

Theater Of Envy: William Shakespeare (Carthage reprint)

by Rene Girard

St. Augustines Press

reviewed by Heward Wilkinson

The French thinker Rene Girard's remarkable book on Shakespeare, valuably republished on both sides of the Atlantic in this paperback version, remains one of the most significant critical perspectives on Shakespeare ever written. It is likewise a profound learning and gleaning from Shakespeare. Girard is a multidisciplinary thinker who is difficult to classify, having relevance, at least, to history, philosophy, anthropology, theology, and literary criticism. Partly through writing his first book, on the novels, especially, of Cervantes, Proust and Dostoievsky, *Deceit, Desire and the Novel: Self and Other in Literary Structure*, Girard came to a radical, difficult, and very disturbing understanding of certain core processes which constitute us as human.

This was, *firstly*, the recognition of the immense power for human beings, and for the development of humanity as humanity (the emergence of "hominization"), of imitative desire, *mimesis*, simplistically illustrated by mass feeling of any kind, a barroom brawl, or a panic in a building, or a stadium. It encompasses aggression, fear, sexual desire, the power drive, religious feeling, art, and much else.

Secondly, there is the theory that human beings *learned*, as they developed culture, to deal with the danger of mimetic violence by developing the mechanism of the sacrificial murder, the scapegoat murder, which for a time freed the group of the danger of mimetic escalation of aggression to everyone in the group, so was therefore interpreted as a redemption, and led to the sacralization of the victim and the foundation of religions.

The *third* stage is the diagnosis of the "human disorder" of mimesis, and the undoing of the scapegoat mechanism, by the religions of non-retaliation, above all Christianity (in its original form). This conception was developed as an anthropological thesis in *Violence and the Sacred*, and *Things Hidden Since the Foundation of the World*.

So powerful is Girard's thesis that he himself, undoubtedly, is characteristically mimetically affected by it, constantly seeking, by dismissals, to differentiate it more sharply than it permits, from, for instance, Freud and Hegel,

who both anticipate powerful elements in Girard's conception. This is something which, indeed, in relation to Bottom in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, he says is one form of the mimetic tendency:

It is Snout now who demands one more prologue after the fashion of Bottom. But, like all compulsive mimes, Bottom hates to be copied; he prizes originality above all else, and as soon as he sees his ideas espoused by another man he repudiates them. The need to contradict in him is just as mimetic as the need to copy.... (61)

It is perhaps this dimension of contrarian *mimesis* which makes Girard underestimate in Shakespeare the element most important to his vision, Shakespeare's own Christianity. (I return to this.)

As this suggests, when Girard turned to Shakespeare, he found in Shakespeare the arch diagnostician and greatest master portrayer of the mimetic process who had ever written! In this book he concentrates mainly on *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *Troilus and Cressida*, *Julius Caesar*, and *The Winter's Tale*, touching on many other plays and poems in the process. He also has a chapter on James Joyce, and Stephen Dedalus' diatribe on Shakespeare in *Ulysses*, for reasons to which I shall return. In a sense, *Julius Caesar* is Girard's *piece de resistance*; the mimetic background to the ritual murder of Caesar, which then fails to exorcise the mimetic crisis, the crisis which only sinks sweetly back into its ground again after the death of Brutus, and Mark Antony's elegy on him, is evoked with phenomenal mastery and penetration by Girard.

But he actually takes *A Midsummer Night's Dream* as his master thread of analysis. Girard thinks that Shakespeare's approach to *mimesis* was too direct in *Two Gentlemen of Verona* and *The Rape of Lucrece*, and that the "message" of *mimesis* is too difficult to tolerate, to admit of a direct approach. He thinks *A Midsummer Night's Dream* demonstrates that Shakespeare had learned a profounder mastery of a more indirect, and more subtle, communication, multilayered, which nevertheless embodies within it, comprehensively mapped and alluded to, all the elements of a mimetic crisis. I briefly sketch facets of it which slot into place aspects of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, which only become meaningful on this approach.

Thus, for instance, Girard manages to portray the deeper significance of the otherwise merely farcical, theatrical troupe of Peter Quince and the Athenian "mechanicals" – which would be the popular meaning of this subplot, illustrating the double level Shakespeare has now achieved. This deeper significance is to *explore the mimetic character precisely of acting* and the acting frame. Bottom is portrayed as through and through a great mimetic, as a great actor must be, and this is the source of his absolute confidence; always, undefeated, he will offer: "I have a device will make all well." And he carries it off, unconquerably, even when he is translated into an ass ("Bottom, thou art translated"; this whole play, as Girard recognizes, is about "translation"), and subject of and to the caresses of Titania, and the ministrations of her fairies. He is completely without snobbery, direct or inverted, and treats everyone as an equal. He is veritably, as an actor, Keats' "chameleon poet":

As to the poetical character itself...., it is not itself--it has no self. It is everything, and nothing—it has no character. It enjoys light, and shade. It lives in gusto, be it foul or fair, high or low, rich or poor, mean or elevated--it has as much delight in conceiving an Iago as an Imogen. What shocks the virtuous philosopher delights the chameleon poet.

And he manages even to embody implicitly a profound Christian humility, saturated with Pauline allusions, before the mystery of his “vision,” the Pauline “things which are not,” which can become redeemed:

‘ have had a most rare vision. I have had a dream, past the wit of man to say what dream it was: man is but an ass, if he go about to expound this dream. Methought I was—there is no man can tell what. Methought I was,—and methought I had,—but man is but a patched fool, if he will offer to say what methought I had. The eye of man hath not heard, the ear of man hath not seen, man’s hand is not able to taste, his tongue to conceive, nor his heart to report, what my dream was.

(I think Gerard Manley Hopkins picked up that “patched fool” in the last lines of his *That Nature is a Heraclitean Fire and of the Comfort of the Resurrection*.) Bottom embodies an unconquerable integrity, which is more than a match for the patronising snobbism of the courtiers of Theseus’ court (Hyppolita, so wise and astute in her reaction to Theseus’s response to the story of the *mimesis* of the lovers, is the least able to honour the *mimesis* of the actors), watching the play. “Translation” is at the very heart of what he embodies. But this aspect of him Girard does not fully explore, though, like any creative innovator, he provides us with the means to go beyond him. As such, Bottom clearly incarnates something profound of the author. It is perhaps because Girard is, paradoxically, wedded to a conception of Christianity as the annulment and antithesis of *mimesis*, and the process of mimetic violence, that he is unable to glimpse a Christianity, Shakespeare’s Christianity, which would itself be mimetically transformational (as in *Measure for Measure*; though Girard glimpses it at the end of *The Winter’s Tale*, he has to see it as only achieved at the very end of the journey). But, laying a base for this nevertheless, Girard grasps the other end of this spectrum magisterially:

This high degree of *self-dispossession*, higher than anything the Western theater can ever achieve or want to achieve, is what Shakespeare is representing in this subplot, a theatrical experience so intense that it turns back into the trance from which the theater must originally have emerged.

In his much lengthier analysis of the lovers' chaotic experience and transformation process, Girard is equally shrewd, and shows that the ostensible interference of Puck in fact simply mimics the mimetic process the lovers are going through. At the end, Theseus treats all this as mere projection, and in this, doubly missing the purpose of the author. James Shapiro, in *Contested Will*, follows, and identifies with, the positivism of Theseus. But Girard shows that Hyppolita's brief but profound response to him, treating the whole mimetic dimension as actual, not as merely projective, is the heart of what Shakespeare is trying to intimate regarding the lovers – for those who have ears to hear:

But all the story of the night told over,
And all their minds transfigured so together,
More witnesseth than fancy's images
And grows to something of great constancy;
But, howsoever, strange and admirable.

I do think Girard misses a dimension of significance, perhaps we could call it archetypal, in Jungian shorthand, in the role of the fairies, which Girard *does* treat as merely projective, merely projective of the mimetic myth and crisis.

Finally, in the closing chapter on *The Winter's Tale*, Girard writes:

Writers are such *mimes*, we are told, that they can feign a thousand states of mind that they never experience themselves. This is true, no doubt, but it is not the whole truth, and partial truths are misleading. What a genuine writer desires to represent is his own state of mind.

(338)

And here comes in the reference to Joyce. Girard, invoking Joyce's triangular exploration, in Stephen Dedalus, of Shakespeare's own mimeticism, which Joyce tries to attach to the conjectural life of William Shakespeare of Stratford, though Joyce sidelong alludes to the authorship issue ("Manner of Oxenford"), makes it totally clear that the great writer about *mimesis* must be profoundly mimetic himself, and must replicate the process of it in his work:

... Joyce understood not only mimetic desire in Shakespeare but the sacrificial ambivalence that goes with it, and deliberately set out to duplicate this remarkable feature in his own text. He decided that, in his great homage to Shakespeare, he should be as Shakespearean as possible, and not only revealed but mimicked the sacrificial strategy of his writer.

(269)

The great writer, as Nietzsche said, writes from his own reality.

This great Shakespearean exploration opens Shakespeare up anew, as no one has done, I believe, since G. Wilson Knight in *The Wheel of Fire*.