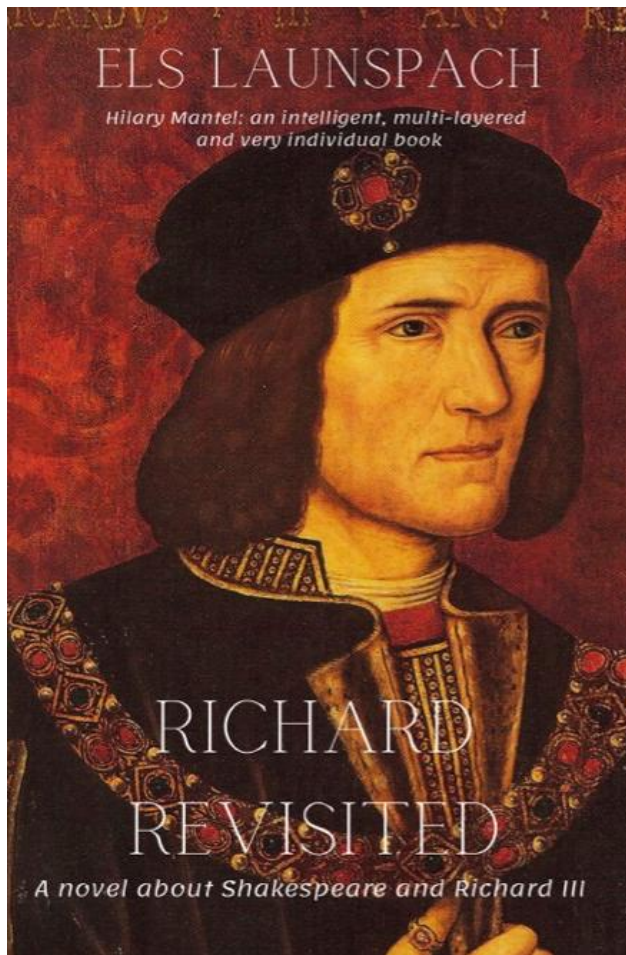


## Reading Shakespeare's *King Richard III* against the Grain

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Haarlem, The Netherlands

*Plots have I laid, inductions dangerous,  
By drunken prophecies, libels, and dreams,  
To set my brother Clarence and the King  
In deadly hate, the one against the other...*



You may recognize the first lines of *The Tragedy of King Richard III* by Shakespeare. Usually, an Elizabethan play will unfold scenes and dialogue contradicting such lines, for instance in the *Merchant of Venice* or *Antony and Cleopatra*. Our first impression of the character changes quickly after the introduction, and should change quickly too. One of the most attractive features of Elizabethan theatre is that it builds qualities and motivations for the audience to judge. Moreover, a work of art by Shakespeare, or for that matter, a tragedy by Sophocles, adds ambiguity to our experience.

Neither of these two phenomena seem to occur in *The Tragedy of King Richard III*, however. From the start we are seduced to accept one interpretation, dividing good and evil along melodramatic lines. Can this play be called a tragedy? The answer is no.

In the essay below I hope to illustrate this view. In addition, I express some doubts whether the “double strategy” which René Girard proposes in *A Theatre of Envy* (Girard 1991) is to be found in this particular play. Ironically, Girard’s own observations on myth and historical texts (Girard 1986) bring me to a contrary conclusion: in our cultural tradition this successful “history” by Shakespeare seems to function as a text of persecution. As a consequence, I will introduce a new notion about the workings of this play: the notion of mimetic satisfaction, superseding catharsis.

## Shakespeare

The question whether Shakespeare, portraying the infamous Richard III, lived within biased circles, is beyond the scope of this article. For this inquiry I refer to the novel *Richard Revisited* (Launspach 2014).

We know that Elizabethan drama offered a variety of plays and ballades debunking the last Plantagenet monarch. Plays in general, and histories specifically, were supposed to unify the English people under the Tudor-rose. Elizabethan and Jacobean playwrights used to twist facts in order to build the character's problem, creating a wonderful show on the one hand and keeping within the boundaries of censorship on the other.

It is amazing to what extent Shakespeare was influenced by Thomas More's *History of King Richard III*, a deeply ironical study of tyranny based on certain 'facts' and rumours (More 1557). In the capable hands of Shakespeare these "facts" became solid fiction. Nothing special about that, but... in this particular case of successful theatre productions, solid *fiction* has led to "fact" again: history books and Tower officials feed the negative image of the usurper and child murderer constantly. For this process down to our times I might refer to painted portraits of King Richard III as well, which were altered to suit dominant views in the Tudor-period.

### First Image of Villainy

My topic here is that *The Tragedy of King Richard III* – contrary to its official title – cannot be considered a tragedy. A romanesque (Girard 1961) reading against the grain, applicable to *Oedipus Rex* and *The Merchant of Venice* for instance, is impossible. One can summarize the plot in one sentence, the rise and fall of Richard III. When it first appeared in print, in the Quarto of 1597, this was how the play was announced:

The Tragedy of King Richard the Third, Containing, His treacherous Plots against his brother Clarence: the pittiefull murder of his innocent nephewes: his tyrannical usurpation: with the whole course of his detested life, and most deserved death.

Such an announcement corresponds with the first image of villainy in the main character:

*Plots have I laid, inductions dangerous,  
By drunken prophecies, libels, and dreams,  
To set my brother Clarence and the King  
In deadly hate, the one against the other...  
(I,i, 24-35)*

These opening lines will never be contradicted during the play. Richard of Gloucester seems to delight in his position, proudly blaming himself, challenging order for fun. The impression of villainy is elaborated upon and confirmed by royal women cursing Richard, emphasizing his physical deformities and the strange stories about his unnatural birth.

My point is that from the very first lines our protagonist, Richard of Gloucester, is modelled into a fascinating monstrosity, epitomizing the charming Vice we remember from the mystery plays, congratulating himself with all Evil to come and cheating the rather flat agents of goodness and justice. Categories of “good” and “evil” are clear-cut from the beginning. Because the play invites us to see only the Tudor view of King Richard, his problem will never become ours. There are no signs of an internal struggle, though his nightmare before the battle of Bosworth functions as a short confession of guilt. The same ghosts confronting him in his sleep, fully encourage and comfort his opponent, Richmond, who is to become the rightful king. Beautiful enough in its verses and images, the sharp line between good and evil stretches from beginning to end.

### **A Text of Persecution**

According to Girard, a text of persecution manifests itself by the use of stereotypes which direct the attention of the reader to the scapegoat. In general, such a text will not be “Romanesque” literature, since it offers the audience a plausible explanation of past events from the perspective of the insiders.

A text of persecution contains a rather seductive narrative. It confirms certain offences, attributed to a person who during the action will be brought down and punished. The characteristics of such a text, mentioned by Girard in *The Scapegoat* are the following:

- Blotting out of differences (*undifferentiation*); chaos as a result of expanding mimetic rivalry.
- Signs of victimization; *stereotypes* like marginality, physical deviations, monstrosity.
- A change from all against all to *all against one*; in the midst of collective violence a rather arbitrary offence or trespassing leads to the guilt of one party or (more often) an individual, the scapegoat.
- In the ruthless persecution of this offender, the existing mimetic *symmetry* disappears behind *asymmetry*.
- Creative and often unconscious *mythological* explanations erase the historical setting.

To these characteristics I would like to add:

- Myth being confirmed by *religious intervention*, emphasizing that the persecution is sanctioned by God. In this play, we experience the workings of divinity firstly in the prophecies of the former queen Margaret; secondly in the cursing of Richard by his own mother, the duchess of York (note: damnation means not only death but the impossibility of redemption, leading to eternal wandering of the soul); and thirdly in the visit of the ghosts at the very end of the play, encouraging the invader Richmond (Henry Tudor) and driving King Richard III to despair.

All features listed above are relevant for Shakespeare's *Tragedy of King Richard III*. As a result of the author's textual aesthetics, using scapegoat-signs from the Tudor tradition (Richard as a monster in the physical and the moral sense), the audience takes his villainy for granted and accepts his final ruin with pleasure and relief.

So did I as a drama-critic, reviewing a Dutch production of the play by one of our companies in the eighties, Toneelgroep Amsterdam. Only after appreciating mimetic theory did I gradually acknowledge what had happened in the audience and in my review. Despite the necessary instruments of a journalist, I found myself totally on the side of the persecutors, exactly as Girard summarizes. I was one of the naïve followers, voicing the murderous crowd in the play (Launspach 1994).

Realising this, I understood the workings of the play better. To analyse its scapegoating effect—the proof being present in my own review—I will reconsider the concept of catharsis and introduce a fresh notion, *mimetic satisfaction*, to encompass the mechanism which inflames not only the bystanders in the play but *the audience* of the performance as well. The unanimity of the persecutors on stage and the spectators finds its expression in the climax. We do not leave the theatre torn apart, mangled in our own choices. Nothing of the sort.

Of course dramatic motives evoke personal interpretations, but the aesthetics of the theatre operating in this text direct our reactions to agree on one point: Richard is guilty and his death is completely justified. How does this come about?

### **Structure**

Having taught theory and history of the theatre at the Amsterdam Theatre Academy for many years, and in due course studying Girard's notions on Greek tragedy, I feel confident to amplify the structure of drama. For readers familiar with the concept of mimetic rivalry, reciprocal violence and its dispersion into mimetic crisis—a symmetry of chaotic uncontrolled violence which can only be stopped by scapegoating—my discovery will be convincing. As Girard argues, unanimity concerning the guilt of this scapegoat is decisive. Only then is a solution of the crisis

found in blaming and killing this person, since he or she is regarded as the cause of all suffering. Thanks to the sudden cohesion, peace is restored, likewise the beginnings of a new order.

According to drama theory the main action of a play is about change in the protagonist: a development—or lack of it—marked by a decision, a choice. Generally, the structure has three points: inciting force, turning point and climax.

The *inciting force* is often a minor event from outside, interfering with the protagonist's dilemma (sharpening his or her problem). From this moment we witness a *rising action* during which the protagonist will overcome several obstacles and set-backs (most of them the result of manoeuvring by the antagonist).

The *turning point* concentrates on the decisive choice I mentioned, which will lead to the final outcome of the play. From this turning point onwards, we are taken in by a *falling action*. Now events have only one direction: catastrophe is coming down on the protagonist (and the community) which cannot be averted, unless one small opportunity.... no, alas!

In tragedy this results in a terrible *climax*. It is here that the *catharsis* is experienced by the community and foremost its counterpart, the audience. It's our hope, pity and fear which is structured in the dramatic arc. Now, allow me to insert mimetic terminology.

The inciting force leads to a sharpening of the hero's mimetic desire. This makes him/her more sensitive to *mimetic rivalry*, which in our play is the moment that Richard's brother King Edward IV suddenly dies, leaving the throne vacant.

From here the *rising action* intensifies to a *mimetic crisis* highlighting the turning point, where the protagonist decides his course. This is characterized by some trespassing which exposes him as a potential scapegoat. Mimetic symmetry is transfigured in asymmetry because the focus shifts acutely to one character: Richard of Gloucester, who by dissembling and blasphemy receives the crown and becomes King Richard III.

From this turning point onwards we experience the *falling action* while the protagonist is defiant to keep his crown. He is attacked several times and increasingly seen as responsible for everything, foremost the disappearance of two young princes. The antagonist forces have joined in an array of persecutors, and King Richard is vanquished in the battle of Bosworth.

### **Catharsis**

As we know, drama is based on ritual, and one of its most balanced patterns can be found in *Oedipus Rex*. In the falling action of Sophocles' tragedy, we are torn apart by pity and fear. The catharsis unfolds when Oedipus recognizes his guilt and blinds himself. But before, as always in

a dramatic structure, *traces of reciprocal rivalry* could be noticed in the rising action. Collective conflict and violence gradually disappear behind the individual decision at the turning point, and thanks to his own investigations we become acquainted with Oedipus' trespassing of the community's laws.

The climax or catastrophe includes recognition by the protagonist himself, a necessary step in mimetic theory since communal crisis can only be overcome by unanimous scapegoating. As audience, we expect Oedipus to be punished in one way or another, ending the chaos. To be sure, this outcome brings enormous relief—because responsibility for any flaw is now signified in the scapegoat. Though we did fully identify with Oedipus, obviously we are not the victim; potential guilt is lifted from our shoulders.

Tragedy will always contain some awareness of collective violence and the danger of mimetic rivalry, Girard argues. However, even an author like Sophocles must submit to the ritual's necessary agreement about the criminal by which we and all bystanders are acquitted, cleansed. This is catharsis: we are touched but dark relief achieved by drama-aesthetics prevails. The landslide from symmetry to asymmetry feels adequate and not too soon. Still, there are hints and stubborn irregularities, as René Girard and Sandor Goodhart have pointed out, enabling us to discover collective conflict and a mimetic solution.

But how shall we picture the effect of Shakespeare's *King Richard III*? The difference, I dare say, lies in our *experience* of falling action and catharsis. In this text resides no agony, no internal struggle to identify with. We know from the start who the scapegoat will be, while we watch his mounting exposure to criminal acts. Only at the very end of the play does he reflect on his actions, but within a couple of minutes he is calling for his horse and slain.

The bystanders/spectators are pleased. Not torn apart, not even shaky. The villain is punished after all and things are okay now, because "justice" has been reinstalled.

### **Shakespeare's Double Strategy**

According to Girard a double strategy might be discerned in this text, serving on one plane the vindictive mob and on another the more sophisticated parts of the audience. Perhaps this can be deciphered when four histories (presumably written in sequence at the start of Shakespeare's career) are taken together: *Henry VI*, parts 1, 2 and 3 with *Richard III* as the closing part. Only then is there a sense of repetition in the power game, always pushing a new king to the foreground, killing off the former one (Kott 1964). Such coherence certainly affords a "romanesque" dimension.

But in the universe of *The Tragedy of King Richard III*, there is no double strategy entailing public punishment on the one hand and mirroring to the educated classes their mechanisms of rivalry on the other, as Girard demonstrated in *The Merchant of Venice*. Here the Christians function as a model for Shylock but at the same time their moral flexibility is portrayed in disgusting contrast to his values. Hopefully the Elizabethan elite did notice some critical undercurrent in that play, which Shakespeare emphasised by having Portia, semi-neutral entering the court, ask: “*Who is the criminal here?*”

Analysing *King Richard III* in the same chapter, Girard attests to the power game of Elizabeth I and the remarkable longing for “evil” in the female characters in the play. However, in my view, any effective double strategy seems to be wishful thinking for three reasons.

1. Censorship: in this particular case obviously the almost ritual justification of the Tudor reign.
2. Pleasure for the aristocracy, evoked by their ancestors on stage making the ‘right’ political choice, siding with Richmond (Henry Tudor); surely and eloquently the play confirms their magnificent pedigree.
3. Melodrama does not carry the seeds of a contrary vision: the text positions Richard as a self-declared villain, while there is hardly any internal development offered during the play.

Studying another famous and effective work of theatre, we can point to Hamlet’s passionate, consecutive search for models in order to meet age-old expectations (Girard 1991). Intuitively acknowledging and postponing the reciprocal violence of his time, Hamlet finally accomplishes revenge by lapsing into mimetic desire, rivalling Laertes in Ophelia’s grave. Rewriting standard tragedy of blood, Shakespeare transfigured the necessity of retaliation in dramatic art into an inquiry about our “crisis of degree,” visible in voyeurism, strategy and delay. We may assume that the mature Shakespeare was able to achieve deep catharsis against all odds. In *Hamlet*, contrary to *The Tragedy of King Richard III*, we witness a heroic effort by the author to oppose mimetic satisfaction (Girard 1991).

## **Conclusions**

There must have been political reasons that—despite dangerous manoeuvring of the nobility in Richard’s world—the collective dimension of fifteenth-century violence disappears in Shakespeare’s play. Since the protagonist is portrayed as a charming, improvising, and manipulative criminal, beforehand announcing his crimes, there is no doubt whatsoever who causes the chaos and eventually should be sacrificed.

Shakespeare's art is effective. In *The Tragedy of King Richard III*, the rise and fall of the Tudor-enemy is enacted, culminating in the destruction of this eternal symbol of Evil. Fortunately order in society—ruled by a new king who creates a fresh tree of lineage—is restored. Hence the dawn of a celebrated period of humankind, in which Richard III as the ultimate troublemaker and murdered god may rise again and again in film and on stage. The villain gets the better tunes. Needless to say, productions through the centuries have engraved the ritual. Yet, the tradition of Richard's mythical monstrosity and crimes is now challenged by the discovery of the King's remains under the carpark in Leicester. Subsequent research gave rise to nuanced exposition and Stephen Frears's recent feature film *The Lost King*.

My effort to read Shakespeare's *King Richard III* against the grain amounts to the assumption that this is hardly possible because:

- the play is not a tragedy
- it uses stringent political myth
- it has the features of a persecution-text
- it offers no catharsis but mimetic satisfaction.

Theatre will always seduce us but has the power to undermine our mimetic urges as well. By deconstruction of theatrical aesthetics, this art is equipped to expose our flight from ambiguous complicity. When we neglect that quality, our culture will continue to be trapped in endless circling around revenge.

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