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Girard, Shakespeare and the Origins of Violence

René Girard published *A Theatre of Envy* in 1991. The book surveys how Shakespeare parallels and extends Girard's mimetic theory. While countless people claim special insight into the great playwright, Girard's anthropological model of human relations is well placed to realise this claim. Its ability to elucidate and connect intimate personal and large societal dynamics resonates with Shakespeare's scope. But Girard's ideas on the bard remain fairly obscure. This article applies his ideas to Shakespeare's shortest, funniest play, *The Comedy of Errors*, to introduce Girard's ideas and sharpen the relevance of both thinkers.

Shakespeare's relevance was questioned recently on the ABC's *Q&A*. Discussion responded to the recent Boyer Lectures by John Bell, who championed in-depth Shakespeare education. The very civil *Q&A* talk traversed opportunity for new, diverse theatre voices, free speech, outrage and social media, but struggled with the term "universal". Nakkiah Lui said the core of art is empathy, which is "timeless", but denied Shakespeare was universal. To back this, she addressed inclusivity, asking Shakespeare fans to value theatre from other cultures. But universal and inclusive are different. The first recognises an invariable, common human nature, the second, cultural or personal variation. Universal art translates across cultures; inclusive art, for specific cultures. Both are valuable: one illuminates humanity *per se*, the other ensures less socially visible voices are heard.

Tim Dean argued that while Shakespeare spoke to his own historical era, maybe to a few centuries, humanity is far older than this. Dean felt art should reference our primeval origins to be universal. This greatly widens the playing field, but denies portrayals of humans in one era might usefully inform humans in another. Both these views on universality however, point to aspects of Shakespeare that Girard's anthropological insights bring into focus.

In building his theory of culture and its origins, Girard critically compared narrative texts—from European novels to texts from history, anthropology, archaeology and ethnology. He treated these as cultural artefacts, seeing their fictional scenarios as capable of describing real social mechanisms. He examined classical and world myth, encompassing Freud, Lévi-Strauss and the Bible. Seeking repeating social patterns more than unique author signatures, Girard found a distinct social dynamic recurring in such records, varying only in local specifics. He incrementally mapped its features, developing his theory, now being applied in fields as varied as neuroscience, business, psychiatry and peacekeeping.

Girard's distillation is deceptively simple. It is also controversial. Secular culture is wary of its association with Christianity, which Girard says diverges from this pattern in important ways. Yet Christians mistrust aspects of Girard's apology which rest on material reasoning, not faith. He challenges established academic boundaries and popular views on power, politics, identity and desire. So what is Girard's theory and why does it unsettle people?

Mimetic theory pivots on the idea we have a strong propensity to imitate one another, and this mirroring, or *mimesis*, rises relatively unconsciously in social situations. Subliminal, pervasive social mimesis generates diverse yet linked effects, influencing human experience from interpersonal bonding to international war. It promotes learning and friendship, yet also provokes animosity. For example, as we mirror one another's desires, we fall into competition by reaching for the same thing. The impulse to imitate constantly stimulates desire for the alluring objects, activities or successes of those around us. This envy motivates yet frustrates, as the other's apparent state is a mirage that can't be reached. Thus *mimetic desire* constitutes an ever-present source of discontent and friction in human relations.

Compounding this, mimesis fosters the spread of

friction. When rivals imitate each other's hostility, *mimetic rivalry* escalates, moving into cycles of revenge. Bystanders, also driven by frustrated desires and mimesis, catch the fever. Factions form as people gravitate to opposed yet mirrored stances like filings to poles of a magnet, mimesis becoming more compelling as the number of people involved grows. Feud turns into war when vast tribes, like great warring twins, lose sight of original causes in defensively mimicking attacks. At the height of crisis, especially in antagonistic crowds, the force of mimesis overrides individual morality, focusing mob attention on one imagined culprit, catalysing violent communal scapegoating.

Counter-intuitively, this re-establishes community. The angry crowd unifies in attacking one target, and finds relief when many projected frustrations vanish with the victim's murder. So intense is the escalating crisis and its abrupt cathartic end, says Girard, it is mythologised and re-enacted to ward off recurrence. Diverse rituals and religions grow from such symbolic preventive activity, stabilising cultures over time, though mimesis continues to prompt crises.

A Girardian analysis might ask what Shakespeare's purpose is in saturating the play with trivial yet conspicuous beatings and brawls. What is he asking us to laugh at, and why?

The theory confronts contemporary discourse in several ways. Rather than linking social exclusion purely to economics or culture, Girard sees it as latent in all human relations, especially when individuals become mobs. He describes his political position as "anti-crowd". After all, he says, "the crowd tends to be completely on the 'right' or on the 'left'". Girard also questions the idea that those in power have unassailable control. As the sacrificial scenario is ritualised, he argues, substitutes who stand in for the original, now deified victim, are treated specially—set apart from the community, becoming the first "kings". He sees power then, as a centre of attention, dependent on the fickle viewers at its periphery, so inherently unstable.

Girard's work is thoroughly reasoned and persuasive, potentially bringing great personal insight, as well as academic value to many disciplines, including Shakespearean scholarship. Shakespeare also dissects and links the micro subjective and macro state-level implications of marriage, murder, insurrection, war—Lady Macbeth's private meltdown plays out alongside counter-rebellion. He shows intimate rivalry unfolding into public tragedy, violence spreading through families, towns, nations—*King Lear*, *Romeo and Juliet*, *Julius Caesar*. He avoids moral certitudes, exploring grey areas between right and wrong and spotlighting the humanity of apparent villains—Shylock's speech ("If you prick us, do we not bleed?") remains a model argument for social inclusion. Shakespeare's powerful kings are rarely certain of their position.

Girard and Shakespeare use similar sources, with overlap from classical antiquity to the 1600s—classical drama, myth and the Bible influence both *The Comedy of Errors* and mimetic theory. Whether academic or dramaturgical, their process is comparable. Girard identifies social patterns in myths and plays, Shakespeare draws tropes and dynamics from them. *The Comedy of Errors* exemplifies his ability to meld stock dramatic ideas and principles into a new, more universal articulation of human issues.

Written early in his career, *The Comedy of Errors* is based on the absurd premise that not one, but two sets of long-lost identical twins unknowingly occupy a small town on the same day. The town's resident Antipholus and Dromio (master and servant) and their newly arrived counterparts, even have the same names. Predictably, there are many incidents of mistaken identity—love speeches addressed, payments made and beatings given to the wrong people. Slapstick violence and raucous arguments punctuate the action and intensify the humour.

Though this knockabout violence dominates the text, it was softened in a 2022 production of the play by John Bell's company. Perhaps this was to avoid offending audiences. In the *Q&A* talk, Bell saw gender and colour-blind casting as now obligatory—maybe microaggression is now taboo. But muting *The Comedy of Errors*' conflicts muted its vital comedy. The director also dropped easy laughs in favour of a darker tone she sensed in the play's mix of hilarity and pain. While this undertone has long puzzled viewers and critics and needs to be tackled, overall the show forfeited laughter and dramatic contrast for soft-focused confusion.

Rather than ignore the play's violence, as much criticism of *The Comedy of Errors* has also done over the years, a Girardian analysis might ask what Shakespeare's purpose is in saturating the play with trivial yet conspicuous beatings and brawls. What is he asking us to laugh at, and why?

The opening confounds the idea of a comic romp. An elderly, destitute traveller faces execution

for unwittingly entering enemy territory. The scene is often read as a useful way to explain the doubled lost twins to audiences, as the prisoner Egeon—father of one set, guardian of the other—retells the family's long-past tragic separation. It also heightens dramatic tension. Duke Solinus gives the old man a day to find the money to pay his fine, but insists the beheading must otherwise occur at five o'clock. This leaves Egeon's life in the balance each time the severed family misconnect—set designs often feature a ticking clock. But there is more to it.

A Girardian lens focuses attention on the war between rivalrous dukes that Egeon is caught in. Solinus justifies the death as revenge for the execution of *his* citizens by the rival ruler—so the conflict is perpetuated at the expense of innocents. This moral issue is explicit, but often missed, because Shakespeare's staging is perverse: Egeon pleads *for death*, while the Duke delays it. The first lines are Egeon's: "Proceed Solinus, to procure my fall / And by the doom of death end woes and all". Yet Solinus replies, "Plead no more", and elaborately defends the execution. In their short exchange, Egeon bluntly asks to die five times and Solinus discursively delays death as often. The Duke eventually names the real issue: civic pressure to kill conflicts with his soul's instinct for leniency: "Were it not against our laws / Against my crown, my oath, my dignity ... / My soul should sue as advocate for thee".

His vacillation highlights this political execution for audiences. It stages an argument between pagan retribution and Christian mercy, echoing battles between Justice and Mercy in the Passion plays of the era. It references liturgy for Holy Innocent's Day, the only day *The Comedy of Errors* was originally performed, in 1594 and 1604. It voices an insistent question of the era: Can a Christian state justify violence? Each recycled argument the Duke makes increases the clarity of this issue and the time viewers have to consider it. Egeon's stance as willing victim further queries the execution. Though less extended, Solinus's delay of revenge points to Hamlet's, and is usefully revealed by a focus on mimetic rivalry as the nexus of social ills.

But the value of Girard's model is not only in re-engaging Christian subtext. Its focus on textual truth accents dramatic dynamics. Here it points to gallows humour that might reconcile the dark opening with the main farcical action. Egeon's stoic fixation on death is so gloomy it is easily comical, as is Solinus's soft-hearted hesitation, which must repeatedly halt guards leading Egeon to the gallows. Bell's show played freely with LGBT tropes and gender swaps, but passed up a chance to stage a camp role Shakespeare himself provides in Solinus. The director instead made Solinus female. This didn't noticeably stress the character's aversion to violence. The scene was played as it often is—a stalwart Duke resists pleas for mercy. It was also not needed to bolster strong female roles in the play. If played to full capacity, *The Comedy of Errors*' women are arguably its most significant characters. When adapting Plautus's plot, Shakespeare amply expanded Adriana (wife of home-town Antipholus) and added her sister Luciana. The sisters appear two scenes before the master of the house. The enhanced Adriana is emotive and fiery, driven by visions of her husband's suspected affair, while her sister is a carefully scripted polar opposite. Shakespeare also added the Abbess, agent of the powerful ending. Even female bit-parts such as courtesans and kitchenmaids are vigorous and significant.

The women's importance is even clearer if the play's trajectory from casual domestic antagonism towards wider civic violence is examined. *The Comedy of Errors* tracks this Girardian progression. Household tensions are inflamed by jealousy and misunderstanding, these small disputes spilling into the streets, embroiling businessmen, nobles and clergy in multi-directional accusations. The chaos comes to the brink of scapegoating in the final act, when a crowd of aggravated parties gathers, all seeking redress. Several possible targets are held captive at this point: guileless travellers sheltering in the abbey, an upright citizen and servant shackled by their household, and pitiful Egeon.

Shakespeare was interested in women's responses in violent situations, and *The Comedy of Errors*' women are instrumental in its descent into disorder. Adriana is the most obviously truculent, beating and threatening servants as heedlessly as her husband. She incessantly berates Antipholus for his dalliance, which the text shows is imaginary. Though Luciana seems an angelic antithesis of this, she regularly worsens the marital rift and community turbulence. She promotes both sides of a moral code, first admonishing Adriana to obey Protestant marital precepts, later suggesting Antipholus flout these and feign to love his wife while betraying her. She spurs Adriana to defy the peace-bringing Abbess.

Most disturbing is a public exorcism the sisters inflict on Antipholus. Teaming up with former enemy the Courtesan, they embrace her damning diagnosis that he is mad, and engage a Doctor Pinch to bind and "cure" him. The scene references the bloody Elizabethan sport of bear-baiting—"pinching" refers to dogs biting a chained bear—and prefigures other bear-baiting scenes in Shakespeare which signal victimisation. It is a classic Girardian scapegoating scenario, complete

with demonisation of the victim. The social reversals are also Girardian—the once conflicting women unite to pursue a common enemy. It shows illusions of villainy or possession spreading infectiously—mimetically—in an agitated crowd.

The Comedy of Errors also anticipates the violence of later plays in Adriana's jealousy, which the Abbess says, "Poison[s] more deadly than a mad dog's tooth". The volatility Shakespeare connects with this is seen when Adriana accosts the wrong Antipholus, thinking he is her husband. Her suspicions are stirred into angry accusations by the twin's confusion. Critics tend to focus on six lyrical lines here, where Adriana declares wifely devotion, but she quickly moves past this, her mood swinging from sarcasm to envisaged marital savagery. Though some lines evoke sympathy, Adriana is predominantly characterised in terms of her emotional instability, shifting between self-defence and outward blame. No one is killed in *The Comedy of Errors*, but Adriana could prototype Shakespeare's more famous jealous men—Othello, Leontes, Troilus—driven to violence by self or other-fuelled visions of betrayal. This is gender equality but not a comfortable one.

Other aspects of Girard's structure feature in this thread of female action. Mimetic desire is suggested when the fake husband propositions a responsive sister-in-law, or the sisters argue about Antipholus. Luciana implies she might make a better wife, Adriana emphasises Luciana's lack of a husband. Though refined, the language reifies mimetic rivalry, with mirrored provocations delivered in abrupt, rhymed retorts:

> *Adriana:* Look when I serve him so, he takes it ill.
> *Luciana:* O, know he is the bridle of your will.
> *Adriana:* There's none but asses will be bridled so.
> *Luciana:* Why, headstrong liberty is lashed with woe.

It is comical, but has hints of the violent passion the sisters in *King Lear* hold for Edmund.

If it is not yet clear that Girard illuminates *The Comedy of Errors*, the reverse is certainly true. Other rich depictions of mimetic, indeed "twinned", rivalry appear throughout the play. At its climax Adriana and Antipholus posture as outraged opponents while delivering matched speeches in mirrored accusatory tones. The starkest allegory however, is the locked door scene.

Here, resident master and servant are locked out of their house, the foreign twins having taken their place. The riotous fight that occurs as the rightful owners try to enter, positions one Dromio each side of a door, next to but hidden from the other. This symmetry, and the scene's many echoed insults, make it an ideal representation of Girard's warring doubles—more alike than different in their tit-for-tat focus:

> Rivals become more and more concerned with defeating the opponent ... rather than obtaining the object, which ... only exists as an excuse for the escalation ... Thus the rivals become more and more undifferentiated, identical: doubles.

Just when family reunion is most within reach, the Dromios ratchet tensions by mimicking each other's jibes, sparking a street brawl. All players, high status and low, resort to mud slinging, which corrodes social order: masters act like commoners, servants order masters away. Shakespeare uses a distinct lowbrow doggerel for all, evoking both mirrored hostility in rhymed abuse, and the socially levelling effect of this. Like all warring siblings, tribes, states, the twins are *close yet divided*, the door to resolution at hand, but closed.

Bell's production choreographs a standout moment at this point, using a double-sided mirror as the door. As lights dim, the Dromios grasp each side of this and revolve while gazing at their own reflections, creating a human mirror ball. This twirling vortex of Dromios, each with arms wide as though reaching for the other, beautifully captures the production's interest in identity confusion. It also captures the personally disorienting affects of mimesis.

Identity loss and confusion are *The Comedy of Errors*' commonly accepted themes. It is assumed the creative purpose of the twins and associated chaos is to express the discomfort of such loss. This is supported by lines from Antipholus and Adriana describing the self as "watery", permeable, indistinguishable in a sea of selves unless correctly recognised. However, Girard offers a new angle, his conception of identity diverging from modern assumptions. If relationships are constitutionally mimetic, with socialisation founded in automatic imitation, identity is other-determined to a large degree. It is always mutable, influenced by many social interactions. The self is still watery and permeable, but more fundamentally so. Literary analysis sees simply that the twins' similarity causes and reifies chaos, while Girardian analysis suggests mimetic rivalry, symbolised by twins, causes similarity and chaos.

No one experiences identity confusion in the central lockout scene. Foreign Dromio guards the door vigorously. Homeground Dromio is outraged

by his imitator but doesn't question his identity—he *offers* it to his usurper so that his usurper can take his beatings. Adriana and kitchenmaid are unmoving in a strident sense of self. Antipholus expects volatility from his wife when he's late, so wholeheartedly escalates the fray, publicly abusing servants, heatedly beating the door. The scene *may* be intended to express the angst of identity loss, but it also describes social processes that create that loss. With emblematic clarity, it shows mimetic violence inflaming conflict and turning participants into mirror images of each other.

That the play isn't only about identity and appearances is clear if we consider how its arguments start. Most think the twin mix-ups explain this, but the fights actually arise from habitual domestic and civic contention, as Girard might say all conflicts do. Relations are strained and servants beaten in the main household well before outsiders arrive. The city is in a vengeful war, preparing to execute well-intentioned travellers. Despite being a comedy, *The Comedy of Errors* states the issue of mimetic violence early, then shows how it can corrupt order and lead to the death of innocents. Other plays also do this. Consider the first lines of *Romeo and Juliet*: "Two households, both alike in dignity ... / From ancient grudge break to new mutiny".

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The Comedy of Errors, however, offers an alternative to tragedy in its Christian-feeling ending. Just as the confused crowd is set to blame one or other Antipholus, or old Egeon, whose pathos strongly recalls a self-sacrificing Christ, the Abbess opens the abbey door, revealing the truth of the twins and reuniting family. This purely material revelation of misguided enmity leaves the mob dumbstruck, contemplating tragedy narrowly evaded. The audience, whose laughter has implicated them in a headlong rush to violence, is also struck by another moving plot twist. It is as if Shakespeare understood dramatic catharsis to be founded in the horrified, relieved awe felt by a hostile crowd after a communal kill, and transfigures this. This startling effect, however, rests on stark contrast between uproarious outrage and sudden quiet mercy, a contrast that is diminished if the play's intensifying violence is downplayed.

Girard summarises three recurring elements in myth: "(1) intimations of a social crisis, (2) the attribution of something like the 'evil eye' to some individual, and (3) the collective murder of that individual". *The Comedy of Errors* realises the first two, but transmutes the scapegoating impulse to offer an alternative, again aligned with Girard's ideas—this time, his ideas about the Bible.

The long-unrecognised use of scapegoating to unite communities is, for Girard, the key distinction between pagan and Christian religion: the first perpetuates this social technology, the second reveals its mechanics. Myths arise from communities who believe the scapegoat caused and/or suddenly resolved the crisis. They may deify the victim, explaining events in terms of the victim's magical power, obscuring the truth of the final violence. Myths acclaim the incident and community actions, supporting a return to stability or founding of a new state.

Christianity, however, is "anti-religious" in Girard's words, because it discloses and rejects this: "myth is *against* the victim, whereas the Bible is *for* the victim". *The Comedy of Errors* demonstrates this consciousness in its Christ figures of Egeon and baited Antipholus, in its ending, and in other respects not detailed here. If there is alignment between Girard and Shakespeare, it must arise partly from their shared appreciation of the Bible, and its insights into sacrifice particularly.

Girardian analysis takes *The Comedy of Errors* beyond theatre into anthropological terrain. Plautus's twins, which Shakespeare deliberately doubled, no longer simply amplify identity confusion—a relatively modern idea. They are seen in the context of myth's warring brothers—one example is Romulus and Remus. The play's veneer as a trivial identity comedy allows Shakespeare to stage a near-miss mob lynching. It is engineered to depict how illusions of enmity, wrongdoing or magic spread mimetically, and how mimetic violence might propel a crowd to collectively blame and murder someone or some group in the heat of the moment.

If read this way, Shakespeare's relevance is clearer. We still see mimetic tribes forming—opposed yet identically hostile, and so volatile. Antithetical yet strangely similar stances and figureheads emerge: vegans/carnivores, incels/rad fems, Greta Thunbergs/Jordan Petersons. Politicians and the media buy into the divide, encouraging outraged spectators to bay for blood. There are reversals as enemies mimic one another: liberals execute strict lockdowns, conservatives protest and riot. Theories of conspiracy or supernatural power thrive, as does

modernity's preferred form of collective murder—online banning. Lands, waterways, species, cultures are sacrificed to mimetically driven consumerism and political tribalism. Could this archaic pattern transform as it does in *The Comedy of Errors*, when its providential yet pointedly corporeal revelation confronts everyone with the folly of accusation? Another counter model is given when the oft-beaten Dromios join hands—to exit the play as one.

Girard can't replace the vast erudition of Shakespearean research, but does ask new questions. Where envy might be ignored as trivial or uncomfortable, he points to it. Shakespeare also provokes, displaying everyone's capacity for rivalry and scapegoating. We won't find new Shakespeares if new theatre voices aren't heard. But we won't find Shakespeare's relevance by softening his edges, as theatre practice may now demand. Making Luciana a camp male, as Bell's production did, might mask a greater taboo than homosexuality: sibling rivalry.

If humanity's core struggle is our tendency to social exclusion, as Girard proposes, universal art will address this. If cultures arise from ritual re-enactment of sacrificial violence, drama always involves the primeval, especially if it spotlights victimisation. If Shakespeare theorises on such dynamics as *A Theatre of Envy* suggests, he is universal. Whether he was cognisant of exactly the effects Girard describes, or simply brings them brilliantly to life, correspondence between the two can only benefit scholarship. Their observations on social relations are of great value. Above all, there is immense value in their unflinching look at violence, for if it is centrally human, only awareness of this can transfigure it.

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*Imogen Wall lives in Canberra. Some of her poetry will appear in **Quadrant** shortly.*

Less Is More

Rip that carpet up from your hardwood floor;
give the walls a fresh coat of plain white paint;
the best advice you'll receive: less is more.

Monolithic homes encroach on a shore
where waves meet them like an unyielding saint.
Rip that carpet up from your hardwood floor.

Prune back those trees so sunlight can restore
hope to gardens drowning in dark complaint.
The best advice you'll receive: less is more.

A silence swallows the unholy roar
of traffic when the last engine grows faint.
Rip that carpet up from your hardwood floor.

Remove the windows and unhinge the door,
let your blood be stirred by winds sharp as flint.
The best advice you'll receive: less is more.

The carpenter ants assemble before
night furnishes day with its starry glint.
Rip that carpet up from your hardwood floor;
the best advice you'll receive: less is more.

Andrew James Menken