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## Deceit, Desire, and Destruction in *King Lear*

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Drama requires intense human conflict; human conflict in Shakespeare takes the form of mimetic rivalry; mimetic rivalry is the product of human mediation; internal mediation does not normally occur until a society becomes undifferentiated.

Rene Girard, *A Theatre of Envy*

*Lear* opens with a whimper. Two underlings are engaging in that most tedious of discussions who is more favoured by the one in power, in this case, the Duke of Albany or of Cornwall. One has the impression that, were it not for the entrance of Edmund the bastard son of Gloucester the discussion, as such discussions are wont to do—would go on interminably. But that, of course, is the point. For a discussion of this placid sort does not continue, nor can it continue. Such discussions presume much; most importantly, they assume political stability, and the social order upon which political order rests,<sup>1</sup> and this will, in the manner of a very few moments, become a thing of the past. The first words, then, of *Lear* are the calm before the storm, the prelude to the exit of the Hobbesian leviathan, the war of all against all. Yet, we would argue, there are seeds within these innocuous seeming first lines which portend danger, and the incredible events which shall follow—no less the complete dismantling of, among other things, political order. Following the theory of literary critic Rene Girard, we shall attempt to trace the dismantling. In his view, violence lies at the core of human society; indeed, violence both creates the need for and is a constant threat to social order. Yet Girard's view of the state is grounded in the concept of mimesis;<sup>2</sup> for Girard, the violence that constantly threatens to undo the social order is the product of mimetic desire which is always and inherently unstable and transitory because it is directly obliquely at its object. Valued things are filtered through a mediator: thus, in his early work, Girard referred to mimetic desire as triangular always involving object, mediator and modeller. His point is that objects have no intrinsic value; rather, what we desire and seek to appropriate is the product of what those whom we imitate desire (and vice versa). This process, initially encouraged by the mediator, eventually becomes problematic at the point at which modeller and mediator become so alike that their desires are undifferentiated. At this point, they become doubles of each other and, in consequence, mimetic rivals. When such a state of affairs infects not just a few

isolated individuals, but a society in general, a social crisis of escalating violence ensues as the product of a lack of differentiation. And it is this loss that is the stuff of great tragedy which, Girard contends, is articulated brilliantly by Shakespeare.

Indeed, this loss is subtly introduced in the first few lines of *Lear* as a foreshadowing of serious difficulties to come. Gloucester says that he cannot differentiate between Cornwall and Albany any more, although Kent's first line indicates that this previously was not the case, in terms of whom the "King had more affected" (I.i.1) since "equalities are so weighed that curiosity in neither can make choice/of either's moiety" (I.i. 5-7).

Although Girard has written extensively on Shakespeare, he has not looked at *Lear* in any detail. We propose to do so. We shall, however, concentrate primarily, though by no means exclusively, on the beginning and the ending of the play. We do so because they display in concentrated form many of the ingredients which comprise Girard's hypothesis regarding the nature of mimetic desire and the violence and disruption of order such desire can, within the context of Shakespearean tragedy, produce.

Consider first the dichotomy Shakespeare plays with concerning nature and convention. Edmund, who cannot be ignored later as he acts as catalyst for chaos, goes unnoticed for the first few lines, while Gloucester and Kent converse about political minutiae. though he is the *natural* son of Gloucester, he has no standing in terms of *conventional* political structure. Because of this tenuous standing, he can be, and is, completely ignored, a mere piece of undifferentiated background. For Edmund, unlike his 'legitimate' brother Edgar, there is no "order of law" (I.i.19) to establish his place. Indeed, Edmund and Edgar are discussed here by their father almost exclusively in terms of their legitimacy or illegitimacy, and discussion of Edmund serves primarily to set a context for Gloucester to engage in ribald conversation with Kent. Thus we are introduced here to a dichotomy between nature, in terms of sexual conquest by Gloucester over Edmund's mother, and convention whereby the same activity, sexual intercourse, produces qualitatively different results. This difference between nature and convention is the genesis and heart of Edmund's soliloquy in I.ii in which he both asserts his loyalty to nature, "Thou, Nature, art my goddess; to thy law/My services are bound....", and castigates convention as a "plaque" (I.ii.1-3). But the assertiveness Edmund begins to adopt in I.ii is not yet possible, for it is founded on a political instability which occurs in the face of a loss of differentiation which begins to unfold only toward the end of I.i during the love test. Thus, when Edmund is discussed at the beginning of I.i, it is only to be summarily dismissed upon the entrance of Lear whom it is impossible to ignore, entering as he does at the head of the royal entourage. "He hath been out nine years" Gloucester informs

Kent regarding Edmund, but before he can continue, he is interrupted : "and away/He shall again. The King is coming" (I.i.34- 5).

The images and the phrasing are integrally important here. Lear enters behind one carrying a crown, a signifier of royal rank. And he is introduced by Gloucester not as Lear, but as "the King." That is, Lear is introduced not as natural person, but in terms of a conventional position, the head of the political and social hierarchy. In fact, there is not yet any dichotomy between personhood and social rank. Lear is simply 'the King;' indeed, at this point the phrase "Lear is King" amounts to an analytic statement. That is why it is so troublesome — actually impossible—for Lear's plan, to be introduced shortly, to work. For when he divides his kingdom, he is in essence attempting to divide himself, and this is rife with the problems typical of split and/or multipersonalities.

On the basis of convention, then, we get at the very beginning a clear image of differentiation between those with status and power and those with none. As a result, we have the order typical of stable political states. Almost immediately upon his entrance, however, Lear will unwittingly begin the process which undermines this order and stability as he thrusts the play into action. "[W]e shall," he says, "express our darker purpose-:" (I.i.38) the abdication and infamous love test are underway.

There are a number of difficulties facing one at this point in the text. Let us mention one : there is an air of unbelievability surrounding the entire love test which makes it difficult, at least from a certain perspective, to suspend one's disbelief. Even given that Lear is a man who has held absolute power for a considerable period of time and, thus, is used to the sycophantic responses of those surrounding him, he seems too easily taken in by the obvious manoeuvres of Goneril and Regan. On the other hand, it is an understatement to say he deals poorly with those such as Cordelia and Kent who fail to accept his plan. In general, then, Lear, presumably a man of political savvy (not to mention savagery), concocts an unworkable plan, is overly sanguine when it meets with approval, and is excessively hostile to having its problematic features pointed out. Lear's plan, therefore, seems not only to be unreasonable, it strikes us as utterly irrational.

One seems forced, then, to wonder what on earth Lear could have been thinking when he hatched his plan. We suggest that Lear had nothing of the earth, nor indeed of the human, in mind regarding his plan. Rather, Lear seeks just the opposite; complete transcendence of the earthly realm to that on the divine. In short, Lear has conceived himself as a god. Note, for example, the use of the map in this regard. Most productions of Lear display the map of Lear's Kingdom prominently; in at least one, an enormous map is placed on the

floor of the stage and left there throughout most of the production to be trampled and torn asunder as Lear's kingdom is itself ripped apart.<sup>3</sup> One feature of maps is that they reduce land in such a way that humans can encompass it : as illusory as it may actually be, one has a transcendence over maps which allows one, as in Lear's case, to have complete dominion over the land and to carve it up in discreet units as if one actually were a god. Of course, in actual fact, maps are but models of land and humans do not have divine dominion over them. One's power over the land in the context of Lear's time meant that one kept vigilance over it, perhaps ruthlessly so. Lear, however, wants to absolve himself of all such responsibility and control but retain his power. That is, Lear fails to recognize that as a human one simply cannot separate control and power; that the power emanates necessarily from the control. Regan's words at the end of scene i-- that Lear "hath ever/ But slenderly known himself" (I.i.295-6) thus reverberate with an irony which, nonetheless, posits a truth about Lear. For Lear here commits that most audacious form of self-delusion by mistaking himself for a divinity. Part of the lesson Lear must eventually come to learn to return stability to the kingdom will be to reject this transcendent and divine perspective, to recognize the sin of hubris.

Besides being models which can deceive in the way alluded to above, maps are also signifiers of order and stability by fixing reality in a definitive way. As we shall discuss at some length below, land images form an integral component of Lear. They act as metaphors for the principals who are themselves fixed at this point, but shall, again like the land, become increasingly undifferentiated.

Dutifully, Goneril begins the love test. In a masterful stroke of irony, Shakespeare uses her speech about value in general, and love of her father in particular to begin the process of the complete devaluation of, in the final analysis, language itself. Her speech makes two direct references to language and in both cases, "I love you more than word can/Wield the matter" (I.i.57- 8), and "A love that makes breath poor, and speech/Unable" (I.i.62-3), she refers to the inability of language to express herself adequately. Undoubtedly, her claims are in part mere puffery and self-promotion in her acquisitorial pursuit, but there is truth, again ironically, in her words. Language here is being stretched beyond its limits. Like maps, language attempts definitively to fix reality, and, in this case, that amounts to transforming love into something quantifiable. Thus, we are continually assaulted in her speech with comparative phrases such as : "more than," "dearer than," "no less than," "as much as" and so on (I.i.54-61).<sup>4</sup> Stretched as has been by Goneril, Regan has little space, that is little language, with which to outmanoeuvre her sister. Thus, whereas Goneril can refer to definite entities such as eyesight and space, Regan must refer to nothing other than her sister's words : I am

made of that self mettle as my sister, And prize me at her worth" (I.i 69 - 70). In doing so, Regan's language comes to refer only to language, and hence is now devoid of the referents of language; it has become those mere "external marks" on a page as Plato once denisively referred to the (written) word (275a). In consequence, all communicative value has been lost : language has now become emptied and/or vacated of meaning,<sup>5</sup> and once this has occurred, once it has become impossible to say anything because language is incapable of differentiating anything, Cordelia has literally nothing to say. Nothing has produced nothing; hence, in a brief interchange between Cordelia and Lear amounting to four lines of text, we get five occurrences of the word nothing.

Lear : ..... Speak.

Cordelia : Nothing, my lord.

Lear : Nothing ?

Cordelia : Nothing.

Lear : Nothing will come of nothing. Speak again. (I, i, 88-93).

Cordelia continues to refuse to say anything until Lear demands, "Mend your speech a little, Lest you may mar your fortunes" (I. i. 96-7). And, at this point, Cordelia does mend her speech, though not in the way Lear would want, since she now does say something rather than nothing, and thereby distances herself from the mimetic crisis that is unfolding. But now she will engage in plain speech. If love is to be quantified, then let us do so. Like all quantifiable things, we must speak in finite terms - that is, if love is a quantifiable thing, then there will be only so much to go around : one must be careful in such (economic) matters or transactions to give and get the right price. Thus, she proposes to "Return those duties back as are right fit" (I. i. 97). And in this context - where Cordelia has a father and, soon, a husband - she of course cannot give all her love to her father; some, "half," will now go to her husband.

This 'plain speech' sits poorly with Lear, as it will later with respect to the plain talk of Kent because Lear is also caught up in the mimetic crisis, given as he is to demanding that he mirrors everyone's desires. Indeed, those who, like Cordelia, Kent, and France, continue to function as if language and so human social behaviour had meaning beyond themselves quickly become excluded or exclude themselves from the social system. That exclusion, most particularly of Cordelia, will, we shall argue later, be centrally important in mapping another Girardian theme onto Lear, namely the process of sacrificial victimage.

Besides displaying an emerging disorder within language, the love test also exhibits a surfacing mimetic rivalry between Lear's daughters, particularly between Goneril and Regan. In her speech, Goneril maintains that she loves her

father "As much as child e'er loved, or father found" (I. i. 59) which immediately defines her love in relation to and comparison with that of her sisters. Regan picks up this challenge by claiming that she is "made of that self mettle as my sister" and thus ought to be "prize(d) ... at her worth" (I.i. 69-70). The speeches of Goneril and Regan, then, while displaying the inability of language to get beyond and/or outside itself, simultaneously indicate that this pair fails to define themselves independently of each other. They both come to imitate the other's desire for the love and affection of their father, and the concomitant power of this love and affection entails. Goneril and Regan have, in short, become mimetic doubles of each other. This becomes increasingly the case throughout the play, particularly with regard to their respective seductions of Edmund.

The sexual interest in Edmund by either Goneril or Regan is slow to begin, but when it does begin to awaken, it does so in the context of Goneril's plan to acquire more power and her disapproval of her husband Albany's increasing discomfort with her plan. That is, at this point, Goneril's interest in Edmund is still instrumental. Thus, when she hears of the death of Cornwall shortly after having made advances towards Edmund at IV. ii. 83- 87, she is ambivalent about its meaning for her :

One way I like this well;  
But being widow, and my Gloucester with her,  
May all the building in my fancy pluck  
Upon my hateful life. Another way,  
The news is no so tart.

That is, at this point, before the mimetic rivalry over Edmund has escalated to the point of contagion, she is still able to keep before her mind what her initial desire was, to acquire control over the kingdom. However, this desire changes qualitatively once Regan becomes more enthralled with Edmund. And quite clearly, the interest Regan has in Edmund is founded on her perception of Edmund's interest in Goneril. Hence, in Regan's discussion with Oswald regarding Edmund in IV.v, she begins by telling Edmund that she is aware that Goneril has given "strange oeliads and most speaking looks" to Edmund (25) but that he is "more convenient .... for my hand/ Than for your Lady's" (31-2) since Regan is now a widow.

It is at this point the mimetic rivalry between Goneril and Regan over Edmund reaches such a fevered pitch that there is a qualitative switch in the perceived value of Edmund. No longer is he viewed merely as a means to an end : mimetic rivalry has constructed Edmund as the sole intrinsically valuable object. Thus Goneril goes so far as to say at V.i. 18-9 that "I had rather lose the battle (with France) than that my sister/ Should loosen him and me."

Cordelia, conversely, remains exterior to this and other rivalries with her sisters. Just as her referential 'plain speech' marks her as different and separate from her sisters, so too her refusal to engage in her father's love test removes her from the mimetic rivalry in which her sisters are engaged.

There is a connection here between the ability - or lack thereof - to speak meaningfully and to see. In both cases what Shakespeare warns against is self-reference, where words refer only to words and vision is only of oneself, and the lack of differentiation such self-reference entails. Cordelia, in fact, makes explicit mention of the connection between speech and sight at I.i.231: "A still-soliciting eye, and such a tongue." Indeed, sight is mentioned explicitly six times in the 'banishments' scene, thrice by Lear, twice by Cordelia, and once by Kent. In the first two instances, both by Lear - "Hence and avoid my sight!" (I.i.124) and "Out of my sight!" (I.i.157) - Lear expresses both his desire, and his inability to avoid the issue at hand. Thus, Kent's response at I.i.158-9: "See better, Lear, and let me still remain/ The true blank of thine eye."

Of course Lear refuses to accept this sage advice, preferring instead the distortions of his own sight and language. Mirrors, as a symbol of self-referential sight and the concomitant lack of differentiation such sight entails, thus become an important focus of *Lear*. Mirroring effects are established both literally and metaphorically: the Fool, for example, repeatedly functions as metaphorical mirror of Lear himself.<sup>6</sup> Consider the following interchange between Lear and Fool in I.iv. At this point, Lear has just recently abdicated his throne. Yet, even as early in the action as this, his abdication has produced a crisis of self-identity, a crisis which will become more acute as the play progresses. No longer sure of who or what he is, Lear now is reduced to locating himself in a mirror. That is, he now is forced to find himself in others, even if this other be his "shadow" in a mirror, in the person of the Fool, and so on. Put another way, Lear has by this point lost the ability to differentiate himself from others and, thus, looks upon others as mere extensions of himself. Differentiation, in this case between Lear and others, has been lost, and as we have argued, such loss of differentiation inevitably leads to violence. The tragic features of this malady are brought out in the following lines. After gazing in a mirror, Lear closes his eyes and says:

Does any here know me ? This is not Lear.

Does Lear walk thus ? Speak thus ? Where are his eyes ?

Either his notion weakens, his discernings

Are lethargied - Ha! waking ? 'Tis not so.

Who is it that can tell me who I am ? (I.iv. 234-8)

And once again it is fool who replies by telling him that he is "Lear's shadow." Though Lear would wish himself asleep, though he would wish he did

not walk and speak thus, that his mental powers had not weakened and lethargied, the tragic case is that this is who Lear now is : he has become his own mimetic double. And given his previous status as the kingdom, doubling of Lear cannot but help to produce destruction. All semblance of order will eventually crumble, all things will, like the vision mirrors produce, reverse themselves. What was right is now left, a point poignantly brought out in the following prophetic passage, again by fool, as he exits in III.iii :

When priests are more in word than matter;  
When brewers mar their malt with water ;  
When nobles are tailors' tutors;  
No heretics burn'd, but wenches suitors;  
Then shall the realm of Albion  
Come to great confusion.  
When every case in law is right;  
No squire in debt, nor no poor knight;  
When slanders do not live in tongues;  
Nor cutpurses come not to throngs;  
When usersers tell their gold i' th' field;  
And bawds and whores do churches build;  
Then comes the time, who lives to see't,  
That going shall be us'd with feet.

This prophecy Merlin shall make; for I live before his time. (III.ii. 81-95)

What the fool articulates here is the fact that by this point in the action all differences have been lost as a result of the escalating mimetic crisis. Of course, Lear and the Fool (or Lear and Lear) are not the only characters who mirror one another within *King Lear*. We do not have space here to trace all these pairings in the text of *Lear*. For example, the entire sub-plot concerning Gloucester's family, though it intersects with the plot of Lear's family, also acts as a play within a play, that is, as an imitation of the 'Lear plot'. Most obviously, Lear's loss of sight is viscerally brought out in the character of Gloucester who, at the end of Act III, literally has his eyes plucked out. We do want, however, to articulate more clearly what we shall refer to as the crisis of identity brought about by the contagious component of mimesis, particularly with respect to the character of Edgar.

Recall that in Act I, Edmund has hatched and effected a plot to usurp his brother's title, and as a consequence, Edgar has had to don the disguise of a beggar, poor Tom. Early in the plot, the disguise has an obvious function : for safety's sake, Edgar must avoid recognition. Thus, in II.iii Edgar delivers the following lines :

No port is free, no place  
That guard and most unusual vigilance  
Does not attend my taking. Whiles I may 'scrape'  
I will preserve myself (3-6).

That is, his only chance for survival is to change his identity, to realize, as he says, "Edgar, I nothing am" (II.ii.21).

But there is a considerable amount of time during which Edgar continues his disguise when the only person around is his sightless father who, quite obviously, cannot recognize him visually. Why, then, outside of attributing a malevolent motive to Edgar, does he continue the disguise? The answer here is partially provided by Francis Barker who claims that in *Lear* "disguise is more than convention ..... it is a necessity and, paradoxically, a form of being, both more and less true than usual" (8). The point here is that one's identity is dependent upon social and political conventions which establish place and rank. Once these crumble, as they do during a mimetic crisis, one's identity is lost and/or transformed, a point poignantly made by Kent, who is also forced to disguise himself, when he says :

If but as well I other accents borrow  
That can my speech defense, my good intent  
May carry through itself to that full issue  
For which I razed my likeness. (I.iv.1-4)

But here is both the irony and the tragedy of the situation; disguises are donned in order to escape the violence of the mimetic crisis and to attempt to effect positive change, and yet the disguises themselves, because they preclude recognition and increase the loss of differentiation, actually contribute to the ongoing and escalating spiral of violence. However, reacquiring one's 'original' character is impossible unless and until political and/or social order is re-established, and this order cannot be re-established, outside of some extraordinary mechanisms we shall discuss below when everyone is other than oneself. There is a sense, then, in which mimesis is a force unto itself and, like a plague, overcomes everything in its path.

The destructive forces of a mimetic crisis impact not only upon personal identity, however, but upon the land as well which itself begins to lose its identity and distinctiveness. That is to be expected, particularly in the context of this play, where personal identity and land are closely linked. We have alluded to this previously in maintaining that, at the beginning of the play, Lear is equivalent to 'the King,' and the King is dependent for his identity upon the land which he controls. Note further in this context Edmund's claim in his soliloquy in I.ii : "Well, then/ Legitimate Edgar, I must have your land" (15-6).

In this context of a discussion of land images in *Lear*, we return first to I.i. As already mentioned, the map in that scene operates as a signifier of a reality both stable and differentiated : land images can, however, be mapped in other ways as well. Note, for example, the expansive and hyperbolic language used to refer to land during the love test. Lear gives to Goneril, as part of her reward and as a signifier of her status, that part of his kingdom "With shadowy forests, and with champions riched, with planteous rivers, and wide-skirted meads" (I.i.64-5). To Regan he gives an "ample third of our fair kingdom./ No less in space, validity, and pleasure/ Than that conferred upon Goneril" (I.i.80-2). But to Cordelia, who 'fails' the test, he gives nothing. That is, her exile from the family is paralleled by her exile from the land.

Note further the places in which the action occurs in this and other early scenes. They are almost all situated in places of stability and power - the castles of Lear, Gloucester, Albany and Cornwall. As the mimetic crisis begins to unfold, however, the action moves first to locations *just outside* the places of the earlier scenes. And finally, the action moves outside conventional settings altogether, and becomes increasingly situate in places of undifferentiated desolation—to woods, wild fields and open heaths.<sup>8</sup> Thus, the loss of personal identity, and the increasing levels of mimetic doubling, are reflected in the very land in which the characters are situated. Literally all stability has been lost.

The question now arises : How are we to escape, if we can, this horrible contagion ? How are we to end the mimetic crisis? According to Girard, the answer here is completely dependent on the kind of political state in which we are situated. In modern states, for example, we have, theoretically at least, the mechanism of the state through law enforcement institutions and the judiciary. These institutions can stop an escalation of violence, or at least contain it within acceptable limits, by acting as independent third parties who themselves are not a part of the mimetic process. That is, if one of us murders a member of your family, you are not yourself forced to retaliate, and indeed if you did, that would force a reaction from our family members, and we would be caught in the stranglehold of escalating violence. But if the state intervenes as a party who is not directly related to either of the warring factions then the issue can be resolved<sup>9</sup>. This is the rational behind Hobbes' claim that it is in our rational self-interest to establish a state with the power to adjudicate such issues. But pre-modern states, without this particular institution, have to seek other alternatives. By examining ancient cultures and the literature of such cultures—the drama of Ancient Greece, for example—Girard postulates that sacrifice as an institution functions in such cultures in the way that the state functions in ours, as a way to end disputes and the destruction such disputes can bring upon us. Without

our going into detail on this point, Girard says that escalating violence in pre-modern societies can be stopped only by finding an outlet for violence, a sacrificial victim, upon which/whom to vent our violence. For, as Girard maintains, although "violence is not to be denied, ...it can be directed to another object, something it can sink its teeth into" (*Violence* 13).

Having said this, we note first that when Lear abdicates his throne, he effectively negates the possibility that the intrafamily dispute can be resolved in a manner typical of what we have called above the modern state. Lear was the state, but by dividing power amongst his factioning children, there is no longer any ultimate institutional authority to resolve the dispute. Once Lear abdicates, and given the mimetic rivalry amongst all the principals, the escalating violence and the destruction of all order is inevitable. Sacrifice, then, would seem the only alternative.

However, just as it is impossible in Lear to have the institution of the state resolve the dispute, so too is it impossible for sacrifice, *operating as an institution*, to function effectively here. For, as an institution, sacrifice, like the state, is dependent upon a stable political order which has, at this point in *Lear*, been lost. Besides this, we should note that there is no textual support in *Lear* for the existence of sacrifice as an institution any way. There is, for example, no mention of a formalized set of sacrificial victims, such as the *pharmakos* of Ancient Greece, nor is there mention of any formal rules which would regulate the working of such an institution : how victims are to be chosen, in what situations they are to be sacrificed, and so on.

This is not to say, however, that sacrifice can be no help here; rather, it is to say that sacrifice cannot operate as a formal political institution. In situations where a mimetic crisis has destroyed political order, and with it political institutions, sacrifice can still operate, but only as an informal mechanism which is itself a mimesis of the institution of sacrifice. In order for this sacrificial mechanism to function effectively, that is, to bring an end to violence and thus effect a resolution to the mimetic crisis, a number of conditions must apply. Most prominently, the victim of sacrifice must be seen by the members of the various groups making up the community undergoing a mimetic crisis as innocent in the sense that the sacrifice must not be viewed by the participants as a punitive measure imposed by one of the groups but, rather, as a demand of the gods. And indeed, there is textual evidence to support the claim that characters in the drama do perceive the crisis in connection with the gods. At IV. i Gloucester laments that "As flies to wanton boys, are we to th' Gods;/ They kill us for their suport" (35-6). Yet, as Edgar maintains, there is also the sense that we are at fault since "The Gods are just, and of our pleasant vices/ Make instruments

to plague us" (V.iii.170-1). That is, the characters within a mimetic crisis see that crisis as emanating from both internal and external sources. Thus, the sacrificial victim will be viewed, somewhat contradictorily, as exterior to the dispute yet as its internal cause. This in part explains why the victim will initially be viewed by those in the crisis as evil, and then, in an incredible gestalt shift, as the sacred cause of peace.

In light of this, we would argue that Cordelia functions in *Lear* as the sacrificial victim. Part of the reason for this is that she occupies that place of being both internal and external to the crisis itself. As a family member, and one who helps the armies of France against her sisters, she can clearly be taken as central to the dispute and to the mimetic crisis. But we must also remember, however, that Cordelia is banished from the kingdom in I.i. She is thus effectively excluded from the fractionalization and violence which occurs between I.i. and IV. vii when she returns. Furthermore, Cordelia is not simply banished from the kingdom; as Lear makes explicitly clear in I.i., she is no longer to be considered a family member: "Thou hast her, France; let her be thine for we/Have no such daughter" (274-5). As a result, Cordelia is not, strictly speaking, internal to the mimetic rivalry that has led to the crisis, but can be seen as such by the players in the dispute.

Viewing Cordelia as sacrificial victim also helps to explain the growth which Lear undergoes toward the end of the play, a growth which, though it begins before Cordelia returns, only reaches its culmination at the point of her death. And Lear, as the embodiment of order, needs to be restored to health in order for the mimetic crisis to be resolved. Lear's growth is a process of humanization, moving as he does from self-reflexivity in which others exist only as mirrors of and impediments to the fulfillment of his desires, to the acknowledgement of those others as autonomous individuals. The process appropriately begins when Lear can sink no further in the mire of self-absorption. Lear's madness, if it is not caused by, is certainly exacerbated and hastened by his failure to achieve his desires which, though they began as mirrors reflecting the desires of those around him, are now nothing more than reflections of everyone else's desires. His desires, therefore, are mirrors in which there are no referents except others' desires and, thus, no way in which to construct an autonomous, and so meaningful, existence.

At the height of the storm, Lear is removed from the society that is completely committed to the mimetic crisis. Circumstances have forced Lear to survive in an asocial, natural, wild environment which demands that he rely on his own natural predelections. Thrown back on his natural self at the height (or depth) of a madness that signifies removal from social norms, Lear begins to

develop a view of others and the world around him that is directed away from the self and, thus, is independent of the society from which circumstances have excluded him.

The first sign of that occurs as Lear urges both Edgar and the Fool to seek shelter before he does. His concern for others' safety has no motive other than his genuine humane concern for the "poor naked wretches" of the world:

Poor naked wretches, whereso'er you are,  
That bide the pelting of this pitiless storm,  
How Shall your houseless heads and unfed sides,  
Your loop'd and window'd raggednes, defend you  
From seasons such as this. O! I have ta'en  
Too little care of this. Take physic, Pomp...  
Expose thyself to feel what wretches feel,  
That thou mayst shake the superflux to them,  
And show the Heavens more just. (III.iv.28-33)

Apparently driven by a burgeoning clear-sightedness of sympathy and humility, Lear now seems to identify with those wretches from whom he would have remained aloof by achieving godhead and so to have begun to move beyond the mimetic crisis. That change in Lear is evident in his challenge to "Pomp" (III.iv.33), the accoutrements of rank, that follows from his recognition that "The art of our necessities is strange,/And can make vile things precious" (III.ii.70-1).

That is not to say, however, that at that point, Lear has emerged from his madness with the insight that is indicative of the growth he demonstrates by the end of the play. Indeed, it is not until Act V, just prior to Cordelia's death, which signifies her sacrificial victimage, that Lear will fully emerge from the mimetic crisis. At that point, no longer driven by desire for self-gratification, Lear reestablishes a relationship with Cordelia because he sees clearly the possibilities for individual fulfillment inherent in rising above the chaos of the society in which all is set in motion by self-reflexive desires. So when Lear says to Cordelia that they will "take upon's" the mystery of things,/As if we were God's spies....." (V.iii.16-7), he no longer seeks the destructive godhead characteristic of his mimetic mode. Rather, he seeks to position himself and Cordelia in a self-contained relationship that is protected from that mode and its symptomatic pathology, chaos, which continues to drive the social and political orders and to which the ongoing war attests. Although Lear's language seems reminiscent of his desire for godhead ("As if we were god's spies") (V.iii.17), and although he speaks as if he has positioned himself in the midst of society's comings and goings, ("we'll talk with them too, / Who loses and who wins;

who's in, who's out") (V.iii.14-5), the fact is that Lear happily selfenclosed and so protected from the malignancy of society.<sup>10</sup>

The literal prison is, of course, the one to which Edmund sends them immediately following Lear's speech. But for all of its power to prevent escape, the literal prison is also, and more importantly, a *hortus conclusus*, a refuge within the temporal, social order from the nightmare life has become. Its temporality distinguishes that space from the destructive and delusionary space Lear seeks earlier as, in his hubris, he tries to make himself a god by remaking himself in the image of those who reflect his own desires. Even in the midst of the nightmare, Lear's desire now mirrors the innocent desires characteristic of the prelapsarian Garden: "We two alone will sing like birds i' th' cage . . . so we'll live./ And pray, and sing, and old tales, and laugh/ At gilded butterflies . . ." (V.iii.9-13). And while the yearning for a return to the primal innocence of Eden may be a yearning for that which can only be a linguistic construct, a mythical reality, that which is only psychologically possible, nonetheless, Lear's language indicates a radical change in his psychology. The extent of Lear's growth is signified by the way in which language has had its power to signify restored by Lear as he seeks a paradise, even if it is at best a linguistic or mythic construct.

Indeed, even before Lear completely emerges from his madness, Cordelia describes him as "child-changed," as having become childlike (IV.Vii.17). The change, of course, suggests that in his madness Lear seems to have lost his adult rational facility. But it also suggests that he has lost the self-reflexivity that characterizes his society. No longer raging either inwardly as at the beginning of the play, or outwardly as he was on the heath at the height of the mimetic crisis, he has found a peace of mind that seems to derive from his having discarded the clothing of the mode Girard locates as characteristic of the social and political orders as in his madness he discards his clothes and finds solace in his recognition that "unaccommodated man is no more but such a poor, bare, forked animal ..." (III, iv.109-10). As he emerges from the sleep that lays to rest his madness, he has been dressed in "fresh garments" (IV.vii.22).

Immediately prior to that statement, Lear describes Edgar, the Fool and himself as "sophisticated." Kenneth Muir glosses the word as "adulterated" (122,n.108). Acknowledging the radical brutishness of human beings inevitably caught in the Girardian social matrix of desire, Lear tries to extricate himself from that matrix by shedding the trappings of society altogether.<sup>11</sup> As we suggest above, it would seem that when his madness is most intense Lear has begun to see clearly. That is borne out by his statement moments earlier that "When the mind's free/ The body's delicate" (III.iv.11-2).

That freedom of mind is made possible because Lear has begun to disentangle himself from the constraints experienced by those who live within the mimetic order.<sup>12</sup> The process initiated in III continues throughout the remainder of the play and culminates in Act V. Prior to that, however, Lear encounters Gloucester. Although he is still suffering from madness, the growing clarity of Lear's perception enables him to respond to Gloucester in the same vein as he did to Edgar and the Fool in Act III. Gloucester becomes for Lear an individual with an identity that is independent of Lear's "I know thee well enough; thy name is Gloucester... (IV.iii.179). As it is in his dealings with Edgar and the Fool on the heath, Lear's acknowledgement of Gloucester is the consequence of his having moved beyond the need for eyes, the symbolic if not literal origin and means of development of the mimetic crisis. As Lear recognizes Gloucester, then, he sets aside vision, telling Gloucester to "take my eyes" (IV.vi.178).<sup>13</sup> The world is for Lear no longer constructed in his own image, and he approaches Gloucester by seeming to have grasped the necessity of suffering the pangs of rebirth before they can be fully restored. The understanding that began on the heath has developed even further. Once he is fully restored as the consequence of being reunited with Cordelia and being healed by her love, he is psychologically liberated and, thus, psychologically able to reconstruct his life within the linguistic, mythical paradise which he and Cordelia have created for themselves.

The self-knowledge at the heart of the restoration takes the form of differentiation, most specifically seen in Lear's acknowledgment that Cordelia is a clearly distinctive other self, not merely a reflection in whom Lear continues to see his desire reflected. Fittingly, that recognition is seen when Lear kneels to Cordelia (IV.vii.59). The self-effacement entailed by the gesture becomes all the more powerful an indicator of Lear's humiliation because of his implicit acknowledgement of Cordelia's stature which has little to do with her regal position as the Queen of France and everything to do with his understanding of the superiority of the capacity she has to love him as a distinct human being.

Despite the abundance of first-person pronouns which Lear uses in the reconciliation scene (there are thirty-one in the space of twenty-four lines), it is apparent that Cordelia's love and, thus, her capacity to forgive have completed the healing process that began on the heath by showing Lear both that love of an other is possible and how that love entails a recognition of the other as an autonomous being. Lear says :

Do not laugh at me;

For, as I am a man,

I think this lady

To be my child Cordelia. (IV.vii. 68-70)

Lear's renewed sense of Cordelia's value as an independent human being leads to his desire to establish the paradise in which he and Cordelia would co-exist as individual equals and signals his refusal of the mimetic order which nonetheless continues to drive society. When the utterly gratuitous death of Cordelia occurs, and she is carried onstage by her father, Lear again becomes the poor bare-forked animal that he was on the heath, responding in the only way he can - - by howling preternaturally (V.iii.256) as if he has moved outside society altogether and now stands alone as the one man who understands not only the horror of his own life and what he has done in society, but equally the natural and thus asocial potential to love or desire another as herself. The mirroring of self that characterizes the mimetic crisis in the play is suspended, if only briefly and at best darkly, as Lear calls for a mirror in which to see Cordelia's breath :

She's dead as earth. Lend me a looking-glass  
If that her breath will mist or stain the stone,  
Why, then she lives. (V.iii. 261-3)

The mirror, then, becomes the means by which Lear can acknowledge that Cordelia has life which means that she exists independently of Lear. For Cordelia no longer mirrors Lear's desire for self-aggrandizement by reflecting his love of self. Horribly, because it is too late, Lear now finds he loves her as an autonomous individual because of the qualities she embodied as Cordelia : "Her voice was ever soft,/Gentle and low, an excellent thing in woman" (V.iii. 272-3).

Lear's emergence from the mimetic crisis and the pathos that entails, fully reveals the play's tragic vision by reinforcing the Girardian hypothesis. Lear attempted to remove himself and Cordelia from the mimetic order that governs society. But he cannot. When individuals band together to form a society, presumably for mutual protection among other things, inevitably, the triangular model of mimetic desire we describe at the outset of this paper, is set in place. Try as one might, Girard insists, living outside that model is impossible. *Lear* makes the point.

In their reconciliation, made possible because Lear has seen the value of loving Cordelia as herself, Lear and Cordelia have resisted succumbing to the mimetic crisis or, indeed, to mimetic desire at all. Instead, they seek to live apart according to a set of principles whereby individuals do not shape their lives in the image of others' desires but, rather, live as self-motivated, autonomous human beings. The potency of mimetic desire is such, however, that it destroys Lear and Cordelia, despite the brief moment of happiness they discover in carving out a separate space. As if to suggest that the attempt itself is an affront to the omnipotence of the social forces which Girard describes in Shakespeare, *King*

*Lear*, finally, refuses any such attempt, insisting, instead, that those who try will inevitably be destroyed. That is, we suggest, the tragic vision Shakespeare gives us. At best, human beings are deluded into thinking that they can escape mimesis and a permanent social equilibrium outside of mimesis is possible. But Shakespeare closes his play on a note that strikes none of that optimism. The young are left, with their "present business" of "general woe" (V.iii. 317-8), recognizing only that "The oldest hath borne most" (V.iii.325), which is to say that the young see clearly only what is most obvious. That they "Shall never see so much, nor live so long" (V.iii.326), Girard shows us, can be little more than an empty wish.

### Notes and References

1. Attempting to deal thoroughly with the relation between political and social order would take us too far afield. Girard, following Durkheim, argues against contractarians such as Hobbes, Lock and Rousseau. While the contractarians argue that political and social order are completely interdependent, Girard appears to argue that social order runs deeper than, and is presupposed by, political order in the sense that political order will always be destroyed by the destruction of social order, whereas the converse is not necessarily the case. As we argue later, some social mechanisms such as sacrificial victimage, continue to operate even in the absence of political order.
2. Girard's conception of mimesis is not to be confused with that notion of mimesis which runs from Plato and Aristotle through the whole of Western aesthetics. That is, Girard's conception of mimesis does not involve a representation of some external reality (or, as in Plato's case, a representation of a representation). Rather, for Girard, mimesis is an hypothesis about desire in a way to be explained below.
3. See Rosenberg (53) for more on this particular production and in general on the use and importance of maps in various productions of *Lear*. Rosenberg refers to Orson Welles' 1956 production.
4. For more on this point, see Rosenberg (50-4)
5. For a more extended discussion of a similar point, see Eagleton.
6. See Shickman 75-86 for an analysis of mirroring effects in *King Lear*, particularly as they apply to the Fool.
7. Note the similarity between this speech and one on a similar topic in *Troilus and Cressida*. In that particular speech, Ulysses discusses the interaction between violence and differentiation in terms of the concept of "Degree". "O when Degree is shaken/Which is the ladder to all high designs,/The enterprise is sick! how could communities,/ Degrees in schools, and brotherhood in cities,/Peaceful commerce from dividable shores,/The primogenitive and due of birth,/Prerogative of age, crowns, scepters, laurels,/But be degree, stand in authentic place? Take but degree away, untune that string,/And, hark, what discord follows! Each thing meets/ In mere oppugnancy!... Force should be right; or rather right and wrong/Between whose endless jar justice resides,/ Should lose their names, and so should justice too." Cited in Girard, *Violence* 50-1.
8. For more on this, see Barker.
9. Girard states : "We owe our good fortune to our... judicial system, which serves to deflect the menace of vengeance. The system does not suppress vengeance; rather, it effectively limits it to a single act of reprisal... The decisions of the judiciary are invariably presented as the final act of vengeance," *Violence* 15.
10. The "mystery" to which *Lear* refers is a mystery because it is of such a different order of human experience/perception than the society embraces. *Lear's* clear-sightedness enables him to differentiate

those two states; thus his use of the simile "as if we were God's spies" rather than a statement of equivalence between himself and Cordelia and the transcendent being who are God's spies.

11. We argue below that the attempt must necessarily fail, that the pervasiveness and necessity of the Girardian society destroys those who seek to live apart from it.
12. Muir, 116, n.11, points to a similarity between Shakespeare's use of "free" in line 11 and Middleton and Rowley's use of it in their *A Fair Quarrel*, l.1. 399 : "Then 'tis no prison when the mind is free. " The trope is, of course, the basis for the Cavalier poet Richard Lovelace's "To Althea : From Prison" which appeared in 1642, 34 years after the first appearance of *King Lear*. In Lovelace's poem, the speaker celebrates his having achieved a psychological transcendence of space similar to Lear and Cordelia's *hortus conclusus* which enables him to escape the growing social unrest of the 1640s. In similar fashion, Lear, too, has escaped the horror of the war which is about to destroy both Cordelia and himself.
13. Stanley Cavell points out that what happens in Lear's confrontation with Gloucester is not simply an "access of knowledge. " Gloucester has "become not just a figure 'parallel to Lear, but Lear's double; he does not merely represent Lear, but is psychologically identical with him. So that what comes to the surface in this meeting is not a related story, but Lear's submerged mind" (52). We agree with Cavell's argument, but would add that it is because Lear has begun to differentiate that he is able to see Gloucester as the register of what he has done. The authors would like to thank Rod Nicholls and Paul Dumouchell for constructive criticisms they made on an earlier version of this paper. They are not, however, responsible for any errors in judgement which may remain. R.S.Stewart also takes this opportunity to acknowledge support he received to work on this paper from the Research Evaluation Committee at UCCB.

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