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# Necessary Victims

## William Shakespeare's Tragic Ethics of Identity

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*A drop of blood drawn from thy country's bosom  
Should grieve thee more than streams of foreign gore.*

—Shakespeare, First Part of *King Henry the Sixth*

A system of ethics produced by prohibitions is a community's condition of possibility. What maintains this system is the community's identity, the way members of the group mythically describe and convince themselves through mutual mimesis of their mutual belonging, that is, of their mutual ethics of nonviolence. This maintained space of ethical mutuality is defined against a larger external space of mutual violence.

First removed from mutual mimetic violence through prohibitions, community and its self-description as identity are then separated from outsiders through the limitation of these prohibitions to insiders. Given that prohibitions are the main protection against mutual violence, applying them exclusively within the group implies that only members benefit from full ethical protection

against violence. Girard explains this inherently violent and exclusionary nature of identity formation:

Although positive and essential, most relationships of belonging—even the most humble—involve some form of exclusion, rejection, and, consequently, violence. To exist, they have to exclude some people, and even if this exclusion is not achieved through physical violence, it employs means that are inevitably perceived as violent by those who are its victims.<sup>1</sup>

If exclusion implies lesser or completely absent ethical prohibitions protecting outsiders, behavior that would not be internally applicable without a slide into a war of all against all can be applied to the outsiders. Thus, prohibitions not only separate from the war of all against all, but in that they only apply to those within the group, they separate from outsiders, potentially relegating the interactions with them to a state of nature.

The scapegoat mechanism as described by Girard and its eventual cultural evolution into ritual are based on this discriminatory ethics: an acceptance of the use of victims from outside the group with intent to avoid internal violence. That discriminatory ethic is based on two propositions: first, that the space of nonviolence is limited and separated from an area external to identity where violence is permitted, that is, from an area from which victims of rituals can be chosen and against which collective violence can be exercised; and second, that the mutual nonviolence and protection extended to those within the group does not extend to those without: Fundamentally, outsiders are people against whom collective violence is always potential and periodically actual.

Upon this original sacrificial and discriminatory ethic, other forms of violence can be grafted and justified, including wars and genocides. Rephrasing Hobbes, outside identity lies the state of nature.

This discriminatory ethics of identity is one of the most problematic aspects of William Shakespeare's work and the central subject of this essay. René Girard was the first to show the fundamental role mimesis plays in determining the behaviors of characters and in organizing the overall structures of Shakespeare's plays. In *A Theater of Envy*, he describes Shakespeare as "not merely a dramatic illustrator of mimetic desire but its theoretician."<sup>2</sup>

## INTERPRETING INTERPRETATIONS

When René Girard's *A Theater of Envy* was published, the book sustained criticism on many fronts, including its meager reference to previous scholarship<sup>3</sup> and historical context. Girard viewed Shakespeare as a source of universal truths transcending his Elizabethan framework. This universalist view was discordant with New Historicism's relativism and its opposition to the idea of invariable truths. Girard's large disregard of Shakespeare's historical context was also in opposition to historicism's emphasis on contextualization. Thus, the effort to understand Shakespeare's work as containing universal truths about human cultures appears in a period where such an enterprise was under attack. In opposition to Girard's views are those of others such as Orgel, who claims, "What we have of the Shakespeare text, all we have ever had, is a set of versions with no original."<sup>4</sup> This absence of originals is related to the New Historicism's antifoundationalism and to the idea of a uniquely correct interpretation. Problematizing the very notion of authenticity, Orgel highlights the diverse historical interpretations of Shakespeare and how they variably determined inclusions or exclusions of works into his canon: "The establishment of a canonical text, whether of Shakespeare or anything else, is only incidentally an objective and scientific matter. It involves much more basically doctrinal and political elements."<sup>5</sup> Orgel attempts to undermine the import of factually proven provenance: "But even when we have a Shakespeare in an authorized text and a Shakespeare that we believe sounds right, do we really know what we mean by the text of a Shakespeare play, what that authentically Shakespearean text represents?" The relativism underlying this supposed absence of an original and authentic Shakespeare is a rejection of privileged interpretive points of view but more fundamentally of the possibility of any universalist claims regarding and derived from his work.

New Historicism's emphasis on interpretations over facts is in clear conflict with a major consequence of the mimetic theory: interpretations *as* facts. Culturally contextual interpretations are objects that can be studied like any other and in that sense hold no epistemologically central position. The theory treats interpretations as scientifically observable cultural objects and places these in an ancillary position to one explicitly privileged form of understanding: the scientific as the favored method for interpreting interpretations. The hierarchy of mimetic hypotheses is organized according to the order of causalities. These build a universalist theory whose sociological claims are verifiable through confrontations with observable reality. This theory is in direct contradiction of New Historicism's unregulated connectedness and disjointed view of history<sup>6</sup>

that interprets such an epistemological hierarchy as one historical episteme among others. For Girard, the truths uncovered by such a causally organized theory—those of mimesis, violence, and their manifestations as culture—are the basis of Shakespearean theater.<sup>7</sup> This is the reason why Girard allows himself a study of Shakespeare's work, as a commentary not solely upon its own context but upon every other.

A rejection of this universalism is not only in disagreement with Girard but with Shakespeare himself, whose own position is universalist in that he applied his understanding of human psychology and societies to periods as varied as the War of the Roses, the Roman crisis of the first century BCE, and the Trojan War, implying his belief in their basic similarity with regard to war and peace, among other things.

#### OF NECESSARY WAR AND GUILTY PEACE

In 1953, Jorgensen placed Shakespeare's work within the larger context of Elizabethan texts about warfare, pointing out: "Publications did, to be sure, appear in praise of peace, but they could scarcely have been heard in the larger and louder company of books which spoke of the dangers of unwarlike states. These alarmist writings, mainly the work of professional soldiers, constituted one of the largest bodies of tracts to appear in Elizabethan England."<sup>8</sup> Jorgensen's reading highlighted a widely held Elizabethan view that peace was deceptive, a potential catastrophe for those who assumed its continuity and failed to prepare for the inevitability of coming wars. While, as Marx argues, this view was "by no means monolithic"<sup>9</sup> and the "vituperation of attacks" on the pacifist ideas indicates their continued presence, a vision of war as a natural state of mankind was widely held and of profound influence on Shakespeare's interpretation of war.<sup>10</sup>

An understanding of this interpretation benefits greatly from Girard's theory on the mechanisms of mob violence and its retroactive interpretations through myths and other identitarian narratives. This is an aspect lightly touched upon in his *Theater of Envy*.<sup>11</sup> Shakespeare's interest in the mimetic conditions giving rise to violence leads to the ethical quandary at the heart of his historical plays: that wars of aggression can be used to avoid internal violence and as such can be argued to be ethically defensible.

The ethics of war are discussed by Pugliatti, who argues that "Shakespeare's representations of war . . . pose questions to which the just war doctrine is still trying to give answers."<sup>12</sup> According to her, and starting with Augustine, the basic ideas of the just war doctrine were developed and formulated to justify

the defense of a nation from invasion or its threat. Thus, “the just war doctrine was—and still is—primarily a set of ideas and precepts formulated to justify (morally as well as legally) rather than to limit war, as is generally argued.”<sup>13</sup> As shall be argued based upon Girard’s theory, Shakespeare added a new and profoundly problematic justification of war: its use as the means of avoiding internal warfare. The problem is not only on the level of what is being said by protagonists, often presented as motivated statements and thus always subject to skeptical scrutiny, but on the level of what actually happens, partially as the result of these statements. What determines Shakespeare’s interpretation of and judgment upon events are ethical objectives: the possible limited peace brought by identity and the necessity of its protection through externalized warfare and narratives justifying this projection. Thus, Shakespeare exposes the lies and misrepresentations at the heart of identity but also seems to present them as necessary.

Girard’s evaluation of Shakespeare’s historical plays is rather negative: “With respect to what interests me most, they are meager works; they do not compare favorably with most comedies and tragedies.”<sup>14</sup> But based upon Girard’s insights regarding the mimetic foundations of the other plays, we shall examine these historical plays, arguing that along with *Romeo and Juliet* they contain a full theory of the state, one that describes the role of mimesis in its formation, the intrinsic and constant threat it faces from this, the pressures on the state to maintain itself using internal repression and external warfare, and the nihilistic threat inherent in mimetic violence, that of radicalized violence becoming its own self-justification in a fully self-aware fashion. From this study a tragic ethics of identity will emerge: a philosophical position that universalism must take into account.

#### A THEATER OF CONTAINED ENVY

A theatrical representation contains violence within the limits of representation. The first of such limits is the location where the piece is played. It is conventionally designated either temporarily or permanently as a space of representation separate from proximate and ordinary everyday reality. The second is the duration, guaranteeing, through narrative inauguration and resolution, defined beginnings and endings, and consequently its separation from preceding and succeeding events of everyday reality. Representation is also limited by behavior: By not responding to what they see before them with physical

violence, audiences are behaving in ways that maintain the violence of narrative within the domain of representation.

Representation spilling into actual violence or plays consciously inciting it are exceptional. Generally speaking, the conventional—mimetic—acceptance by a group of the space of representation acts as a highly efficient means of containing it. Thus, theater is a sphere where the violence of human societies can run rampant and spread on a narrative level but is contained within the limits of representation. In that sense, it can be described as ritualistic activity, defined by Girard as one that allows the practice of violence—in the case of theater through narrative proxy—while containing and giving it predictability and beneficial resolution.

Theatrical narratives can show transgressions of prohibitions that regulate and maintain a social order against its own violence without threatening to contaminate it. Theater is thus a sphere where violent behaviors and their consequences can be explored with relative safety. As first noticed by Girard, the description of that violence in Shakespeare's work can imply a mimetic anthropology.

Theater is also a sphere where ambiguity can be explored. Resolutions that are achieved on the level of narration need not be presented as philosophical resolutions of contradictions but the violent triumph of one faction holding one view over another. Thus, ethical contradictions found in identity need not be conceptually resolved but can be explored as such.

Unresolved contradictions can be the expression of unresolvable ambiguity. In Shakespeare's work, violence directed outside the sphere of identity is a lesser of two evils, for without society and its self-description in identity there is "a war of everyman against everyman"<sup>15</sup> and, as shall be argued in the analysis of *Richard the Third*, the nature of this war is even more radical than that proposed by Hobbes. On the other hand, with identity and the mutual ethical behaviors it implies for those who share it, there is a space of nonviolence where morality can survive. In other words, and similarly to Hobbes, for Shakespeare, morality does not precede society but emerges with it.<sup>16</sup> Outside this space and in the relation between the different identities, there remains the war of everyman against everyman, an *a-moral* space. Thus, the emergence of identity is that of limited morality, the lesser of two evils in that it gives human beings a limited but real protection against their mutual mimetic violence, an island within the ever-present potential of generalized warfare.

Yet, and while this tragic ethics contains elements similar to Hobbes's description of the "natural condition of mankind,"<sup>17</sup> there is an added understanding in Shakespeare's writings: an articulation of the threat of internal

violence with its resolution in external wars. Collective violence exerted outside the sphere of identity is described by him as the ultimate remedy against violence within, a theme fundamental to some of his most important plays. These plays will be examined in a thematic and not a chronological manner, one organized by Girard's systematic description of mimetic crises.

#### A SPREAD OF VIOLENCE

Beyond its romantic pathos, *Romeo and Juliet* is a play primarily concerned with mimetic violence and social disintegration. In it is an extremely interesting tragicomic description of the mimetic spread of violence. The play starts by positing a preexisting crisis with a prologue describing an ongoing feud between the Capulets and Montagues. This initial contextualization establishes the existence of an atmosphere of violence and constant expectation of violence between the two houses.

Sampson and Gregory, servants from the house of Capulet, enter the stage: The first is bragging about what he, a fierce warrior, is going to inflict upon the Montagues and Gregory is mocking him:

SAMPSON: *Gregory, o' my word, we'll not carry coals.*

GREGORY: *No, for then we should be colliers.*

SAMPSON: *I mean, an we be in choler we'll draw.*

GREGORY: *Ay, while you live, draw your neck out o' the collar.*

SAMPSON: *I strike quickly, being moved.*

GREGORY: *But thou art not quickly moved to strike.*

SAMPSON: *A dog of the house of Montague moves me.*

GREGORY: *To move is to stir; and to be valiant is to stand:*

*therefore, if thou art moved, thou runn'st away.*

SAMPSON: *A dog of that house shall move me to stand:*

*I will take the wall of any man or maid of Montague's.*

GREGORY: *That shows thee a weak slave; for the weakest goes to the wall.*<sup>18</sup>

Gregory is not taking Sampson's bluster seriously. He ridicules him by reminding him of his status as a servant, turning his every claim of valor into its opposite. Sampson is flustered, pushed by Gregory's sarcasm into making increasingly outrageous claims, escalating his imaginary violence against the Montagues to include rapes and beheadings. This only gives Gregory further occasion for mockery:



SAMPSON: [ . . . ] *women, being the weaker vessels,  
are ever thrust to the wall: therefore I will push Montague's men from  
the wall and thrust his maids to the wall.*

GREGORY: *The quarrel is between our masters and us their men.*

SAMPSON: *'Tis all one. I will show myself a tyrant. When I have fought with the  
men, I will be cruel with the maids—I will cut off their heads.*

GREGORY: *The heads of the maids?*

SAMPSON: *Ay, the heads of the maids, or their maidenheads.*

*Take it in what sense thou wilt.*

GREGORY: *They must take it in sense that feel it.*<sup>19</sup>

Despite his sarcasm toward Sampson, Gregory's behavior is also influenced by the quarrel. The feud between families has produced an atmosphere of a constant expectation of violence influencing all participants. Within it the presence of Montagues, no matter how innocent, is always perceived as a potential threat. Thus, when two servants from the Montagues appear on the scene, Gregory tells Sampson to draw his weapon. From banter among friends—verbal violence within the house of Capulet—the potential suddenly escalates to *physical* violence directed out, toward the house of Montague:

GREGORY: [ . . . ] *Draw thy tool;  
Here comes two of the house of Montagues.*<sup>20</sup>

Only a few moments ago Gregory was ridiculing Sampson (implying his own superiority). Now both are equally terrified. The constant expectation of violence introduced by the ongoing feud between the two houses had them fearing Montagues might initiate violence. Thus, as a precaution, Gregory prepares to draw his weapon. That his action is precautionary and not belligerent is shown by his vehement resistance to Sampson's consequent provocation to start a fight.

Sampson has interpreted Gregory's precautionary action not as precaution but as aggression against the Montagues. Still chafing from being mocked, he wants to show that he is not the coward Gregory made him out to be. He declares himself ready to fight. Gregory, who never wanted a fight in the first place, resists provoking one by accusing Sampson of being an unreliable coward:

SAMPSON: *My naked weapon is out: quarrel! I will back thee.*

GREGORY: *How! turn thy back and run?*

SAMPSON: *Fear me not.*

GREGORY: *No, marry; I fear thee!*<sup>21</sup>

Gregory needs an excuse to back away without reversing the accusation of cowardice upon himself. So once again he accuses Sampson of being cowardly, adding to the latter's insult. Because of this added insult, Sampson is now locked in by his own rhetoric. To prove his courage against Gregory's accusation of cowardice he must back his words with real violence. But Sampson is terrified, so he pushes Gregory to take the initiative instead.

By pushing Gregory to start a fight, Sampson has unwittingly turned the table on him. Unknown to Sampson, Gregory is equally terrified and if he is to hide his fear and not appear cowardly, he must initiate something that can be interpreted as an act of aggression. He suggests a frown upon the Montagues:

GREGORY: *I will frown as I pass by; and let them take it as they list.*<sup>22</sup>

Gregory's hope is that this is a gesture they would ignore. Frowning is a way of appearing to do something without actually doing anything. If it works, his strategy would prove his courage to Sampson without resulting danger from the Montagues. At this precise instant violence could have been averted: Gregory could have frowned, the Montagues could have frowned back or ignored him, and each would have gone his own way.

But Sampson escalates his fight with Gregory. He wants to show him that he, great warrior Sampson, is not a coward. So he escalates upon Gregory's half-hearted provocation by biting his thumb at the Montagues—the equivalent of flipping them the finger.

SAMPSON: *Nay, as they dare. I will bite my thumb at them; which is disgrace to them if they bear it.*<sup>23</sup>

It is important to emphasize that Sampson's escalation is motivated both by the general tensions with the Montagues and by his own individual mimetic tensions with Gregory. What started as banter within the house of Capulet is transformed by the progression of verbal violence and counterviolence into potential physical violence directed outward, toward the servants of the house of Montague: From verbal sparring between two companions, the situations progresses toward potential violence between servants of the two houses.

Abraham from the house of Montague does not want to fight. Yet he cannot ignore the thumb-biting gesture without appearing a coward. He cautiously inquires about Sampson's gesture:

ABRAHAM: *Do you bite your thumb at us, sir?*<sup>24</sup>

The hesitant Sampson wants to preserve ambiguity, so he recognizes the gesture without admitting its intent:

SAMPSON: *I do bite my thumb, sir.*<sup>25</sup>

Abraham insists:

ABRAHAM: *Do you bite your thumb at us, sir?*<sup>26</sup>

What follows is a period of hesitant exchange:

SAMPSON: [*Aside to Gregory*] *Is the law of our side if I say ay?*

GREGORY: *No.*

SAMPSON: *No, sir, I do not bite my thumb at you, sir; but I bite my thumb, sir.*

GREGORY: *Do you quarrel, sir?*

ABRAHAM: *Quarrel, sir! no, sir.*

SAMPSON: *But if you do, sir, I am for you: I serve as good a man as you.*

ABRAHAM: *No better.*

SAMPSON: *Well, sir.*<sup>27</sup>

Abraham tries to allow for the suggestion that the masters of both houses are equally good and end it there. This would preserve the dignities of all, allowing for an avoidance of violence. He offers Sampson camaraderie of sorts, since each would be recognized by the other as serving as good a master and by implication have his value recognized. Sampson sees a way out of a situation he does not want to be in, of checking the escalation of violence while keeping face. At this precise instant the situation can go either way: Sampson could accept the way out that Abraham is offering him. He could say something that implies his master is as good but no better and each would go his own way, or he can say “better” and the fight would start.

Sampson’s hesitation shows that at this stage of the escalation he is the one who might decide to play the role of peacekeeper. What tips the scale in favor of violence is Gregory spotting Tybalt, Capulet’s nephew. So, and as Sampson previously shored up his courage by relying on Gregory’s presence, the latter now shores up his own by relying on Tybalt’s. He takes the role Sampson occupied a few moments ago—that of provocateur—and incites him to say “better”:

GREGORY: *Say better; here comes one of my master's kinsmen.*

SAMPSON: *Yes, better, sir.*

ABRAHAM: *You lie.*

SAMPSON: *Draw, if you be men.—Gregory, remember thy swashing blow.*

[*They fight.*]<sup>28</sup>

Benvolio the nephew of Montague enters. Like Sampson, Gregory, and Abraham before him, he attempts to play the role of peacekeeper, drawing his weapon to part the belligerents:

BENVOLIO: *Part, fools! put up your swords; you know not what you do.*

[*Beats down their swords.*]<sup>29</sup>

To comment on the situation, Shakespeare places in Benvolio's mouth a biblical quotation—one he often uses. Just like the Jerusalemites in Luke, the servants have escalated the violence because "they know not what they do."<sup>30</sup>

Benvolio might have been successful in parting the servants and quelling the violence if at this very instant a misunderstanding had not occurred. Tybalt, the nephew of Lady Capulet, sees Benvolio with his sword drawn against the men. Because of his constant expectation of violence from Montagues he misinterprets this as an attack on his own servants:

TYBALT: *What, art thou drawn among these heartless hinds?*

*Turn thee Benvolio, look upon thy death.*

BENVOLIO: *I do but keep the peace: put up thy sword,*

*Or manage it to part these men with me.*<sup>31</sup>

Benvolio is attempting to be a peacemaker. He tries to explain the situation to Tybalt. Just like the bragging Sampson was offering camaraderie to Gregory in the face of the Montagues, and Abraham was offering camaraderie to Sampson as servants of equally good masters, Benvolio is offering camaraderie to Tybalt as masters in the face of their rowdy hierarchical inferiors, and just like Sampson and Abraham, he is spurned.

At that precise instant Tybalt can choose to accept this explanation and he would join him in stopping the violence or, he can choose not to believe him and they would fight. This is yet another instant where violence could have been contained but for Tybalt's rage:

TYBALT: *What, drawn, and talk of peace! I hate the word*

*As I hate hell, all Montagues, and thee:  
Have at thee, coward!*

[They fight.]<sup>32</sup>

Because of the preexisting quarrel, Tybalt does not believe Benvolio's explanation and does not trust his offer. In this crisis atmosphere, the expectation of violence tends to be the presupposition used to interpret any interaction between factions. Thus, and despite his best intentions, Benvolio is forced to defend himself against Tybalt and is absorbed by the violence.

Shakespeare is representing a progression of violence in a mimetic atmosphere of mutual expectation of violence: What started out as banter between two members of the Capulet house escalated into a fight between them and the servants of the Montagues. The violence then spreads to their masters. From there it spreads to supporters of both houses, who, upon seeing the fight between Benvolio and Tybalt, join the fray. At this point other unrelated citizens join in and start clubbing them:

*CITIZEN: Clubs, bills, and partisans! strike! beat them down!  
Down with the Capulets! Down with the Montagues!*<sup>33</sup>

The fight has now escalated into all-out violence engulfing representatives from all sections of the city: The Capulets, the Montagues and the other citizens of Verona. In this extraordinary passage Shakespeare has shown how in an atmosphere of constant expectation of violence, banter among friends can lead to a threat of civil war.

The head of each house then joins in, and Shakespeare mocks these. Capulet excitedly asks for a sword; his wife offers him a crutch:

[Enter Capulet in his gown, and Lady Capulet.]  
*CAPULET: What noise is this?—Give me my long sword, ho!*  
*LADY CAPULET: A crutch, a crutch!—Why call you for a sword?*  
*CAPULET: My sword, I say!—Old Montague is come,  
And flourishes his blade in spite of me.*<sup>34</sup>

Montague wants to jump in, but is easily held off by his elderly wife:

[Enter Montague and his Lady Montague.]  
*MONTAGUE: Thou villain Capulet!—Hold me not, let me go.*  
*LADY MONTAGUE: Thou shalt not stir one foot to seek a foe.*<sup>35</sup>

One does not seriously imitate those seen to be ridiculous: ridicule has created the distance through which the audience, at risk of being vicariously absorbed by the events before it, can examine the situation without being mimetically drawn into the violence. Mockery in this case allows the audience a form of critical distance. What Shakespeare wants to reveal through this critical distance is that this fight is without a real object, an escalation of interindividual aggression sparked and amplified by an atmosphere of mutual mimetic expectation of violence. Because of the mimetic nature of the situation, the roles are the same; only those occupying them change. This applies to all levels of hierarchy, which are equalized by mimetic violence. The passage from one point of escalation to another is based upon a misunderstanding of intentions perceived as violent, and a mimetic response to these misunderstood intentions consisting of an escalation of counterviolence, which in turn is faced with further mimetic escalation, and so on.

This is a brawl that started without anybody really wanting it to: neither the equally terrified Sampson and Gregory, nor the prudent Abraham, nor Benvolio, who physically tried to stop it, nor even possibly Tybalt, who is convinced of his moral justification in joining it. In every stage of this progression somebody tries to stop the violence but is ultimately absorbed by it. No one wants this fight, but each is pushed by mimetic pressures to engage in it.

These mimetic pressures are from within each individual's group and from without. From within there are pressures to prove one's adherence to one's identity by exhibiting enmity against the other. Sampson and Abraham are also locked in competitive egalitarianism, leading toward a necessity of preserving one's standing and avoiding dishonor by exhibiting courage. External pressures consist of the mutual and constant expectation of violence among the families and the mutually imposed necessity of responding to such violence.

Mimetic pressures are thus inscribed in the very identity of the participants: They have to fight because being Capulets and Montagues places internal mimetically created and reinforced obligations upon them. Given that these families' identities are organized as the potential of collective violence directed externally and given that this potential is constantly reinforced by mimetic and mutual internal observation by members of the groups themselves, opting out of the imitation that fundamentally defines the group carries the risk of being excluded from it.

What halts constant expectation of violence leading to civil war is central authority and the entry of its highest representative, the Prince of Verona. The prince contains violence with a death threat:

[Enter Prince, with Attendants.]

PRINCE: [ . . . ] *on pain of death, all men depart.*<sup>36</sup>

Unlike all death threats leading to this brawl, this has the prestige and legitimacy of his lawful position behind it. Not belonging to any of the warring factions, he occupies an exterior position and has the power to inflict harm on both houses. His exteriority and overpowering agency mean he is able to contain the violence that participants themselves are unable to escape because of the mimetic pressures placed upon them by their identitarian obligations. He now successfully occupies the position that Gregory, Abraham, Sampson, and then Benvolio tried to occupy without success, that of an external deterrent to the spread and escalation of violence. Thus, Shakespeare presents the prince and in extension central authority as the last obstacle against the spread of mimetic violence.

The role Shakespeare assigns to the Sovereign is very similar to one later described by Hobbes: The battle between Capulets and Montagues is spreading to other citizens, pushing Verona toward generalized violence. In a very real sense, the mimetic draw of their violence is endangering the unity of the state, potentially fragmenting it. Shakespeare clearly displays this danger by representing violence spreading to other citizens. The prince is exercising his authority to stop the fall into factional fragmentation. The interaction between the Capulets' and Montagues' identitarian ethic and the sovereignty of the prince represents the conflict between two mutually exclusive conceptions of Verona and one that implies two mutually exclusive ethics.

The first of these views the city in terms of adversarial interfactional relationships. The ethics regulating that relationship are based on immediate or personal vengeance between the two factions. This vengeance is regulated by a code of conduct. For instance, when Tybalt wants to kill Benvolio he does not stab him in the back but asks him to turn around and "look upon his death," challenging him to a duel. This is not an unregulated war of annihilation where anything goes, but one of violence strictly regulated by an ethic of *honor*. It is also regulated by the opposite of honor, the danger of *shame*. Each participant in this progression of violence is forced to engage in the struggle in order to avoid the shame of being branded a coward. For instance, Sampson knows that if the servants of the house of Montague do not respond to his bite of the thumb, it would be a "disgrace to them if they bear it."

The second conception views Verona as a unified sphere of sovereignty, one where direct reciprocal violence is repressed. The only legitimate violence within that sphere is the one authorized by the Prince himself. It views the death

threat made by the Prince against those who would continue to fight as fundamentally different from the illegitimate one made by Tybalt against Benvolio.

The factional ethic of honor and shame and direct vengeance is by its very nature in conflict with central authority, for which the very existence as such relies upon the monopoly it holds on violence within the city. In the absence of central authority, direct factional vengeance and countervengeance feed upon and escalate each other. Honorable obligation to take immediate vengeance for offenses against one's own faction means violence will spread and develop into civil war, which in turn can potentially destroy central authority.

Both factional and sovereignty ethics are essentially identitarian in that the sphere of their application is rigorously determined by an identity. While Montagues and Capulets attempt to practice immediate vengeance within a sphere where the Prince wants to hold sole monopoly on violence, the Prince himself must hypothetically practice immediate violence in his relationship with other princes. In other words, in his relationship with these he must behave exactly like Capulets and the Montagues in relation to each other, unless he is part of a larger sphere of sovereignty that mediates his own violence. The difference between the Sovereign and the heads of both houses is simply in the sphere of application: The Prince wants control and monopoly on violence within the sphere of his sovereignty while presumably applying the ethic of unmediated violence in his relationship with other states. On the other hand, the heads of the two houses want to apply the ethic of unmediated violence within the Princedom itself while controlling violence within their own factions. Such direct factional vengeance is something that the Prince cannot accept without accepting a fragmentation of his domain into competing spheres of sovereignty.

During these particular events the Prince of Verona was successful in containing the spread of violence and the fragmentation it might have caused to his realm. But what other solution is available when for some reason central authority is not able to contain the progression toward civil war, and when factionalism has progressed to such a degree that the collapse of sovereignty threatens? Shakespeare proposed a tragic solution.

## FAILURES OF SOVEREIGNTY

Shakespeare portrays how in periods of social crises, any leader who wishes to survive must know two basic facts: that collective violence reinforces identity, and that in times of internal crisis the most rapid solution for avoiding



revolutions is finding a common enemy toward which they can redirect their violence in a unified manner. He describes this clearly in the first part of *Henry the Fourth*.

The play begins after a bloody civil war in England, one in a series of struggles between the houses of York and Lancaster during the War of the Roses. In its aftermath the king sees an urgent need to reconstitute the unity of the kingdom. His solution is to prepare a crusade in which all the warring factions in England would participate as allies. Participating as allies against outsiders, they reinforce their internal solidarity; reinforcing their solidarity, they are less likely to reengage in civil war.

Henry explains his motivations very clearly in a passage Shakespeare places in the opening of the play in order to emphasize its crucial importance:

*No more the thirsty entrance of this soil  
Shall daub her lips with her own children's blood;  
No more shall trenching war channel her fields  
Nor bruise her flowerets with the armed hoofs  
Of hostile paces; those opposed eyes  
Which like the meteors of a troubled heaven  
All of one nature, of one substance bred  
Did lately meet in intestine shock  
And furious close of civil butchery  
Shall now, in civil well beseeming ranks  
March all one way, and be no more opposed  
Against acquaintance, kindred and allies  
The edge of war, like an ill sheathed knife  
No more shall cut his master. Therefore, friends,  
As far as to the sepulchre of Christ [ . . . ]  
To chase those pagans in those holy fields<sup>37</sup>*

Faced with fragmentation and a potential resurgence of civil violence, Henry's stratagem has as its objective the reconstruction of the unity of his people in opposition to those outside their Christian and English identity. His plan for a crusade aims at replacing the nobility's mutual violence with unified violence against a common enemy, thus reinforcing the threatened unity of the realm. If in this particular case the enemy was Islam, any other would have done just as well, as long as that designated enemy is outside Henry's sphere of sovereignty.<sup>38</sup> Thus, instead of harming his kingdom with their incessant warring,

the nobility would be diverted from each other and unified in their violence against strangers.

Henry clearly states that the motivations behind his projected war against Muslims are *internal*; this passage speaks of this crusade in terms related solely to civil war and peace, and the last verse briefly mentioning “these pagans in those holy fields” is but an indication of which enemy will be chosen in view of achieving a redirection of violence. Shakespeare mentions no urgent threat by Muslims forcing Henry to lead this war. The real urgency facing the king is the potential civil war brewing in England itself. Thus, while Henry might be ideologically convinced of the morality of reoccupying the holy-land, his main motivation is the avoidance of civil war.

Fundamentally, Henry’s acceptance of this violence against Muslims is based on the simple identitarian fact that they are Muslims, part of the larger identity against which his own larger identity—Christianity—defines itself through potential and actual acts of collective violence, such as Crusades. Henry needs this larger unifying identity to counter the fragmentation of his domain and to reconcile its warring factions. One of the things that could reunite these is their enmity against Muslims.

This use of external enemies is based on an implied and fully accepted ethical position. While the sphere of identity is not always in conflict with that of morality, a universalist would argue that it does not coincide with it either. For Shakespeare’s Henry there is no distinction between the sphere of identity and that of morality. The king is unaware that his actions pose any moral contradictions and is totally convinced of the usefulness and morality of his enterprise: that whatever harm he will visit upon Muslims is fundamentally justified by virtue of them being Muslims. Violence done outside the realm of identity is viewed as being of a totally different moral nature than violence done within. This is the position that Shakespeare seems to adopt in the first and second tetralogies. In these plays, villains are not those who wage external wars of aggression, but those—like Richard the Third—who cause war and internal dissension within England itself, that is, those who threaten the spheres of identity.

Henry’s stratagem and its positive description of it by Shakespeare are based on a fundamental acceptance of the identitarian boundaries by those who share them. Without such acceptance an identity would not function. “Boundaries,” the limits between the within and the without, manifest as terms of identity—such as race or religion—and are used by groups to describe and delineate themselves.

Both the terms and boundaries of identity, while obeying specific mechanisms of formation, are variable. Thus, they can be race, religion, language, or

gender, and boundaries can change depending on historical circumstances, but when identity is unproblematically accepted by those who share it with no critical understanding of the internal interindividual mechanisms forming it, the internal perception of these is as something essential, transcending variability.

On the other hand, an understanding of identity and interindividual mechanisms underlying it can allow for its manipulation. Henry seems to occupy a middle position between an unproblematic acceptance of identity and a potentially cynical manipulation of its underlying mechanisms. His acceptance of the legitimacy of the identitarian boundaries between himself and Muslims is so profound, it is simply beyond what is debatable—an unexamined assumption that structures his thoughts without being thought of. Such unproblematic acceptance is how identities are capable of justifying to themselves the violence they commit externally. On the other hand, and despite this unproblematic acceptance, Henry seems to understand how to manipulate the mechanisms of violence underlying identity. He is a man who feels justified in manipulating identity in order to protect it.

Despite its inherent discriminatory ethic, Shakespeare never condemns the mechanism of reinforcing group adherence by diverting internal violence into external wars; he only condemns its application within the wrong domain. For instance, warring factions within England are all engaged in mutual violence. Just like for the Montagues and Capulets, this violence reinforces their factional identities. The problem for Shakespeare is not that they are engaged in identity-reinforcing violence *per se* but that they are engaged in it within England itself, fragmenting it internally instead of unifying it by participating together in external forms unifying violence. Identity-reinforcing violence is viewed as legitimate and necessary but only when practiced by the larger and legitimate identitarian groups such as England. Henry's planned act of collective violence against Muslims is covered by the religious legitimacy of the crusades. Fundamentally, then, Shakespeare accepts the discriminatory ethic of identity.

So where does a certain identity get its legitimacy? Why is violence done by England more legitimate than violence done by factions within England? In his description of Henry's crusades, Shakespeare describes the monarch's attempted crusade approvingly. The legitimacy of violence against Muslims is simply assumed as a self-evident, in need of no justification. The consequences of England's failure to direct its violence outward are the subject of the rest of this play: Henry IV was not able to put his plan into execution, and the action develops as this contrast between what could have been—a legitimate and unifying war against Muslims that would have preserved peace within the English realm—and what actually happened, the tragedy and devastation of a civil war in England. Thus, when

the mechanism of directing violence outward failed, England fell into and was destroyed by civil war. As we shall argue, there are other times when Shakespeare's acceptance of identity's victims is not unproblematic. This is especially true when Shakespeare describes civil wars and their victims as in *Julius Caesar*.

These different attitudes—unproblematic acceptance and tragic resignation—seem to be based upon an arbitrary difference between legitimate identity and illegitimate identity or faction. Factions arise when a legitimate identity is destroyed by internal violence or civil war. A legitimate identity has the right to wage war in view of reinforcing itself, whereas a faction does not. The problem is that the difference between the two is completely arbitrary. What Shakespeare would seem to consider as an illegitimate identity can be completely legitimate for those who share in it, and the progression from illegitimate to legitimate is based upon which one is able to violently impose itself. This is exemplified by Henry himself, the leader of an illegitimate faction that dethroned a formerly legitimate king, Richard the Second, attempting to impose its legitimacy through external violence.

The legitimacy of Henry's faction is credibly contested by Shakespeare himself: During the revolt that led to Henry's rise to power, the Duke of York, Henry's own uncle, says to him:

*Grace me no grace, nor uncle no uncle  
I am no traitor's uncle [ . . . ]*<sup>39</sup>

Shakespeare is thus aware of the problematic nature of the distinction between faction and legitimate identity. The tetralogy first shows the evolution of Richard the Second's faction from legitimacy to illegitimacy. Richard's incompetence and lavish spending are seen as the essential cause of the civil war. Conversely, the plays represent Henry's faction as moving from illegitimacy to legitimate kingship. But how did an illegitimate faction gain its legitimacy? Henry, for instance, had no legitimate claims to the throne. In purely legal terms he is a usurper. His subsequent legitimacy seems based on the fact that he was able to create a coalition. In other words, he was competent enough to create a sphere of peace within his own faction. For instance, he was sufficiently intelligent to allow the uncle accusing him of treason some face-saving objections against the rebellion while at the same time effectively gaining his support.

Having gained power, Henry attempts to apply his competence in bringing peace to the whole kingdom. Thus, for Shakespeare, Henry's legitimacy springs from this very competence. While the playwright relies on the opposition between legitimate identity and faction to distinguish between legitimate and

illegitimate forms of violence, the legitimacy of a king or a faction is not absolute or fundamental but derives from his or its ability to impose internal peace.

When violence destroys an identity—as in the Roman civil war or the War of the Roses—the surest solution to reestablish peace is the complete victory of one faction over the other. In that sense, it is not really important which faction wins, as long as dissensions are contained and unity recreated. Part of that which must be recreated in view of internal peace is legitimacy itself, for without the illusion of legitimacy, power will tend to be violently contested yet again.

Such victory of one faction over another can imply the sacrifice of “honorable men,” people who genuinely believe that what they are doing is morally right. In the last part of *Richard the Second*, for instance, Shakespeare presents the attitude of the deposed king in the guise of a saintly acceptance of fate. One is invited to pity Richard and lament his fate. In a conception very close to Christian sacrifice, somebody, a saint, is being sacrificed in view of ending our violence—our sins. When Shakespeare represents factional violence as recreating identity, what he shows is not the unproblematic acceptance that characterizes the violence of legitimate identity, but rather a resignation to an inevitable evil. In cases where factions arise, violence is to be avoided if at all possible and to be engaged in only if inevitable. As opposed to legitimate identitarian external aggression, violence in these cases is viewed as failure and honorable victims are viewed as necessary.

### NECESSARY VICTIMS

Shakespeare presents a position of war as a necessary redirection of internal violence toward the outside. Out of an understanding of the interindividual mimetic mechanism underlying his work it is possible to deduce what role he assigns to the mechanism of diversion of violence: In short, a social order is a space of nonviolence that needs to periodically export its own violence in order to survive. Violence is thus tragically inevitable. Shakespeare reacted to this tragedy with a tragic ethics: He understood identity too well to completely believe in it, considering it as a necessary collective self-delusion protected by necessary external violence as the guarantee of some measure of social peace.

Like *Romeo and Juliet* and *Henry IV*, *Julius Caesar* proposes that identity is based on the unifying accusation and potential violence against those deemed outsiders. The play again starts with the suggestion of a preexisting internal crisis, one that will eventually lead to Caesar’s assassination.<sup>40</sup>

After the assassination, Brutus gave a speech to the gathering crowd, accusing Caesar of having been a potential dictator legitimately executed for wanting to take away Roman liberties.<sup>41</sup> Expressing his love for Caesar, Brutus also recognizes his courage and valor. The murder is presented as an act of patriotism, that of an honorable man who had everything to gain from Caesar's continued survival, doing his duty despite his personal sacrifice. Having thus gained the support of the crowds, Brutus invites them to stay with Marc Anthony, who was allowed to give Caesar a eulogy on the sole condition that he does not incite revolution or say anything against Brutus or his party.<sup>42</sup>

The crowd wildly applauds Brutus, offering to carry him in triumph and make him dictator instead of Caesar. This should have given him enough warning that, except for vaguely understood and enthusiastically believed accusations, the crowd had no real understanding of why Caesar had been killed. Had Brutus allowed the crowds to carry him in triumph instead of asking them to stay with Marc Anthony, he might have insured his victory. But Brutus had no real understanding of the crowd or of the mimetic basis of their support. If they identified with Brutus's faction and supported him, it was precisely because they accepted the accusations against Caesar.

Marc Anthony deftly turns these accusations into an indictment against Brutus and his faction, attacking the very foundation of Brutus' argument, namely, the latter's claim that he is an "honorable man."<sup>43</sup> As opposed to the naive Brutus, Marc Anthony understood quite well the emotional nature of mob adherence and, as importantly, how easily mobs can change their mind. Several times the mob wanted to go out and kill all conspirators:

*ALL: We'll mutiny.*

*FIRST CITIZEN: We'll burn the house of Brutus.*

*THIRD CITIZEN: Away, then! Come, seek the conspirators.<sup>44</sup>*

Several times Marc Anthony stops them to make sure they understand quite well why they were going to kill Brutus and burn his house, making sure they did not change their minds the way they just did with Brutus. Finally, when Marc Anthony does release them, that same mob that, only a few minutes ago, had believed and supported Brutus so strongly goes on its rampage, killing most of his co-conspirators. The mob would have killed Brutus too had he not escaped.

In turning the accusation against Caesar against Brutus, Marc Anthony uses the same mechanism Henry attempted in order to unify the English nobility. Both are attempts to unify a group by identifying an external enemy. The

differences between the two strategies are superficial. So while there is a difference between the national identity Henry was trying to reinforce and the factional identity Marc Anthony was trying to establish around himself, this only concerns a difference in terms of identities. Terms can be nationality or faction, but both depend for their existence and continued survival on the same fundamental process: a direction or redirection of violence against a common enemy. In the case of Henry this redirection had as its failed objective the unification of the nobility and reinforcement of their identity. In the case of Marc Anthony it successfully and completely switched the crowd's adherence from Brutus's to his own faction. After Marc Anthony's speech the mob formed an identity precisely because they were united in their accusation against Brutus and his faction. Shakespeare goes one step further by showing us the object of this accusation is haphazard through the switch from one accused to the other within a matter of minutes. Once the accusation stabilized, the undecided mob turned into a faction—that is, an identity. The mob became a faction with an identity to which the members' adherence is so strong that they are ready to engage in a civil war and die for their "cause."

If one were to observe that riot of the crowd after Marc Anthony's speech, isolating it from what leads to it, one would tend to see in it the most formidable evidence of belief. One would also tend to say that the crowd always identified with the party of Marc Anthony and Octavian. If one were to ask that same crowd, they would undoubtedly have said and believed the same thing. Their spectacular lynching of all supporters of Brutus would have been the most obvious proof of it, chiefly to themselves. But Shakespeare shows us this most formidable belief precisely in order to subvert its foundations. What is the identification of the crowd with Caesar's faction, and before that, what is their identification with Brutus's faction based upon? Nothing more than the accusation against either Caesar or Brutus, of which they were consecutively convinced within minutes with a bit of rhetoric.

This is the undecided and unpredictable nature of mob violence before it hardens into a stable accusation and forms an identity. During that period of crisis before an identity is born, the accusation can turn very rapidly from something to its opposite. The truths of five minutes ago can become the falsehoods of the present. This is an unstable state where a poet, Shakespeare's alter ego perhaps,<sup>45</sup> can be lynched because he happens to have the same name as one of the conspirators, and it is against this extremely dangerous abyss that Shakespeare constructs his tragic ethics of identity.

To him the hardening of the accusation against either Brutus or Marc Anthony is the only safeguard against collective self-destruction. As long as the

accusation has not hardened against either one of them, as long as there is no consensus on who is guilty, however arbitrary that consensus may be, and as long as one faction has not been able to impose its version, the Roman civil war would continue.

The problem as Shakespeare poses it is that Caesar, Brutus, and Marc Anthony are not guilty. They are "honorable men." For Shakespeare, Caesar was a patriot who wanted to end the succession of Roman civil wars. Brutus loved Caesar, whom he sacrificed with extreme reluctance and only to protect his larger republican ideals. Marc Anthony gave a moving eulogy to Brutus after he defeated him and forced him to kill himself. In this eulogy Marc Anthony recognized the idealism of Brutus. Thus, even for a participant such as Marc Anthony, the hardening of the accusation against one or the other of the warring factions in Caesar's funeral does not imply true guilt or innocence but simply a direction or redirection of mob violence. Both parties see themselves as doing what is good for Rome, and in one instance at least, this intention is recognized by the other. The necessity of a consensus against one or the other is not the necessity of punishing the guilty but simply the obligatory price paid for internal Roman peace based on a unifying accusation. In that sense Brutus's ending statement to the crowds is prophetic: "With this I depart: that, as I slew my best lover for the good of Rome, I have the same dagger for myself, when it shall please my country to need my death."<sup>46</sup> It tells of an acceptance of self-sacrifice, and Brutus in the end did kill himself because Rome needed a sacrifice. In that sense, Brutus can almost be interpreted as a Christic figure.

This is a profoundly tragic ethics. It recognizes the arbitrary nature of the accusation upon which the formations of identities are based but also recognizes the necessity of such accusations. Shakespeare's ethics is thus based on the redirection and minimization of human violence. In this, it is an ethics of lesser evil, that of the sacrifice and self-sacrifice of "honorable men" as the price paid to avoid the greater evil of civil war.

Shakespeare's ethics of identity has the weight of history behind it: Identity is the fundamental defense against human violence. The world is made up of these opposed identities surviving because of their very opposition. Human beings have always regrouped in self-defined identities forcing others to do the same. It seems therefore better to adopt a position from within one and make sure, through war, ritual, epic poetry, and propaganda, that this identity has adherence through belief and that it is preserved from internal violence. If that means glorifying external wars in order to justify sovereignty and the measure



of internal peace it brings, so be it, and if one can make himself believe his own glorifying verses, even better.

This terrible ethics is a conclusion from hundreds of years of internal European violence and expresses the relief Shakespeare felt at the relative internal peace brought on by the Tudor reign. Like most of those who experienced the costs of civil war, Shakespeare was quite willing to pay the price of internal peace. But is this all there is? Is this all we are? Acquiescent beings subject to identity's violent dictates? Have we reached humanity's ethical limits, a state of lesser evil preserved by a redirection of violence?

In response to this question, Shakespeare might say that violence spreads. When identity is dislocated, a world is "out of joint," and all that exists is violence and the constant expectation of violence; the smallest misunderstanding between two individuals, as in *Romeo and Juliet*, can spread, intensify, and lead to civil war. When Shakespeare developed his ethics concerning identity, it was in reaction to this abyss.

But this resignation to the inevitability of identity would seem to shackle us with Antiquity's conception of history as the simple and inevitable repetition of the same: the same tragedies, the same violence, the same injustices expressed in different terms. And what happens when the violence inherent in the discriminatory identitarian ethic is accepted not only as inevitable but as highly desirable—accepted as the very meaning of life, in fact—when it is not only used instrumentally but assumed as its own objective?

In *Richard the Third*, Shakespeare describes a radicalization of the mechanism of identity. Through Richard the Third's nihilistic search for violence, this mechanism became self-aware and this self-awareness turns it into a demonic self-destructive absurdity. The image of Richard the Third is that of Satan divided upon himself.

As a warning against peace, Nietzsche writes, "Under conditions of peace the warlike man attacks himself."<sup>47</sup> As a warning against unrestrained war, Shakespeare shows a militant man's war against himself, and how it spread and engulfed a whole nation.

The play starts by asking, what happens when there is peace if the only value to life is found in war?

#### THE PERIODIC APOCALYPSE

After a bloody civil war, King Edward has established himself as monarch. He has reconstructed the unity of his realm, achieving what any sovereign strives

to achieve, a great measure of internal peace. And this peacetime is offering its rewards to the victors: arms hung up for monuments, dances with measured steps, sounds of lascivious flutes and idle happy days.

Richard the Duke of Gloucester is complaining about these peaceful times; he is bored. The warlike prince has no one to fight but himself. He can only inflict his pitiless violence upon his own deformed image. In one of the cruelest passages in Shakespeare we see Richard describing his inability to adapt to these times of peace. Ruthlessly mocking his own physical deformity, he describes this self-cruelty as his only form of amusement:

*Why, I, in this weak piping time of peace,  
Have no delight to pass away the time,  
Unless to spy my shadow in the sun  
And descant on mine own deformity.<sup>48</sup>*

As he can no longer apply cruelty upon others, Richard's self-inflicted violence is the only meager satisfaction he can derive from these peace-loving times. But internal violence is no longer satisfying. Richard is bored with simply singing his self-contempt to his own shadow. Self-cruelty is far too easy and he needs better enemies upon which to inflict his brutality.

Richard's utter absence of self-compassion is naturally reflected in a complete lack of compassion for others. In his conspiracy for the throne, his cruelty in plotting to send his brother to his death is but the progression of his cruelty upon himself. The conspiracy for the throne has nothing to do with what it can provide in terms wealth, power, or glory. He already possesses these and finds no value to things already possessed or easily obtained. It is the violence extended toward its possession that gives the throne its value.

Thus, Shakespeare has constructed Richard as a personification of violence as justification, as opposed to justified violence. He is nihilistic in the sense that for him value can only manifest as the destruction of values. In Richard's radical moral deformity, violence has moved beyond an instrument for the acquisition of things, and things are justified inasmuch as they are the instrument of the manifestation of violence. If objects of contention such as the throne only have value inasmuch as they represent the violence extended toward their possession, then it is logically consistent that at a certain level of nihilistic radicalism, a person can give and derive all value to and from destructive violence itself.

As Richard is nihilistically self-aware that violence is that which gives value to things, he now practices it for its own sake. But even his self-awareness does not escape its instrumentalization to violence. This manifests in his

self-contempt. In his pitiless gaze upon himself, he fully understands he is a villain. But this awareness is only the occasion for inflicting further self-villainy. When Queen Margaret curses him, Richard privately agrees with her: "Had I curs'd now, I had curs'd myself." Thus, self-awareness turns into a tool for the continuity of the thing of which it is aware, of the violence and villainy of Richard as applied to himself, leading to internal fragmentation.

Richard's self-inflicted cruelty implies a division upon himself. Nietzsche describe the individual not as a unity but as composed of several mental elements, organized as a social structure: "the soul as social structure of the drives and emotions."<sup>49</sup> Richard's conspiracy is the spread of the war within his individual social structure toward the interindividual.

A society going through a crisis of internal violence will tend to fragment into smaller and smaller factions. Richard's self-division as both despiser and object of that opprobrium—that is, as both the practitioner and object of that violence—is the application of that factional logic to a radical conclusion: not only violence of all individuals against all individuals, or that of Richard against all, but more radically of the violence of Richard against himself. Thus, Richard is in continuity with the divisive effect of violence upon his own society.

In his war against himself and against all, he maintains an adversarial relationship with all, including himself. There is no space of nonviolence or of mutual aid. This is a radicalized version of Hobbes's "the war of all against all" and is the extreme opposite of society. By practicing it Richard destroys the space of individual and interindividual identities. Betraying the ties of kinship, he sets up his own brother to be jailed and then sends murderers to kill him. He then sends a murderer to kill Edward's sons, his own nephews. He plans the murder of his own wife when she inadvertently stands in the way of his plans of consolidating his reign by marrying his own niece. Fratricide, infanticide, and incest: These transgressions are the result of violence's radical expansion destroying the ethical prohibitions designed to contain it. The logical consequence of the triumph of violence's expansion is the destruction of the ethic that preserves identity from violence itself. In its radical expansion violence no longer recognizes any ethical difference between internal and external violence. There are no protected co-identitarians. In effect, there is no identity as such.

Nor does violence's radical expansion preserve the unifying nature of collective violence. Those who align themselves with Richard, thinking they are joined with him by an exercise of unifying violence, are soon betrayed. This is what happened to the Duke of Buckingham. After having helped Richard ascend to the throne, he is asked by the king to kill the late Edward's sons. Buckingham hesitates and Richard very rapidly turns against him, publicly humiliating him.

Buckingham senses the winds turning. Knowing Richard's prior history and understanding the mortal danger he is in, he fearfully abandons the king on the eve of a crucial battle. Richard is against everyman—including himself—and soon enough, everyman—including himself—is against Richard.

He knew that a revolution was being prepared against him. So his deliberate humiliation of Buckingham, his chief ally, was nothing short of suicidal. If the duke had not abandoned him in fear of his life, Richard might have won the subsequent battle with the revolutionaries.

By destroying the sphere of identity that morality preserves and is preserved by, Richard destroys all spaces of nonviolence. He is thus in war against all, and to defend themselves, all are forced to be in war against him. But by doing this he creates the conditions where violence against him is inevitable. And this is but the last expansion of violence itself. Shakespeare is arguing Richard's suicidal tendency: If violence's self-expansion is not restrained, its logical consequence is the death of the agent provoking it and, by extension, the suicide of violence itself. Richard thus personifies the mechanisms leading to the end of violence.

The radical manifestation of violence within and without the individual is what can be defined as total war. In a very real sense it is suicidal. Without a space of nonviolence, implying a space of alliances, Richard cannot possibly withstand the amount of counterviolence he is unleashing against himself. Thus, for Shakespeare, Richard is a man whose actions have as their logical consequence the death of that self upon which he practiced so much cruelty in the beginning of the play, and what his life ultimately amounts to is a prolonged suicide. His kingdom is turned into the means of achieving it.

During the final battle, after he had taken five heads, Richard was willing to trade that kingdom for a horse in order to continue the violence. In that very instant an instrument of war, a horse, was far more useful than a kingdom in aiding the expansion of violence into his suicidal apocalypse. Richard is stripped of all, including his kingdom, and reduced to his essential nature, that of a purely self-justified expansion of violence. All excuses for that violence, including the defense of the kingdom, are done away with. Within violence's radical expansion, a kingdom for a horse is a very logical trade-off if that horse best serves violence.

Richard, as the personification of violence's expansion, is the radical and logical consequence of factional violence. The fact that the spread of violence he represents was destroyed this time in no way implies that it will not periodically arise again out of the very orders that emerge from this destruction. The apocalypse's periodicity is inscribed within the very conditions of identity.

## CONCLUSION

Shakespeare offers a clear and explicit understanding of the role of collective violence in the unifying preservation of identity. Thus, orderly “well-beseeming” wars are justified ethically as identity’s last safeguard against the spread of internal violence and social disintegration. Shakespeare viewed the processes leading to factionalism as ubiquitous, inevitable, and constantly threatening to the sphere of sovereignty with no permanent resolution to factional violence, only ways of minimizing it. The first means of minimization consisted in a strong central authority able to quell violence before its spread. Failures of authority are presented as instances where intra-identitarian violence was not contained. Shakespeare ethically justifies wars against foreigners—such as Muslims or Frenchmen—when such containment fails and the great collapse of civil war threatens. Those who do or attempt to engage in such wars are presented as moral characters.

Thus, humans in Shakespeare’s work are morally limited beings: “fallen,” following the Christian tradition. Their tendency toward factionalism and violence is ubiquitous and must always be negotiated with. As the eradication of these violent tendencies is impossible, the only moral option left is to minimize their results. Shakespeare’s ethics of identity is in reaction to this tragic state of mankind, a pragmatic search for the lesser of two evils: central authority and external wars as an attempt to avoid generalized war and the collapse of all forms of human association, or the abyss of radical nihilism as embodied by Richard the Third.

A resistance to collective identitarian violence is manifest in modern universalism. As Girard argues, universalism is the historic expression of Christianity’s resistance to the scapegoating mechanism. As collective violence needs belief in order to function, the critically distant understanding of it allowed by Christianity weakens adherence to it. Yet, as Girard predicted, the weakening of identity can lead to increases in external violence. In a passage about Proust but one that fully applies to *Henry the Fourth*, he writes, “The decline of feudalism exacerbated feudal conflicts.”<sup>50</sup> This potential increase in violence implies the urgent need for a discussion about the ethics of identity. A debate between Shakespeare’s tragic ethics and universalism is of great consequence to our time, and the strength of his arguments must be taken into account and faced full on if we are to produce an ethics that recognizes and adapts to man’s mimetic nature.

## NOTES

1. René Girard, "Belonging," trans. Rob Grayson, *Contagion: Journal of Violence, Mimesis, and Culture* 23, no. 1 (2016): 4.
2. René Girard, *A Theatre of Envy, William Shakespeare* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), 121.
3. Richard Van Oort, "René Girard's Shakespeare," *Anthropoetics, The Journal of Generative Anthropology* XXI (Spring 2016), <http://anthropoetics.ucla.edu/ap2102/2102vanoort>. This criticism of Girard is frequently coupled with the complaint that he claims to have "discovered" a universal human mechanism and is—perhaps arrogantly—associating himself with figures such as Shakespeare. As Van Oort states:

Girard's *Theater of Envy* is almost totally devoid of references to previous scholarship, and this has understandably upset Shakespeare specialists. Girard explicitly rejects the idea that he is just another "Shakespearean" humbly providing another interpretation to the ever-growing mountain of Shakespeare scholarship. . . . Interpretation is an inadequate word for Girard because interpretation is what everybody else is doing.

Van Oort's use of the word "humbly" is in implicit but obvious opposition to Girard's supposed attitude. This treatment of Girard's claims as some manifestation of his overconfidence poses the danger of downgrading his methodological attempt at universalism to a mere manifestation of his psychology. In defense of the psychological Girard, it must be recalled that throughout his career he consistently asserted that his ideas are not new, that his "discoveries" are already found—fully formed—in biblical and literary texts.

4. Stephen Orgel, *Imagining Shakespeare: A History of Texts and Visions* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2003), XIV.
5. Stephen Orgel, "The Authentic Shakespeare," *Representations* no. 21 (1988): 5, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2928375> (accessed September 26, 2019).
6. Neema Parvini, *Shakespeare's History Plays: Rethinking Historicism* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2012), 11, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.3366/j.ctt1wf4c98>.
7. Van Oort, "René Girard's Shakespeare." This study of Shakespeare as comprising universal sociological truths is seen by Van Oort as problematic in that it cannot integrate his specificity as a dramatist: "So for Girard, Shakespeare is quite literally an anthropologist or sociologist." The problem with this view is that "the more one emphasizes the idea that Shakespeare was a social theorist, the more tricky it becomes to explain the fact that he was also, quite obviously, a dramatist, an entertainer of the people."
 

This supposed difficulty of studying Shakespeare as a synthesis of both drama and sociology is not fully explained. Drama of course can be a link to objective reality, expressing scientific ideas about human societies and even examining itself as an anthropological phenomenon. To reject its philosophical, anthropological, and meta-dramatic abilities is to radically diminish its reach.
8. Paul A. Jorgensen, "Shakespeare's Use of War and Peace," *Huntington Library Quarterly* 16, no. 4 (1953): 321–22, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3816188> (accessed September 7, 2019).

9. Steven Marx, "Shakespeare's Pacifism," *Renaissance Quarterly* 45, no. 1 (1992): 49–98, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/286283> (accessed September 25, 2019).
10. Marx, "Shakespeare's Pacifism," 56.
11. R. A. Foakes, *Shakespeare and Violence* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003):  
 1. Foakes describes violence as "natural to human beings," fundamentally meaningless and only justified—or given meaning—retroactively: "Underlying all considerations of violence is the issue that has troubled many great writers, namely how is it that an individual, usually a man since violence has always been primarily associated with males, can for no adequate reason commit terrible acts of violence" (Foakes, *Shakespeare and Violence*, 7). Attempting to avoid the "dogmatism" of either nature or culture as the cause of violence, he adopts a position allowing for the influence of both. What Girard's theory allows is further precision in understanding the properly mimetic characteristics of human violence and the consequent expression of this mimesis as culture.
12. Paola Pugliatti, *Shakespeare and the Just War Tradition* (Farnham: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2010), 2.
13. Pugliatti, *Shakespeare and the Just War Tradition*, 206.
14. Girard, *A Theatre of Envy*, 7.
15. Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan, The Matter, Form and Power of a Common—Wealth, Ecclesiastical and Civil* (London: Andrew Crook, 1651, prepared for the McMaster University Archive of the History of Economic Thought by Rod Hay, n.d.), XIII, 79, <https://socialsciences.mcmaster.ca/econ/ugcm/3ll3/hobbes/Leviathan.pdf> (accessed August 28, 2019).
16. Hobbes, *Leviathan*, XXVI, 164.
17. Hobbes, *Leviathan*, XIII, 76.
18. All the quotes from Shakespeare are taken from *The Complete Works of William Shakespeare* (Oxford: Shakespeare Head Press, 1996). This one is from *Romeo and Juliet*, 1.1.1–15.
19. Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet*, 1.1.20–28.
20. Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet*, 1.1.32–33.
21. Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet*, 1.1.35–38.
22. Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet*, 1.1.41–42.
23. Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet*, 1.1.43–44.
24. Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet*, 1.1.45.
25. Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet*, 1.1.46.
26. Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet*, 1.1.47.
27. Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet*, 1.1.48–58.
28. Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet*, 1.1.59–64.
29. Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet*, 1.1.65–66.
30. Luke 24:34.

31. Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet*, 1.1.67–70.
32. Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet*, 1.1.71–73.
33. Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet*, 1.1.74–75.
34. Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet*, 1.1.76–80.
35. Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet*, 1.1.81–82.
36. Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet*, 1.1.105.
37. Shakespeare, *The First Part of King Henry the Fourth*, 1.1.6–21.
38. Theodor Meron, “Shakespeare’s Henry the Fifth and the Law of War,” *The American Journal of International Law* 86, no. 1 (1992), 1–45, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2203137>. There is a difference in that “The customary rules of *jus armorum*, or *jus militare*, regulated the conduct of soldiers within Christendom, but not between Christians and Muslims or other non-Christians” (Meron, 1992, 3). What this means is that in the case of intra-Christian warfare violence is regulated, whereas outside that sphere it is not. In Henry’s case, however, the most urgent task is diverting violence out of his own kingdom, and Muslims are only a preferred target.
39. Shakespeare, *Richard the Second*, 2.3.1245.
40. Girard, *A Theatre of Envy*, 193–99.
41. Shakespeare, *Julius Caesar*, 3.2.1545–1560.
42. Shakespeare, *Julius Caesar*, 3.2.1594–1600.
43. Shakespeare, *Julius Caesar*, 3.2.1625–1643.
44. Shakespeare, *Julius Caesar*, 3.2.1776–1777.
45. Cinna the Poet.
46. Shakespeare, *Julius Caesar*, 3.2.1579–1582.
47. Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil: Prelude to a Philosophy of the Future*, trans. R. J. Hollingdale, intro. Michael Tanner (London: Penguin Books Classics, 2003), 92.
48. Shakespeare, *King Richard the Third*, 1.1.25–29.
49. Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, 44.
50. Girard, René. “Belonging,” 1–12.

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