions were not given the legitimacy of epic literature.

Aristotle’s analysis of tragedy can further our understanding here. Epic and tragedy work to teach and delight, but what do they teach, and how do they delight? The rhythm and harmony of the poetry are important, but we focus here on content, which Aristotle argued is primary: plot and character. He addressed himself to the question: what are the



necessary features of a tragedy's plot and characters so that spectators will feel pity and fear for the protagonist and experience catharsis at his downfall? Like *The Iliad*, Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex* teaches that even, and especially, the most powerful member of society is subject to fate, which represents the cosmic order that is the foundation of community. In terms of our originary hypothesis, a human occupying the central locus is subject to the structure and integrity of the larger political *scene*, which includes the resentments of the periphery.

As René Girard has argued, the plague that afflicts Thebes can be viewed as a metaphor for a mimetic, that is, social crisis; both mimetic contagion and infectious disease threaten the social distinctions that maintain community.<sup>[17]</sup> In such a crisis, the community typically finds a scapegoat—in this case, one who is both envied and feared as the “tyrant” of Thebes.<sup>[18]</sup> The representation of Oedipus's blinding and exile provides a catharsis that would satisfy the resentment that citizens inevitably felt toward their leaders. At the same time, the fate of Oedipus reconciles spectators to their peripheral position, since the price of centrality is exile or death. Aristotle shows that a tragedy is fashioned, ideally, so that the audience accepts the protagonist's downfall as necessary, as “fated.” This recognition is what enables the feeling of catharsis. We may pity and fear the fate of Oedipus, but ultimately his blinding and exile are the necessary purging of an evil that disturbs the cosmic order. Although Aristotle doesn't use the word “fate,” his analysis points in precisely this direction. In the best tragedies, he writes, “the change to bad fortune which he undergoes is not due to any moral defect or depravity, but to an error [*hamartia*] of some kind” (21).<sup>[19]</sup> In other words, the protagonist's downfall should be caused by the unintended results of his actions. The unexpected causal relation creates a feeling of necessity and doom that is the essence of fate considered as an aesthetic experience.

### **3. The Hebrew Contribution**

There was one notable exception among the ancient Near Eastern countries to the above observations and that was the Hebrews. They took a completely different approach to the problem of authority. In fact they defined themselves by their opposition to their neighbors, the priestly, polytheistic hierarchies of Mesopotamia and Egypt. Placing their faith in an invisible, transcendent God gave the Jews a subversive and persistent independence from the foreign powers to which they often found themselves subject. Their social order tended to be leveling of traditional hierarchical distinctions. The one true God is so awesome and powerful that all humans are relatively equal. We find no divinized rulers such as the pharaohs of Egypt among the Hebrews, and even King David, God's favorite, is represented as distinctly flawed and emphatically human in the Hebrew Bible.

The Mosaic revelation of God's transcendent authority provided the seed that made possible the development of Modernity.<sup>[20]</sup> The worship of foreign gods is defined as idolatry, and the imperative destruction of their images is known as iconoclasm. Jan Assman suggests

that the second commandment prohibition of “graven images” expresses the rejection of a political theology while enabling the liberation of the Hebrews from their foreign overlords:

Idolatry primarily means the legitimization of the state in terms of divine representation. The state presents itself in its images, symbols, and ceremonies as a representative of the divine. From the viewpoint of the Bible, this is idolatry. From the viewpoint of Egypt, however, it is precisely for this that the state was created. . . . the Egyptians believed the gods to be remote and hidden, having withdrawn from earth and made themselves invisible. In lieu of their corporal presence, they installed the state on earth to represent them in the form of kings, images, and sacred animals. . . . the king acts as representative of the creator, installed on earth “for ever and ever” in order to establish “Ma’at” [true order and justice] and to expel disorder. . . . The prohibition against images means, in the first place, that the “living God” (Elohim hayim) must not be represented. Images contradict the real presence of the divine implied by the idea of the covenant. The latter is a form both political and “living” reflecting God’s turning toward the world. Images are media of a “magical” representation of an absent divine power and therefore imply or presuppose the idea of divine absence. The “living God” hides and reveals himself as he chooses and forbids any attempt at a magical summoning of his presence. (87)

We can’t say that the Hebrews separated religion from the state (i.e., their self-government), but their religion was separate from and opposed to the empires that surrounded (and sometimes ruled over) them. Rulers and state powers are almost always portrayed as cruel, corrupt, and tyrannical in the Judeo-Christian scriptures. The Christian Bible is the most consistently anti-authoritarian collection of documents in human history.

Despite the iconoclasm of the Bible, the medieval church was able to adapt scripture to its purposes, which included a form of divine hierarchy. It was the Protestant Reformation that allowed the radical potential of the Bible to reach fruition. The translation of the Bible into vernacular languages (and its distribution in affordable form) was one of the most important factors in the cultural revolution of the Reformation, which in turn made possible the Enlightenment and Modernity. Protestants extended Christ’s critique of Jewish ceremonialism to Catholicism. Radical Protestants considered even many fellow churches as insufficiently reformed and still infected with “popish superstition.” Eventually, with the English, American, and French revolutions, the critique of idolatry was extended to divine hierarchy.

What is important for our purposes is that the Biblical iconoclastic imperative created a critical attitude toward the figures of the sacred center—not just “graven images” but also including a widespread suspicion of the public scene and its authorities. This skepticism toward public figures was correlative with a new authority given to the private scene of representation, the soul. Each Christian, as a divine soul, is equal before God. The private

relationship with God becomes the locus of the sacred, while public rituals, religious or political, are vulnerable to accusations of idolatry.

The Judeo-Christian tradition bestows upon the West a whole new way of thinking about authority, a way fundamentally opposed to divine hierarchy. Christ is authorized precisely through his persecution and crucifixion. Anti-authoritarianism becomes the new foundation for authority. The Protestant rejection of tradition implies a new value for freedom, reason, and empiricism that makes possible what is called “the rise of the West.”<sup>[21]</sup> Over time, iconoclasm becomes the defining attitude of the West toward public figures in general, whether people, symbols, trends, or dominant ideas. Today even basic biological categories such as male and female are subject to deconstruction. What is any fixed sexual difference but a false idol, an arbitrary and oppressive imposition by society? And so, the private decision to be a different sex demands public recognition.

#### 4. Christian Individualism and Renaissance Literature

The new authorization of individuals in Christianity creates a corresponding problem of authority for art, which was usually public in form during the ancient, medieval, and Renaissance periods. Eric Gans writes,

As soon as we feel ourselves the potential equals in triumph and in suffering of the participants of the agon, we are no longer in the world of the classical aesthetic. Classical decorum is lost; the rivalry of the audience with the central figure reflects a more deeply symmetrical form of resentment than classical form can tolerate. In order to defer the corrosive effect of this internal resentment, the neoclassical [i.e., Renaissance] aesthetic must abandon the naiveté of the classical and represent the scene itself within the work.<sup>[22]</sup>

The question for interpretation now becomes, what makes a work of literature and its figures worthy of our attention? This becomes a question in a new way because “we feel ourselves the potential equals in triumph and in suffering of the participants of the agon,” a sense of self-worth directly resulting from the Christian revelation of the equality of souls before God. Recognizing our essential equality actually stimulates resentment at any perception of disparity. (As Gans has argued, this is the central paradox of the democratic doctrine of equal rights.<sup>[23]</sup>)

For the classical aesthetic, a “legendary or historical guarantee” was enough to give protagonists authority for the audience.<sup>[24]</sup> But for art conceived upon the auspices of Christianity (medieval, Renaissance, and following), the rivalry and potential resentment of viewers make the representation of centralized figures a problem for artists. The most basic function of art is to assuage resentment—why else do so many people listen to music with earbuds all day? Music, like literature, provides relief from the petty irritations that fill everyday life.<sup>[25]</sup> But what happens when literature itself provokes resentment?<sup>[26]</sup>

One might object that it would be silly for a reader to resent the figures of a literary work; not only are they fictional but also because the reader can merely put down the book and stop reading (or leave the theater). This point actually supports my thesis. With an established religion, as in Shakespeare's England, people were required by law to attend the church service. With literature, however, one is free to attend to a work or not. This is one way of describing the problem that serious authors face: how to motivate their audience to buy and read an ambitious work that requires some time and effort to appreciate. One meaning of culture is the discipline required to enjoy and take benefit from great art.

Gans claims that the Renaissance solution to the problem of the audience is to "represent the scene itself within the work." How exactly does this work? The answer to this question is essentially the history of art since the Renaissance and just as multifarious. In brief, a literary text makes the problem of its own authority a major topic. Serious art becomes explicitly or implicitly self-referential.[27] In one way or another, modern literature models the audience and the problem of reception. This doesn't mean that art is *exclusively* self-referential, although there is a germ of truth in the claim of some modern aesthetic theories that all (modern) literature is about itself or the subject of art.

Gans writes that the most perspicacious way of viewing literary history is in terms of *the place of the scene of representation within the work*. [28] This suggests that there are different ways of placing the scene, but in every case, placing the scene of representation within the work means a doubling of the scene. The play-within-a-play found in so many Renaissance dramas exemplifies this development. Renaissance art is self-conscious, impelled to reflect upon its own anthropological basis. Literary works explore the "construction" of authority and discover that it is dependent upon the periphery's attention. Centrality is a function of the scene upon which it is found. The authority of the central figures is not a given, as in Classical literature, but validated for readers by the form and content of the artwork. Yet exploring the bases of authority is inherently ambivalent.

In many cases, Renaissance art demystifies centrality and shows its human (not divine) basis. Isabella, in Shakespeare's *Measure for Measure*, defies the deputy-Duke Angelo and memorably critiques the vanity of earthly rulers:

. . . man, proud man,  
Dressed in a little brief authority;  
Most ignorant of what he's most assured,  
His glassy essence, like an angry ape  
Plays such fantastic tricks before high heaven  
As makes the angels weep; who, with our spleens,  
Would all laugh themselves mortal. [29] (2.2.122-8)

Man is only "*Dressed* in a little brief authority," without any intrinsic or lasting dignity or

power. The typical actions of an earthly ruler are compared to the tricks of an “angry ape,” whose arrogance blinds him to “His glassy essence,” his immortal soul, which should but doesn’t reflect his creator. Isabella is a novice nun and her perspective is essentially Christian. By deconstructing political authorities, Shakespeare’s play authorizes itself as art. On one level at least, Shakespeare’s plays usually end by affirming monarchy, but along the way political figures are typically and repeatedly humiliated.

Shakespeare’s iconoclasm goes so far as to critique his own poetry and drama. In the Renaissance debate between art and nature, Shakespeare usually comes down on the side of nature while critiquing art as superficial and deceitful. See, for example, Perdita’s discussion with Polixenes on “art” vs. “great creating nature” in *The Winter’s Tale* (4.4.81-103). Hamlet, likewise, in response to his mother’s question, disclaims with scorn any “seeming” in his appearance of mourning:

Seems, madam? Nay, it is. I know not “seems.”  
‘Tis not alone my inky cloak, good mother,  
Nor customary suits of solemn black,  
Nor windy suspiration of forced breath,  
No, nor the fruitful river in the eye,  
Nor the dejected havior of the visage,  
Together with all forms, moods, shapes of grief,  
That can denote me truly. These indeed seem,  
For they are actions that a man might play.  
But I have that within which passes show;  
These but the trappings and suits of woe. (*Hamlet* 1.2.76-86)

Speeches such as these are best understood as apotropaic gestures, warding off the accusation of false seeming that, significantly, might be said to define theater. The play defends itself from iconoclasm by incorporating it within itself, anticipating and thus containing any potential criticism.

Hamlet is not only defending his sincerity but critiquing what he perceives as the *show* or scene of mourning for his father’s death and, by extension, all such public, ritual demonstrations. True authority is within. Hamlet has “that within which passes show”: an inwardness so transcendent as to defy representation. This is a radical revolution in the location of authority and a defining feature of modernity. Since culture itself is merely show, only fiction can reveal the truth. Art becomes the premier anthropological discovery procedure for modernity.

The problem of authority on a public scene is not just a narrow aesthetic problem but directly parallel to the larger problem of how to authorize political figures in an increasingly deritualized world. There are limits to this parallel of course. Art has a variety of techniques

for self-authorization not available to political figures, and vice-versa. And art often addresses larger political issues of authority. But before a text can address larger issues, it must first prove itself worthy of our attention. A complaint I have heard about an inferior literary text is “I could have written this!” It is because of individualism that this statement is an insult to the text and its author. Why else should an individual’s comparison to the author be a standard for judgment? This is not to deny that readers identify with literary characters, or that art, in some sense, “holds the mirror up to nature,” but rather that the potential for resentment must be mitigated in some way.

## 5. The Sign of Election

The Middle Ages represent the most sophisticated and complete attempt to synthesize Christian egalitarianism with divine hierarchy. Medieval art was to a large extent Christian and public, and we will look briefly at how medieval painting and sculpture deal with the problem of authority for an artwork’s central figures. To justify their position, the central figures need some kind of supplement. Just as language arose to supplement nature, and art arose to supplement religion, now art finds ways to supplement itself. For medieval art this took the form of *signs of sacrality*, the most obvious of which is a halo adorning an artwork’s central figures.<sup>[30]</sup> There is a whole iconography of such symbolic *tokens* with particular meanings that distinguish specific saints and angels in various ways. We take such signs as merely conventional without considering why they became necessary. The signs of sacrality serve to defuse the charge of idolatry, validating the figures as worthy of representation. Protestants, unfortunately, found such signs inadequate, which led to the iconoclastic destruction of many religious artworks.

The tokens of divinity can also be understood as signs of election, a radical model of identity introduced by the ancient Hebrews. God distinguished the Hebrews by making them his chosen people, singled out for accomplishing God’s purposes in history. The legitimation of their chosen status is a complex issue. On the one hand, Abraham is called out of his homeland to found a new nation as an expression of God’s power, freedom, and inscrutable will. Abraham and his family are not distinguished in any worldly sense. God chose them to display his power, not to reward Abraham’s earthly significance. God can choose an anonymous shepherd tribe and make of them a great nation, precisely to humiliate the other nations and their delusions of grandeur. Glory belongs to God alone. But on the other hand, when God commanded Abraham to leave his homeland, promising to make of him a great nation, “he believed the LORD, and he counted it to him as righteousness” (Genesis 15.6, *ESV*). It is Abraham’s faith, an internal quality invisible to the military empires of the Near East, that distinguishes him. But election is a mixed blessing. God makes great demands of the Hebrews, including the call for exclusive loyalty and faith in the face of trials, while promising them success in the long run. But they must pass through the deprivations of the desert wilderness on their way to the promised land, and the scriptures record that the Jews failed God’s tests quite often, for which they suffered. Their suffering becomes an ironic

token of God's favor, anticipating Christ's crucifixion.

In the New Testament, the apostle Paul is the great model of individual election. He was traveling to Damascus to persecute Christians and defend traditional Judaism when he was struck down and blinded, elected to be an apostle to the Gentiles. Paul is chosen against his will, in a way that goes beyond the reluctance of Moses and other prophets to serve as God's messenger. Paul does not "merit" his new identity, although he goes on to great success as an Apostle. Christ is given signs of election, from the announcement of the angel to the virgin Mary and then to the shepherds at his birth; God's proclamation of Christ's Sonship at his baptism, the temptation in the desert, and finally his execution by torture on the cross, culminating in the victory of the Resurrection. His whole life, like the Jews' history, is in effect a Passion story, a record of trials, tribulations, and triumph that succeeds in bringing the message of faith to the world.

The Passion narrative is diametrically opposed to the story of the fated downfall of Oedipus and other tragic heroes.<sup>[31]</sup> Theories of Atonement tend to obscure this point, but a main idea of the Passion is that Christ does not in any way deserve his crucifixion, unlike Oedipus who killed his father and married his mother.<sup>[32]</sup> It is sinful humans that crucify Christ, who is an innocent scapegoat. The violence of the crucifixion is emphatically human and not "divine" or fated. God does not crucify Christ, although he allows it to happen, and he chooses to make the crucifixion the path to salvation to remind humans of their sin and need for grace.

From the New Testament we learn that anyone can be elected, and in fact the dregs of society, prostitutes and tax collectors, are especially chosen. Concurrently, in accord with iconoclasm, public figures of power and authority are revealed as corrupt.

Election becomes a major topic for literature from Dante until the present day. Dante's status as prophetic seer and his vision of Heaven are earned, in effect, by his journey through Hell and Purgatory. The story of individual development, from Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* to Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, is paradigmatic for modern authors. The key point is that centrality (and hence authority for readers) must be earned by an individual's fortitude and determination in the face of trials and temptations. At the same time, in the West, it becomes more possible for individuals to achieve status without the privileges of birth, a real life development that becomes a common subject for novels. The novel of personal development serves to authorize the protagonist as well as authorize the novel itself in a practical way. Many early novels serve as a guide to success in the modern world. These stories draw upon the Judeo-Christian paradigm of election, suffering, trials and tribulation culminating in triumph.

The drama of personal development is one of the most important solutions to the problem of literary authority. Consider Shakespeare's Henry the Fifth, who earns his status as king by

his time spent with the underclass, his defeat of Hotspur, and finally his victory over the French at the Battle of Agincourt, at which the English army was greatly outnumbered by the French army. On the night before the battle, King Henry visits his troops in their encampment, in disguise, to assess their morale and support. In his discussion with the men, one of the main topics is the king himself, whom the soldiers discuss not knowing he is present. Henry finds that the troops are pessimistic about the battle the next day, given the strength of the French army. In discussing whether the king should be informed of their danger, Henry says they should not do so, lest the king become discouraged, show his fears, and dismay the rest of the men:

For, though I speak it to you, I think the king is but a man, as I am. The violet smells to him as it doth to me: the element shows to him as it doth to me; all his senses have but human conditions. His ceremonies laid by, in his nakedness he appears but a man; and though his affections are higher mounted than ours, yet when they stoop, they stoop with the like wing. Therefore when he sees reason of fears, as we do, his fears, out of doubt, be of the same relish as ours are. Yet, in reason, no man should possess him with any appearance of fear, lest he, by showing it, should dishearten his army. (*Henry V*, 4.1.101-113)

Shakespeare is working with the problem of authority in a sophisticated way here, at both the dramatic level and the (real world) political level. Henry, as a Prince and now as King, maintains a dialogue with the common people, whom he understands well. Just as today, a political candidate can take great advantage by coming from a working-class family or serving in the military, especially during a war—and for good reason. We recognize that these experiences are valuable for leaders. But this is not just a practical issue but one of perception and publicity. By downplaying the king's "divinity" in his dialogue with the common soldiers, Henry actually adds to his authority for the theater audience and for his followers in the play. Whereas any hint of commonality would normally be an insult among aristocrats, Henry cultivates his kinship with the common people.

In the same scene, they debate the king's responsibility in the afterlife for the deaths of the soldiers, if the cause of battle be not just. Historically it was not uncommon for kings to begin wars for selfish political reasons. In *Henry IV, Part 2*, King Henry IV advises his son "to busy giddy minds / With foreign quarrels" (4.5.212-3), but *Henry V* works to establish the justice of his decision to wage war against the French. Henry's authority is not based on birth alone but the justice of his cause. Due to the influence of Christianity, Renaissance literature foregrounds moral concerns that were much less important in ancient Greek literature. The fact that King Henry *plays a role* during this scene (and throughout the Henriad tetralogy) exemplifies how Renaissance drama typically stages the scene of representation, an anthropological discovery procedure that works on multiple levels but is motivated, first and last, by the potential resistance of spectators.



Near the end of the scene discussed above, Henry has a long monologue in which he reflects upon the great burden of responsibility on kings and the fragility of their support from ceremony:

We must bear all. O hard condition,  
Twin-born with greatness, subject to the breath  
Of every fool, whose sense no more can feel  
But his own wringing! What infinite heartsease  
Must kings neglect that private men enjoy!  
And what have kings that privates have not too,  
Save ceremony, save general ceremony?  
And what art thou, thou idol ceremony?  
What kind of god art thou, that suffer'st more  
Of mortal griefs than do thy worshippers?  
What are thy rents? What are thy comings in?  
O ceremony, show me but thy worth!  
What is thy soul of adoration?  
Art thou aught else but place, degree and form,  
Creating awe and fear in other men?  
Wherein thou art less happy, being feared  
Than they in fearing.  
What drink'st thou oft, instead of homage sweet,  
But poisoned flattery? O, be sick, great greatness,  
And bid thy ceremony give thee cure! (*Henry V*, 4.1.231-50)

On one level, this is Shakespeare's plea for sympathy and support for the King, who recognizes acutely that the source of his political authority is in fact simply ceremony: the public, ritual attention of the community and nothing divine. Echoing Protestant reformers' critique of Catholicism, he calls ceremony an "idol," so that any reverence given would be idolatry, a concept invented by the ancient Hebrews (see Assman on this point). Unlike many kings and political figures, Henry is well aware that the "homage sweet" he receives is often actually "poisoned flattery." A public, centralized position is vulnerable on several levels, and the *Henriad* tetralogy as a whole presents the idea that a king is responsible to his community. The Renaissance theory of "divine right" held that kings were responsible to no one but God. Although his speech deconstructs ceremony, the play itself is a secular ceremony but one that includes several layers of irony. The artistic representation of the bases of authority is interminably complex, because there are so many levels and perspectives (including the critic's), both synchronically and diachronically. But we should note that this speech functions to authorize Henry by showing his vulnerability and warding off the charge of unmerited power.

Russell Fraser in his book *The War on Poetry* shows that the well-known hostility toward

poetry and drama in Renaissance England (culminating in the forced closure of theaters in 1642) was not just narrowly religious and moral. Fraser points out, “the hatred of poetry is not exclusive to the Puritan” (7). He writes, “The polemical literature of the period demonstrates conclusively the existence of an economic motive in the attack on poetry and plays” (53). Writers and politicians were concerned with apprentices wasting time in the theater, for example. One reason drama and literature have to justify themselves is that the time and energy of the spectator become a valuable commodity in a world of new economic possibilities. “In the sixteenth century the proper use of time is the prosecuting of virtuous business, which one will gloss as his bias directs him” (55). There is one commodity that is always in short supply, and that is attention.

## 6. The Onstage Audience

In Shakespeare’s dramas, it is usually the aristocracy who has the leisure to watch a play. We get a clue to popular attitudes in *Henry IV, Part 1*, when Falstaff and Prince Hal put on an impromptu performance of the Prince and his father, the King, discussing Falstaff. I want to draw our attention to the reaction of the Hostess here, who exclaims in response to their playing, “Oh, Jesu, this is excellent sport, I’faith,” and later, “Oh Jesu, he doth it as like one of these harlotry players as ever I see!” (2.4.387, 392-3). Shakespeare has a fine ear for the language of people of all classes. The Hostess represents a person with little education and little opportunity for or expectation of any economic improvement in her condition, and in this sense, she is typical of serving-class people before, during, and after Shakespeare’s lifetime. For the theater audience this little play-within-a-play is a crucial scene for several reasons. But within the world of the play, we can see that the performance is improvised and unsophisticated, with a dagger for a scepter, a cushion for a crown, and Falstaff professing to speak “in King Cambyses’ vein” (2.4.383). Notice that the Hostess has nothing to say about the content of their performance. The mere fact of a person publicly, confidently impersonating the King is enough to elicit her enthusiastic admiration. The Hostess serves to parody the naiveté of certain elements of a previous generation. Still, her comments suggest that outside of London and before the construction of dedicated theaters there, the standards for amusement were relatively low, with little time or occasion for such spectacles. The Mystery plays were put on by amateurs, as were most holiday performances. An audience with little leisure for literature or drama would be highly entertained by almost any dramatic performance, and authors would not be concerned about potential rivalry from the audience (although of course medieval and Renaissance audiences were known to be quite active and vocal during performances, like the Hostess, but this does not suggest rivalry or resentment in the sense I’ve described). But with the construction of dedicated theaters in London, and thus competition for a limited audience; and with the rise of a middle-class with expanded opportunities for advancement, the situation was quite different. The Hostess’s response during the tavern scene supports my thesis by way of contrast. One of the main principles of a new way of interpreting literature is recognizing the cultural revolution that begins with the Renaissance (and before) and continues now. Of

course some in Shakespeare's audience may have been just like the Hostess, grateful for any relief from the tedious work required for survival. But the existence of a substantial body of literature attacking poetry and theater, and the growing resistance to royal authority during Shakespeare's lifetime shows that larger forces were at work, and the evidence discussed here suggests that audiences were becoming more sophisticated and discerning at both the theatrical and political levels.

While the Hostess represents an audience member that Shakespeare would not need to worry about, *Hamlet's* Polonius represents one that competes with the central figure. During the First Player's recital of Aeneas's speech to Dido (*Hamlet* 2.2. 475-560), Polonius rudely interrupts with his pedantic comments. Polonius wants to be recognized as man of discernment and taste, and as such he is a rival with the First Player. Hamlet, likewise, competes with the performers of *The Murder of Gonzago* for the attention of the courtly audience with his caustic commentary. Hamlet, of course, has his own agenda during this scene, but this supports the point I'm making. While his agenda goes beyond the simple vanity of Polonius, he still asserts himself as a rival to the players in terms of "the purpose of playing." During Claudius's coronation speech, Hamlet, ostentatiously dressed in black, is again a rival for the attention of court.

The function of the onstage rivalry of characters like Polonius and Hamlet is a complex issue. By modeling a resistant audience, Shakespeare in effect incorporates and pre-empts the potential rivalry of the off-stage audience. In the case of Polonius, he also parodies his more nitpicking critics. Hamlet's resentment of Claudius, however, is well-motivated by events. Shakespeare iconoclastically critiques the hypocrisy of courtly ceremony, at the same time authorizing Hamlet and his tragedy. More broadly, these self-referential scenes serve to explore and finally understand the complex, protean relationship of periphery to center in the Early Modern period. Understanding the scene of representation often means demystifying it, but equally often, staging the scene serves to authorize its central figures.

## 7. Early Modern Tragedy

Shakespeare's *Richard the Second* stages the Renaissance debate about the authority of kings very directly. Arriving in England after his Ireland expedition and hearing of rebellion among his subjects, Richard proclaims confidently,

Not all the water in the rough rude sea  
Can wash the balm off from an anointed king.  
The breath of worldly men cannot depose  
The deputy elected by the Lord.  
For every man that Bolingbroke hath pressed  
To lift shrewd steel against our golden crown,  
God for His Richard hath in heavenly pay

A glorious angel. Then, if angels fight,  
Weak men must fall, for heaven still guards the right. (*Richard II*, 3.2.54-62)

But then, a minute later, finding out that the Welsh troops and many of the English people have deserted him, Richard reflects on the vanity of kings:

. . . within the hollow crown  
That rounds the mortal temples of a king  
Keeps Death his court and there the antic sits,  
Scoffing his state and grinning at his pomp,  
Allowing him a breath, a little scene,  
To monarchize, be fear'd and kill with looks,  
Infusing him with self and vain conceit,  
As if this flesh which walls about our life,  
Were brass impregnable, and humour'd thus  
Comes at the last and with a little pin  
Bores through his castle wall, and farewell king! (*Richard II*, 3.2.163-70)

The sheer beauty of the poetry here (and elsewhere) adds considerably to the pathos of Richard's speech and character. Elevated language, of course, is always associated with tragedy and divine hierarchy. As with many of Shakespeare's plays, *Richard the Second* is almost paradigmatic for the shift from the medieval cosmos, the feudal order, to new models of authority based on more practical considerations such as competence and merit but lacking the dignity of divine hierarchy. The fact that Richard becomes a tragic figure in his downfall exemplifies the ambivalent attachment that Renaissance society still had for monarchy and the public, ritual scene of ceremony and honor. But the play as a whole suggests that Richard lacks honor in the moral sense and must be replaced, although his deposition begins the War of the Roses. The problem of authority here occurs at two levels, the political and the aesthetic. Tragedy in the traditional sense, ancient and Renaissance, depends on a certain respect for the cosmic order among the audience. When this respect is lost, then tragedy ends too, although various mutations survive: melodrama and the domestic tragedies of Ibsen, Arthur Miller, and others.

Shakespeare lived during a period of decisive change: there was still enough respect for divine hierarchy to make possible great tragedy, but the tide had begun to turn, and the seventeenth century introduced radical changes that led to modernity. Shakespeare's response was to take precisely this change as the subject matter for his plays. There is a discernable progress in his career: tragedy starts to become more problematic as respect for monarchy and aristocracy declines. King Leontes, in the late Romance *The Winter's Tale*, becomes ridiculous (and hardly tragic) in his downfall and therefore subject to the carping of Paulina. Plays like *Richard the Second* in effect stage the end of the medieval cosmos, making this shift the basis for tragedy. The tragedy of *King Lear* includes the approaching

end of the cosmic order and the associated genre of tragedy. The turn to Romance in the latter part of Shakespeare's career dramatizes the end of tragedy while offering hope for a better future.<sup>[33]</sup> The development of Shakespeare's dramatic oeuvre ultimately reflects the increasing resistance of his audience, which is presented allegorically in *The Tempest* as the challenges made to Prospero's authority by Caliban, Ariel, and even Miranda.<sup>[34]</sup> Prospero chooses to abjure his magic in recognition of the impossibility of certain kinds of art/magic in a "brave new world."

This shift has everything to do with the change in the locus of the authority from the public ritual scene to the private scene. *King Lear*, for example, begins with a public ceremony in which Lear divests his authority to "younger strengths" so that he may "Unburdened crawl toward death" (1.1.40-1). The majesty of Lear's language here and throughout the play testifies to the authority and dignity of the cosmic order. But the opening scene is corrupt at every level, from Lear's irresponsible abdication to his daughters' patently false professions of love—symptoms of the decline of divine right in the Jacobean period. His facile acceptance of his daughters' flattery is a sign of his inner weakness. But this whole elaborate ceremony is brought to sudden collapse, like Prospero's wedding masque, like *The Murder of Gonzago*, with the simple "nothing" spoken aloud by his youngest daughter, although Cordelia cannot be blamed for the ensuing tragedy. In the final act, we find a new locus of authority with the private scene, which is presented in utopian terms. After their capture, Cordelia asks her father, "Shall we not see these daughters and these sisters?" presumably to claim preferential treatment as relatives despite being captured foes (5.3.7). But Lear protests,

No, no, no, no! Come, let's away to prison.  
We two alone will sing like birds i' the 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, 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 th' moon. (5.3.8-19)

To "see these daughters and these sisters" would be to return to the public scene, in this case, a tribunal of judgment, where they would plead for mercy as helpless captives. Only the private scene, even in a prison, will allow them true freedom, to "live, / And pray, and sing, and tell old tales, and laugh / At gilded butterflies, and hear poor rogues / Talk of court news." They will view the public scene from a detached, cosmic perspective, "As if we were

God's spies." The public scene is recognized as the scene of deceit and murder, which tragically invades their prison soon after this speech. The private scene of representation is not just the soul but also the domestic scene of intimacy and devotion, which provides a desirable alternative to the depravity of the public scene. Instead of public recognition, whether of honor or disgrace, they will recognize each other in mutual love and forgiveness.

The play ends with the heartbreaking spectacle of Lear's mourning for Cordelia, which is public but also transcendent and thus, in a sense, beyond representation or spectacle. After Lear's death, the remaining characters abandon the scene with no relish for resuming political rule. Although Albany has the best claim to kingship now, he tells Kent and Edgar, "Friends of my soul, you twain / Rule in this realm, and the gored state sustain" (5.3.325-6). In response, Kent suggests he would rather follow Lear in death, "I have a journey, sir, shortly to go. / My master calls me; I must not say no" (5.3.327-8). They vacate the public scene, both theatrical and political, in recognition of its destruction as the locus of authority. The novel will eventually succeed epic and tragedy as the privileged literary genre, with a private reading experience of (typically) domestic matters.

## 8. **Paradise Lost and the Problem of the Audience**

Let's take a look at John Milton's biblical epic *Paradise Lost*, a fine example of the late Renaissance aesthetic and some of the trends we've identified.<sup>[35]</sup> Satan's rejection of God and his Son illustrates the iconoclasm that is so typical of modern literature and culture. For Satan, the angels' worship of God is mere idolatry. It's true, of course, that Satan is demonized, and the narrator is careful to justify God's punishment of Satan and the rebel angels. This brings up an important point, that the question of literary authority is not concerned with whether we like a character or not, whether he is a hero or villain, but to what extent he compels and rewards our attention (although moral considerations, as I mentioned above, are important on certain levels). Milton uses a psychological realism for the protagonists of *Paradise Lost*, and no character is more psychologically convincing than Satan. However misguided, his rejection of God's order to worship the Son in Book Five is persuasively motivated. Satan exemplifies the iconoclastic, individualistic attitudes that emerged decisively in Renaissance literature and culture. With the falls of Satan and humans (Adam and Eve), Milton explores the psychology of evil and sin, their self-deluding vanity and falsehood; this is perhaps the main lesson of *Paradise Lost* and still relevant today.

Renaissance literature in general is ambivalent about the individualism that fuels modern iconoclasm: while it may be required to resist corruption in high places, it was perceived as disruptive of social order. Edmund in *King Lear*, although he is theatrically compelling, represents individualism as a threat to virtue and political stability. But Cordelia, in the same play, shows that individualism is necessary in face of the hypocrisy of the opening scene, equally ceremonial and political. Satan also embodies this ambivalence. He is initially

presented as heroic and tragic, and even if Milton wanted to critique such tragic heroism as a delusional vanity, it is still absorbing. A substantial number of critics have found Satan's rebellion more persuasive than the narrator's attempt to disparage it on moral and theological grounds. The ambivalence of Satan's character in reception is well known. But what has not been recognized is the extent to which, in portraying Satan, Milton was both representing and responding to the rivalry and resentment of Renaissance readers. Our new method clarifies the difficulty and shows what is at stake in ethical terms. Satan's resentment mirrors readers' resentment of public figures including literary protagonists.

Milton was a great iconoclast in his non-fiction writing. He attacked forced tithes, prohibitions against divorce; and he argued for radical ecclesiastical and political reforms, to the extent of holding a king accountable for his crimes. Iconoclasm can be grounded on a coherent vision for social order, or it can become unmoored and directed blindly to any public center of attention. Milton saw that iconoclasm can be misused, when it is directed to what he perceived as the necessary ground for all social order, God.

*Paradise Lost* demonstrates how Renaissance texts "represent the scene itself within the work," that is, model, test, and interpret the scene of representation. Satan's rebellion is framed for readers from a variety of perspectives: his own, his followers, the loyal angels, God, the Son, and the narrator. Satan is always aware of an audience and he crafts his self-presentation accordingly. In his monologues, he is his own audience, and he responds critically to his attempts at self-justification (as do many of Shakespeare's protagonists). This goes beyond what we find in classical literature: e.g., the different perspectives on Achilles's rage, or the contrast between Tiresias and Oedipus in his tragedy. In the classical aesthetic, the different perspectives serve to develop the plot and characters. In *Paradise Lost*, they go beyond plot and character to question and interpret the scene of representation itself. The classical aesthetic expresses a broad agreement about the foundations of the cosmic, social order, notwithstanding the conflicts about Helen, Chryseis, and Briseis. To some extent this is also true for Shakespeare's lifetime, but the English Civil War destroyed any even nominal consensus on the basics of social order, and *Paradise Lost* reflects this shift. Milton was impelled to frame Satan's rebellion in a way that is implicitly metarepresentational. Stanley Fish's reader-response reading of *Paradise Lost* shows how the interplay of perspectives functions to bring about a new perspective that includes the reader's.<sup>[36]</sup> Milton's epic has a pervasive irony that is foreign to the Classical aesthetic.

The debate about how to evaluate Satan and God in *Paradise Lost* demonstrates how authority can work on different levels. There is a problem of authority within the fictional world of the text, by which the epic tests and finally affirms Milton's vision for social order. But there is also the problem of the authority of the text's central figures for readers. The contradictory representations of Satan arise from the different strategies Milton used to address these different problems. To compel reader's attention (and explore the psychology of evil), Milton gave Satan persuasive motivations and unsurpassed depth and interiority.

But for characters within the world of the text, Satan's promise of freedom and autonomy proves illusory. By the same token, having God justify his actions publicly, in theological terms, runs into problems. Many readers have resisted and rejected Milton's representation of God, exemplifying well what Gans calls the "the rivalry of the audience with the central figure."

God's self-justification is well received by an audience of good angels, yet found lacking by the rebel angels and many readers. While God's speeches are founded on scriptural authority, Satan's rebellion is more attractive, at least initially. Satan's fascination derives in large part from his tragic suffering, which is comparable (ironically and presumably unintentionally) to Christ's Passion. For many readers, Milton succeeds better at justifying Satan than justifying God. Paying attention to the problem of authority—both within the text and for readers—helps illuminate the famous difficulties that readers have found in *Paradise Lost*, difficulties that were inherent to the task that Milton set himself, "to justify the ways of God to men" while writing a great epic that would ensure his immortal fame.[\[37\]](#)

To criticize Milton's God means to imagine oneself in God's place. The critics' rejection of God implies that, if they were God, they would have done things differently, and at least they would have done a better job of justifying themselves. Critical readers are implicitly rivals with God, just as is Satan. God's speeches in Book Three are Milton's answer to what is called the "problem of evil": why, if God is all-powerful, does he allow evil and the resultant suffering to exist? Critics disparage God's defense on two main grounds. First, God's reasoning is found faulty and even disingenuous. Second, readers find the fact that God deigns to defend himself in rational terms and at length violates the proper decorum for representing God. Readers take the Bible as the standard for decorum in this regard.

As readers, we can legitimately ask why God/Milton did not consider specific counterarguments, or why Milton didn't take a different approach to justifying God. But at the same time we find an implicit rivalry between readers and Milton's God and with Milton himself. Shakespeare was sometimes ridiculed by fellow poets like Robert Greene and Ben Jonson, but there's no evidence that his contemporary audience resented him or viewed him as a rival. During Milton's lifetime, the author becomes a figure for resentment and rivalry, not just the figures within the text. To some extent, this rivalry reflects the particular form of *Paradise Lost*, in which the narrator is presumably Milton; and the work makes truth claims based on the Bible, for which many readers have their own interpretation. But we also find such resentment toward the authors of many modern works, and this reflects the pervasive modern idea that we are all equal. If we are all equal, then no one is exempt from rivalry. Milton's God is an idol for Satan and for some readers, and Milton himself becomes a magnet for resentment.

By suggesting that some literary criticism is informed by rivalry, I don't imply anything about the validity of such criticism, its logic and supporting evidence. The point is just that



the (actual or potential) rivalry/resistance of readers is a problem that shapes literary history in some very important ways. A literary work that attracts criticism is by the same token attracting attention, which is one measure of success. Rivalry and competition are positive forces for innovation and progress. Rivalry is grounded in our sense of moral equality, a foundational principle of modernity. Resentment (and the associated iconoclasm) can be blinding or enlightening. Sir Francis Bacon's critique of the four idols—idols of the Tribe, idols of the Cave, idols of the Marketplace, and idols of the Theater—was certainly constructive.[\[38\]](#) Rivalry may motivate a reader to write their own work. Milton was inspired by rivalry with his predecessors in the epic genre.

The implicit rivalry with authors and literary figures helps us to understand why masterpieces of the kind produced by Shakespeare and Milton became increasingly difficult to create in the twentieth century. Modern artists use a variety of creative techniques to deal with the problem of the audience. Samuel Beckett writes in a non-fiction essay, "to be an artist is to fail, as no other dare fail, that failure is his world and the shrink from it desertion, art and craft, good housekeeping."[\[39\]](#) The proper subject for a postmodern masterpiece is its own impossibility.[\[40\]](#)

## 9. Interiority and Authority

I want to dwell a little on Satan's highly developed interiority including his inner conflicts. There is always a disjunction between how he presents himself and how he feels and thinks privately. For example, he argues convincingly in Heaven, before his followers, that God is a tyrant whose rule must be rejected. But later, in his monologue on Earth, he admits to himself that God did not deserve his rebellion. Milton was undoubtedly influenced by Marlowe and especially Shakespeare in the representation of Satan's psychology. Macbeth, Hamlet, virtually all of Shakespeare's protagonists have great psychological complexity and depth. Compare Satan to Achilles, who doesn't deign to hide his inner self. For the ancient Greeks, the public self, one's reputation and honor, constituted the self. In reference to Hamlet, Gans writes,

The sign of sacrality that justifies the central position of the figure of medieval religious art has now been unpacked from the center and articulated as a tension between the public scene and the private inwardness—the "soul"—of the protagonist.[\[41\]](#)

As with so much of Gans's writing, there is a depth of meaning here for us to unpack. First of all, the great Renaissance protagonists give us the illusion of virtually limitless depth of character. Harold Bloom writes,

Shakespeare's uncanny power in the rendering of personality is perhaps beyond explanation. Why do his personages seem so real to us, and how could he contrive that illusion so persuasively?[\[42\]](#)

Bloom recognizes the metatheatrical dimension of Hamlet's representation: "Hamlet can seem an actual person who somehow has been caught inside a play, so that he has to perform even though he doesn't want to." [43] (Tom Stoppard applies this same insight to great effect in his comic masterpiece *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*.) For Bloom, Hamlet is beyond explanation except as an expression of Shakespeare's transcendent genius. Shakespeare's "uncanny power" must perhaps remain a fascinating mystery, but we can say with confidence that he was responding to larger cultural developments including the authority bestowed on "private inwardness" by the Judeo-Christian tradition. Gans notes that this inwardness is full of tension and conflict. Both Hamlet and Satan find opportunities to berate themselves ("What a rogue and peasant slave am I!") and bemoan their situation. The interior struggle involves a tension between "the public scene" (including their role in the larger plot situation) and "the private inwardness—the 'soul'—of the protagonist." This conflict reflects our situation as moderns. Whereas medieval characters were identified (and identified themselves) by their social role, as moderns we reserve our ultimate identity for our private life, in dialogue with ourself and our family and friends. Rousseau, Heidegger, and Sartre believed that one's social role, because it was imposed by society, was inauthentic and should be rejected as the basis of identity. We withdraw our allegiance from the public scene because it is perceived as corrupt and oppressive.

When King Claudius announces his coronation and marriage, Hamlet stands off at the margin of the scene dressed in black. When challenged privately by the royal couple, he replies with riddling contempt. The authority given to the inward self here provides an alternative to the public scene, and the protagonist is now separable from the ritual scene of tragedy. Hamlet challenges the authority of the public scene (which is also the scene of sacrifice hence tragedy), but fate eventually compels him to the return to the tragic scene in the final act, where he meets his death. The Renaissance aesthetic is still ambivalently attached to the cosmic order and divine hierarchy. This attachment is what makes a tragedy involving fate possible.

Gans finds that a character's internal conflict is the heir of the medieval, visible "sign of sacrality." In other words, an inward tension serves to distinguish modern protagonists and designate them as worthy of attention in an increasingly desacralized world. How exactly does this work? The protagonists may be centralized or marginal within the fictional world of the play, but they generally reject the public scene, and they get a cathartic charge from their rebellion. The iconoclastic rejection and deconstruction of central figures (e.g., Claudius) serves to distinguish the self as "chosen" in a sense—an insight fully incorporated into Romanticism. Election and iconoclasm are the same imperative on different levels.

The protagonist's inwardness models a new form of sacrality; their internal conflicts authorize them as worthy of representation, just as classical heroes like Achilles were authorized by their battlefield conflicts. Renaissance protagonists are able to "internalize the crucifixion" (as scholars say), which authorizes the self inwardly and for others. The self

becomes, in theory, independent of public recognition. The suffering imposed by a deceitful world is a source of and validation for identity and authority for modernity. The results of Oedipus's blinding and exile to some extent anticipate the Christian model. He becomes a prophet himself in Sophocles' *Oedipus at Colonus*.

## 10. Contemporary Audience Resistance

One of my central claims is that because of the authority given to individuals by Christianity there is a potential for rivalry and resentment among readers for a literary text's central figures. The primary evidence, as we have seen, is the texts themselves, the various techniques that authors use that function to authorize the central figures and assuage possible resentment. Much literary criticism also supports my thesis. I've mentioned how some Milton scholars are implicitly in rivalry with God and Milton. By the same token, how many critics have proposed rewriting the ending to Mark Twain's *Huckleberry Finn*? My readers can supply examples from their own secondary research experience. Harold Bloom calls neo-Marxist literary theory and criticism the "school of resentment," with some justification.<sup>[44]</sup> Teachers sometimes find students resentful of the time and effort required to understand great literature, showing little appreciation for how these works enrich our lives and prepare our minds for greater tasks. I'll give an example of how students resist a great work of art from my own experience. I was teaching Ingmar Bergman's film classic *The Seventh Seal* in one of my classes, a film with which most of my readers will be familiar. We watched the film together as a class, and then we reviewed and discussed several key scenes. One that I selected for discussion was the picnic scene with the saintly couple Jof and Mia (with their infant son Mikael) sharing fresh milk and wild strawberries by the side of the road with the knight Block, his squire Jöns, and the mute woman. This is one of several scenes from this film that have imprinted themselves indelibly upon my memory. After the terrors they have all suffered in their travels, it is a rare moment of tender joy. The knight is initially somber and sad, but Mia cheers him up with her grace and the strawberries. The knight raises the bowl of milk and gives this beautiful speech of thanksgiving:

I shall remember this moment: the silence, the twilight, the bowl of strawberries, the bowl of milk. Your faces in the evening light. Mikael asleep, Jof with his lyre. I shall try to remember our talk. I shall carry this memory carefully in my hands as if it were a bowl brimful of fresh milk. It will be a sign to me, and a great sufficiency.<sup>[45]</sup>

For me and many others, this is a magnificent moment of joy and peace, emblematic of the power of art to redeem tragedy and suffering. I was especially interested in the knight's mention of "memory," a reference to one of the primary functions of language and art, simply to remember events through "a sign." The public event gives birth to a private memory to be cherished as "a great sufficiency."

Yet a student in the class found this speech annoying. I could have never imagined in a million years that somebody could object to this speech. I asked why. She said it was pretentious. Another student chimed in, "yea, he's dominating the conversation." It's true of course that such a speech is not common or realistic in everyday conversation. For me that just makes it all the more special. I was flabbergasted by the students' response. I tried, briefly, to defend the speech, but I let it go. To some extent, students are reacting not just to the film but to the somewhat artificial situation of the classroom (including the felt pressure to be "critical"). In any case, it demonstrates with perhaps depressing clarity the resistance of a contemporary audience. Marc Gervais comments on the film scene,

As Jof plays the lute, softly singing a love song to Jesus Christ and springtime, the Knight raises the scooped out dish in a gesture straight out of the offertory, consecration, and communion ritual of the Christian Mass. (17)

The connection to religious ritual is important. The students' reaction is modern day iconoclasm. Even though the students have no idea of idolatry, it is the same underlying imperative: the reaction against a figure monopolizing the public center (ever so briefly) with a ceremonial speech that assumes assent.

## **Conclusion**

The issue of authority in literature is well known, especially with the work of New Historicists, but the role of the audience has not been recognized. Christian egalitarianism combined with Jewish iconoclasm gives rise to a secular dynamic without parallel, driving the cultural, political, and aesthetic history of the Christian West. Our relationship with centralized figures, political and literary, is profoundly conditioned by the three "R"s: rivalry, resentment, and resistance. Popular literature, based on the principle of wish fulfillment, does not suffer from this problem. Serious literature, on the other hand, requires a certain discipline, and the rewards are proportional. (I don't mean to suggest any sharp distinction between popular and serious literature in practice. Rather, all literature exists on a continuum of more or less "popular" in the sense I've described. Nevertheless, the distinction is real and important.)

As moderns with more opportunities for advancement as well as for entertainment, we become more jealous of our time and attention. But at the root of the development I'm describing is the tension between public figures that monopolize the center of the scene of representation and individuals on the periphery, who find themselves subordinate in one way or another, however temporarily. This hostility is to some extent natural to human culture, finding its root in the original scene of language. But it becomes an independent cultural principle with Judaic iconoclasm, and it's extended to all individuals (as an element of identity) by Christian egalitarianism.

A new way of interpreting literature does not offer a set method and its application will not

produce predictable results. Every work of art is unique in terms of its content, form, and context. Interpretation should proceed both methodically and intuitively. Nevertheless this new way does offer some starting points and insights. We begin with the questions: what constitutes authority for the people within the fictional world of the text? And what is the source of the authority of the text (its content, figures, form, and author) for the audience? In addressing these questions, we should recognize that the authority of the text for its audience is a quintessentially modern problem resulting from the Christian doctrine of equality. For modernity, authority is never assured but rather the fragile achievement of a dialogic process of negotiation between center and periphery, always subject to revision.

We can analyze a text in terms of the relationship between the center of the scene of representation and the periphery, both within the work and including the audience. As an anthropological discovery procedure, literature models and tests the scene of representation on every level, personal, aesthetic, and political. Modern literature, without the support from traditional social hierarchy, must find ways to assuage the potential resentment of readers, and self-reference in various forms is one of the main ways of addressing this problem.

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## Notes

[1] Bakhtin is interested in how the novel exemplifies the process of heteroglossia; Renaissance literature plays a role in the literary-historical development leading to the novel: Mikhail Bakhtin, "Discourse in the Novel" in *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), 259-422.

[2] Peter Goldman, "Girard and Bakhtin on the Novel," *Anthropoetics* XXI, no. 2 (Spring 2016), <http://anthropoetics.ucla.edu/ap2102/2102goldman/>.

[3] For an introduction to Girard's ideas, see René Girard, *The Girard Reader*, ed. James G. Williams (New York, Crossroad Publishing, 1996).

[4] Plato, *Republic*, Book X, Trans. G.M.A. Grube and C.D.C. Reeve, (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 1992): 264-292.

[5] For recent research that supports Girard's theory of mimesis in certain aspects, see the essays in *Perspectives on Imitation: From Neuroscience to Social Science Vols. 1 & 2*, eds. Susan Hurley and Nick Chater (Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 2005); and Michael Tomasello, *The Cultural Origins of Human Cognition* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1999). Although their research supports the importance of imitation for human development and culture, professional specialists in Anthropology and Social Neuroscience have largely ignored Girard's evidence for the conflictual potential of imitation.



[6] See René Girard, *A Theater of Envy: William Shakespeare* (South Bend, IN: St. Augustine's Press, 2004); and Richard van Oort, *Shakespeare's Big Men: Tragedy and the Problem of Resentment* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2016).

[7] See Eric Gans on this point, *Signs of Paradox: Irony, Resentment, and Other Mimetic Structures* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997), 21.

[8] Terrence W. Deacon shows how symbolic signs depend upon mimetic (iconic and indexical) signs: *The Symbolic Species: The Co-evolution of Language and the Brain*, Chap. Three, "Symbols Aren't Simple," (New York: Norton, 1997): 69-101. See also Merlin Donald on the mimetic basis of language and culture: "Imitation and Mimesis," *Perspectives on Imitation: From Neuroscience to Social Science Vol. 2*, eds. Susan Hurley and Nick Chater, (Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 2005), 283-300.

[9] On the originary hypothesis, see Eric Gans, *Originary Thinking: Elements of Generative Anthropology* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1993), 1-44.

[10] On the adaptive nature of imitation and its importance for the evolution of the human species, see the essays in *Perspectives on Imitation: From Neuroscience to Social Science Vols. 1 & 2*, eds. Susan Hurley and Nick Chater, Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 2005; especially Merlin Donald's essay "Imitation and Mimesis," 283-300; as well as Eric Gans's originary hypothesis referenced above in footnote #9.

[11] This claim is the perhaps the most important (and original) insight of and foundation for Eric Gans's originary hypothesis.

[12] For more on the parsimony of this hypothesis, see Peter Goldman, "Why Generative Anthropology?" *Chronicles of Love and Resentment* No. 445 (July 13th, 2013), <http://anthropoetics.ucla.edu/views/vw445/>.

[13] Emile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*, trans. Joseph Ward Swain (New York: Free Press, 1915), 236-7.

[14] On the opposition of public and private scenes of representation, see Peter Goldman, "'The reforming of Reformation itself': Public versus Private Scenes of Representation in Shakespeare's *Measure for Measure*," in *The Originary Hypothesis: A Minimal Proposal for Humanistic Inquiry*, ed. Adam Katz, 171-211. Aurora, CO: Davies Group, 2007.

[15] Eric Gans, *The End of Culture: Toward a Generative Anthropology* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), 177.

[16] Eric Gans, *The End of Culture*, 242-8.

[17] René Girard, "The Plague in Literature and Myth," in *"To double business bound": Essays on Literature, Mimesis, and Anthropology* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978), 136-154.

[18] The English word "tyrant" is derived from the Greek *tyrannos*, which was originally a neutral term for one who came to power without the sanction of a city's constitutional laws.

[19] Aristotle also writes, "The imitation is not just of a complete action, but also of events that evoke fear and pity. These effects occur above all when things come about contrary to expectation but because of one another" (17). The protagonist does "the terrible deed [leading to his downfall] in ignorance" (23). Aristotle, *Poetics*, translated by Malcolm Heath, (London: Penguin Books, 1996).

[20] See Eric Gans, *Science and Faith: The Anthropology of Revelation*, (Savage, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1990), p. 60.

[21] On the "rise of the West," see Peter Goldman, "John Milton on Ecclesiastical Free Markets and Weber's Protestant Ethic," *Anthropoetics: The Journal of Generative Anthropology* 22.2 (Spring 2017), <http://anthropoetics.ucla.edu/ap2202/2202goldman/> .

[22] Eric Gans, *Originary Thinking*, 148-9.

[23] Eric Gans, "Originary Democracy and the Critique of Pure Fairness," in *The Democratic Experience and Political Violence*, eds. David C. Rappaport and Leonard Weinberg (London: Frank Cass, 2001), 308-324.

[24] Eric Gans, *Originary Thinking*, 149.

[25] One might also mention the contemporary addiction to apps like YouTube, Facebook, Twitter, etc. With social media, we not only distract ourselves with the amateur productions of others, we can also gain an audience for our own productions. Gaining recognition for our own productions is the most satisfactory way of easing resentment. An implicit goal for us as moderns is to craft our very life as a *story* that compels and rewards the attention of others; after all, we are "the potential equals in triumph and in suffering of the participants of the agon."

[26] One could ask why we still accept the literature of ancient Greece, given the modern potential for resentment. The short answer is that a work of literature implies its audience and original context, and usually we accept it on its own terms.

[27] I address the issue of self-reference in late Renaissance painting in "The Emergence of Aesthetic Self-Reference," *Anthropoetics* 24.2 (Spring 2019), <http://anthropoetics.ucla.edu/ap2402/2402goldman/>.

- [28] Eric Gans, "The Esthetic in History," *Chronicles of Love and Resentment*, No. 578, (March 10th, 2018), <http://anthropoetics.ucla.edu/views/vw578/>.
- [29] William Shakespeare, *The Complete Works of Shakespeare*, 5<sup>th</sup> ed. ed. David Bevington, (New York: Pearson-Longman, 2004). All references to Shakespeare will be to this edition.
- [30] Gans, *Originary Thinking*, 154-5.
- [31] René Girard argues that the Passion demystifies myths of scapegoating including Oedipus: *Things Hidden since the Foundation of the World* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1987), 180-223.
- [32] Theories of the Atonement usually maintain the divine necessity of the crucifixion for salvation, a point that can elide human responsibility for the historical event of the crucifixion.
- [33] On *The Winter's Tale* and Shakespeare's turn to Romance, see Peter Goldman, "The Winter's Tale and Antitheatricalism: Shakespeare's Rehabilitation of the Public Scene," *Anthropoetics* XVII no. 1 (Fall 2011), <http://anthropoetics.ucla.edu/ap1701/1701goldman/>.
- [34] See Peter Goldman, "Shakespeare's Gentle Apocalypse: *The Tempest*" *Anthropoetics* XVIII, no. 2 (Spring 2013), <http://anthropoetics.ucla.edu/ap1802/1802goldman/>.
- [35] John Milton, *The Complete Poetry and Essential Prose of John Milton*, eds. William Kerrigan, John Rumrich, and Stephen M. Fallon (New York: Modern Library—Random House, 2007).
- [36] Stanley E. Fish, *Surprised by Sin: The Reader in Paradise Lost* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967).
- [37] For more on the conflict between epic and Bible in *Paradise Lost*, see Peter Goldman, "'By merit more than birthright': Election and the Logic of Modernity in *Paradise Lost*," *Anthropoetics* XXIII, no. 2 (Spring 2018), <http://anthropoetics.ucla.edu/ap2302/2302goldman/>.
- [38] Francis Bacon, *Novum Organum*, trans. Peter Urbach and John Gibson (Chicago, IL: Open Court, 1994), 53-77.
- [39] Samuel Beckett, "Three Dialogues," in *Samuel Beckett: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. Martin Esslin (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1965), 21.
- [40] On the problem of masterpieces in postmodern culture, see Eric Gans, "Beckett and the Problem of Modern Culture," *SubStance* Vol. 11, No. 2, Issue 35 (1982), pp. 3-15; and Eric

Gans, "No More Masterpieces," *Chronicles of Love and Resentment*, no. 27 (January 27<sup>th</sup>, 1996), <http://anthropoetics.ucla.edu/views/vw27/>.

[41] Gans, *Originary Thinking*, 157.

[42] Harold Bloom, *Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human* (New York: Riverhead Books, 1998), 6.

[43] Bloom, *Shakespeare*, p. 401.

[44] Harold Bloom, *The Western Canon* (New York: Riverhead, 1995), 4.

[45] *The Seventh Seal*, DVD, directed by Ingmar Bergman (1957; New York, NY: The Criterion Collection, 2009). The given speech here is from the English subtitles.