"That future strife be prevented now": Shakespeare's Lear

"My father told me that he had been told that in the past a man who broke the peace was dragged on the ground through the village until he died. But after a while this custom was stopped because it spoilt the peace which it was meant to preserve." Chinua Achebe, *Things Fall Apart* (1958)

It is customary, nearly universal, to dismiss Lear's expressed motive of preventing future strife now, in favor of a hidden motive, a darker purpose, for the manner of his disvestiture, and for us to side with Cordelia, against all these other hypocrites.¹ I am afraid that mimetic entanglements make hypocrites of us all and all our poor attempts at peace. To say with Lear "None does offend" is to recognize that all offend, defensively.

*King Lear* begins with two fathers, Gloucester as well as Lear, provocatively resetting long-standing competition between rival siblings back to the starting line. Kent is puzzled; he thought that "the King had more affected the Duke of Albany than Cornwall"; Gloucester, who ought to know, having made himself the prize of another sibling rivalry,² answers Kent's perplexity: "curiosity in neither can make choice of either's moiety." That is, jealous envy of the other dowry, which would propagate a future strife, has been anticipated and prevented by the


² In a way, Gloucester's resetting is the more flagrant. Kent has never met this son, although he has apparently heard of him. He has been out nine years, and will be sent off soon. I don't believe Gloucester consciously intends to sharpen Edgar’s love for his father by inciting rivalry with this spirited fort/da and proclamations of equal paternal love, although that is what his mercurial behavior is best suited for.
map which delineates them as equal. Because a royal family's sibling strife would surely snowball into the kingdom, this map and its ritual dispensation is public: Kent and Gloucester, but also Burgundy specifically refer to what this map dispenses, and all interested parties, rivals married and unmarried, will have seen it.

"That future strife be prevented now," Lear's map buries Lear's preference for Albany. Why does it display his preference for Cordelia? If we look at the 'responses' at the dispensation, we can surmise what has always happened in this family. Lear, as if at the beginning of a race never before run, offers Goneril "our largest bounty," the conspicuous third portion any observer would think of as Cordelia's. Goneril was once Lear's 'onliest' daughter, the subject of her parents' undivided love. In her speech, Goneril prefers Lear beyond what the senses promise, no less than life, as much as any other child could. For this Lear gives her land "with shadowy forests and with champlains riched,/With plenteous rivers and wide-skirted meads." (I,i, 64-5)

Regan was born for competition, born into rivalry with her elder sister, and a master of one-upsmanship.

Only she comes too short, that I profess

Myself an enemy to all other joys

Which the most precious square of sense possesses,

And find I am alone felicitate

In your dear Highness's love. (I, i, 72-76)
Regan trumps Goneril, presenting herself as an aggressive enemy to everything that the senses would offer as rivals to her love of her father. In addition to her lifelong rivalry with Goneril, she is further inflamed by seeing two unequal portions left on the map, and perhaps hopes that this time, despite a lifetime (Cordelia's lifetime) of failure she can beat Cordelia for the ultimate prize. Regan's underlying argument, which Cordelia can then develop against her sister, thanks to her position as last speaker, is that Regan prefers her father's company to anyone else, including her husband Cornwall. Cordelia will further clarify what we can already see: driving the rivalry of the sisters for their father, is the father's rivalry with their husbands to retain all the daughters' love.

According to mimetic theory, one of the surest signs of increasing metaphysical rivalry is the growing abstraction and neglect of the desired object. Lear's rich description of Goneril's portion of forests rivers and meads has evaporated in the description of Regan's dowry to "an ample third./No less in space, validity and pleasure/Than that conferred on Goneril." (I,1, 81-2) The only quality given to Regan's land is that it is a portion equal to Goneril's.  

We have to rethink Cordelia and our championing of her cause. Mimetic competition conditions Cordelia as much as anyone else. Whatever her intentions might be, Cordelia is ensnared in the mimetic mechanism. Cordelia, in effect, confronts competition by not competing, ostentatiously. Cordelia thus proposes herself as autonomous, someone to be loved herself and fought over; she challenges her father with rivals to his love, turning, in effect, his practice of inviting the desire of others back on him. One of the rivals for her love, France, takes

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3 Goneril thinks that she had rather lose the battle for the kingdom than lose Edmund. (V, I, 18-19)
up the challenge, loving where Lear hates, 4 "inflamed" (I,i, 255) by the prohibition Lear placed on Cordelia, 5 taunting waterish Burgundy for his lack of competitive being.

If we are to understand the action of this play we must defer taking sides and lodging accusations, especially against the easiest targets. Goneril and Regan have every right to worry that this latest expression of Lear's fancy but "offend" (I, I, 304) 6 them. At the end of this scene, after all seems to be over and decided, Kent banished, Cordelia disowned and departing with France, Goneril alerts Regan that "There is further compliment of leave-taking between France and him" (I, I, 301)—what is that about? That is, how can the sisters know that a new map won't appear, how can they be certain that Lear won't turn any one of the sisters against the other or others in some new contest?

In the next scene between Gloucester and Edmund we see again the futile procedures which follow from trying to anticipate and prevent future strife, attempting to pacify all these others who always start the violence that we must stop. Edmund calculates successfully that clumsily failing to hide a letter from his father will arouse a paternal suspicion and he successfully displaces this suspicion off onto the rival son Edgar with 'evidence.' 7 To understand such anxious defensive procedures we can do no better than remember the Theban King Laios

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4 Lear says to France "I would not from your love make such a stray/To match you where I hate" (I, I, 209-10). Of course Lear's warning to France to avert his liking has the opposite effect.

5 Later, Regan expresses perfectly the relation between prohibition and desire, asking Edmund if he has found his way "to the forfended place" (V, I, 10).

6 The word "offend" in this play denotes an action which entangles offender and offended, interdividually. According to the Oxford English Dictionary, "offend" originally meant "to strike (one's foot) against something, to make a false step or stumble morally"; the examples of Biblical passages given suggest the pertinence to Girard's discussion of scandal. Of the many examples given in the OED, the Tyndale Bible (1526) gives for Matt xviii. 6 "Whosoever offend these lytell wons which beleve in me" where "offend" translates skandalon.

7 See Girard's discussion of the efficacious role of 'evidence' in
who, through evidence even less certain than Gloucester's, anticipates and prevents future strife by acceding to the killing of his firstborn not yet born.

When we listen to the conversation between Goneril and Oswald which begins Act I, scene iii we can better understand how Shakespeare dramatizes the futility of finding the original offense behind symmetrical accusations. Goneril asks Oswald if her father struck "her" gentleman for the chiding of "his" fool. We know from Act I, iv, 68 that the fool has not been seen for two days, so this happened two days ago. For Goneril, these subsequent days have been filled with offenses to her.

By day and night he wrongs me. Every hour
He flashes into one gross crime or other
That sets us all at odds. I'll not endure it.
His knights grow riotous, and himself upbraids us
On every trifle. When he returns from hunting,
I will not speak with him. Say I am sick.
If you come slack of former services,
You shall do well; the fault of it I'll answer. (I, iii, 3-10)

Goneril blames Lear uniquely for a general misrule, a violent contagion of upbraiding and payback that is infecting her own household. Most performances make Oswald oozingly sycophantic and Goneril shrewish, a very bad pair indeed, but Goneril can be forgiven for

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8 Her later accusation against Lear's riotous knights is even more formulaic and mythically comprehensive: "Men so disordered, so deboshed and bold/That this our court, infected with their manners, /Shows like a riotous inn. Epicurism and lust/Make it more like a tavern and a brothel/Than a graced palace." (I, iv, 232-36)
fearing that Lear is 'breeding occasions" (I, iii, 24, quarto reading) to, (as he threatens later upon leaving her), "resume the shape which thou dost think/I have cast off forever" I, iv, 300-01). Goneril must defend herself against such future strife by breeding her own occasions to 'justify' defensive measures.

Lear hears the same testimony of offenses against him and his "men of noblest parts" during the same period from his knight:

My lord, I know not what the matter is; but to my judgment your Highness is not entertained with that ceremonious affection as you were wont. There's a great abatement of kindness appears as well in the general dependants as in the Duke himself also and your daughter. (I, iv, 55-60).

One can see how contagious suspicion itself breeds occasions and the defensive maneuvers against them. Lear now even believes that his favorite 'son' offends him. There is nothing in the play to corroborate a jealous and rivalrous Albany. Yet Lear replies:

Thou but remembr'est me of my own conception. I have perceived a most faint neglect of late, which I have rather blamed on my own jealous curiosity than as a very pretense and purpose of unkindness. (I,iv, 64-67)

Jealous curiosity fathers suspicion and preventive measures everywhere; it is the unstoppable mimetic mechanism snowballing through the community. Against Albany's caution that Goneril fears too far, Goneril answers
Safer than trust too far.

Let me still take away the harms I fear,

Not fear still to be taken. I know his heart.

What he hath uttered I have writ my sister.

If she sustain him and his hundred knights,

When I have showed the unfitness—(I, iv, 319-24)

Shakespeare carefully shows us how such enmity begins in a suspicion of what will be needed to restore peace at the places where it is most likely to break down. When Lear leaves Goneril for Regan, threatening to resume the shape he has put aside, Goneril is too careful of peace to trust her sister. She sends a letter because she must worry about what would happen if her sister would take her father's side; her sentence is unfinished, but the figure of one hundred knights makes it clear enough that these 'riotous knights' still exist in some way as a group despite her dismissing them. Regan could restore what Goneril has reduced, and 'digest' Goneril's half of the kingdom. Albany may wisely caution that "Striving to do better, oft we mar what's well" (I, iv, 336-7) but without a transcendent judicial system to keep the peace, the 'law' is in their own hands to maintain what is 'well' at the moment, and like archaic culture in general, prohibitions and other preventative practices multiply during crisis. All the animal imagery which is deployed within accusations that someone else's behavior is bestial shows an ontological anxiety that they will slip back into some proto-human horde, and shows how closely a society without an independent judicial mechanism sits to its origin in the archaic.
Rumour stands for the mechanism (in Girard's sense of the term) of reciprocity, rivalry, and snowballing enmity. Again and again we see that rumour and mistrust are in advance of anyone's anticipation, seeming to have a life of its own. Edmund, whose "machinations" are as far-seeing and malignant as anyone's, is nevertheless a step behind the process Curan describes, when he warns Edmund of rumours he has heard of "likely wars" "twixt the Dukes of Albany and Cornwall" (II, I, 10-11).

The rival letters to Regan carried by Kent and Oswald also carry the long-standing prejudices of performance. One could hardly ask for a more efficient example of Girard's idea that Shakespeare played two audiences, giving one their victims, giving the other his unparalleled understanding of mimetic behavior. Of course we sit or stand (although now I mostly sit at The Globe) as a single audience and surely enjoy as one Kent's plain dealing with Oswald and "the fiery Duke." We enjoy Kent tripping Oswald as a base footballer, the coarse aspersions against Cornwall, as offenses committed against all those who steal our being or our peace with 'their' presumption. Yet this should not blind us to Kent's structural symmetry with Oswald, each furthering occasions bred by their masters.

If we demonise characters such as Cornwall as inherently vicious, we miss their common origin in mimesis. At the beginning of the play, both dukes restrain Lear from lethal violence against Kent. "Dear sir, forbear" (I, I, 162). Cornwall degenerates into barbarism quickly, he is the fiery Duke, but who is not fiery? Even France is "hot-blooded" (II, iv, 207). Girard's early idea of conversion, falling away from mimetic rivalry at the point of death is everywhere at the end
of the play. Edmund says "Some good I mean to do/Despite of my own nature" (V, iii, 244-45), and Goneril confesses her crime in her last words, as Michael Edwards reminds us.\(^9\)

"None does offend" because all do. Gloucester loves his sons, Lear loves his daughters, parents love their children—how do these mimetic entanglements happen? I keep band-aids (plasters) in the cupboard, every parent does, just in case. If a loving father provokes a child into asking, exasperatedly, 'do you think I want to cut myself?' you can hear in a very small and benign way how the prophylaxis of prohibition and ritual inadvertently and unfairly accuses those it would protect or protect itself from.

Readers who find Girard "too pessimistic," theorists who would rebalance Girard with "positive reciprocity" grotesquely misunderstand what he is showing us. From his early work on the modern novels which reveal how we hurt ourselves into envy and rivalry despite ourselves, Girard went directly to the myths and rituals of archaic cultures to see how they protected themselves from the same dangers of breakaway mimetic behavior without the decisive efficiencies of a transcendent legal system to restore peace. The vast network of archaic prohibitions to prevent future strife only inadvertently 'accuses' children as inherently incestuous and patricidal (pace Freud). Girard reads out for us the portrayal and the production of human behavior by prohibition, in other words, the origin of the human in the prevention of violence. It is because we want peace that we do what we do: that really hurts.