

Reading Shakespeare's King Richard III against the grain

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

You may recognize the first lines of *The Tragedy of King Richard III* by Shakespeare. In general an Elizabethan play will unfold scenes and dialogue which contradict such lines, for instance in the *Merchant of Venice* or *Antony and Cleopatra*. Our first impression of the character changes quickly after the introduction, and it should change quickly too. One of the most attractive features of an Elizabethan tragedy or comedy is that it will build qualities and motivations for the audience to judge for itself.

Moreover, a work of art by Shakespeare, or for that matter, a tragedy by Sophocles, seems to allow a certain ambiguity in the experience of the audience.

Neither of these two phenomena seem to occur in the *Tragedy of King Richard III*, however. From the start we are seduced to accept one interpretation, dividing good and evil along familiar lines. Can this play be called a tragedy? The answer is no. Despite its official title professionals in the theatre know it to be a melodrama. This is what I will illustrate.

In addition, I will express my doubts as to whether the double strategy which René Girard describes (1), can be found in this particular play. Inspiring as this notion of a double strategy is, I deny its existence in Shakespeare's history on Richard III. Instead, we will move into darker areas. Girard's observations on myth and historical texts (2) bring me to the conclusion that Shakespeare's play on Richard III functions as a text of persecution. In this presentation I hope to explain why.

As a consequence I would like to introduce a new understanding concerning the outcome of this theatre play: mimetic satisfaction replacing the idea of catharsis.

SHAKESPEARE

The question whether Shakespeare, writing this play, belonged to a biased party, is beyond my scope in this presentation. On that subject I have written the novel *Messire*.

Elizabethan drama offered a wide variety of plays and ballades debunking King Richard III, the last Plantagenet from the House of York. Plays in general, and histories especially, were supposed to unify the English people under the Tudor-rose. Elizabethan writers were used to twisting facts in order to build the character's problem, having a wonderful show on the one hand and keeping within the boundaries of censorship on the other.

It is amazing, however, to what extent Shakespeare was influenced by Thomas More's biased *History on King Richard III*, an ironical study of tyranny based on certain 'facts' and rumours. Historically, Thomas More's interpretation was completely wrong. My novel deals with the historiography which resulted from his decisions. In the hands of Shakespeare these 'facts' have become solid fiction. Nothing special about that, but... in this particular case of successful Shakespearean tradition, solid fiction has led to 'fact' again: history books and Tower officials feed the negative image of the usurper and child murderer constantly. For this process down to our times I also refer to the phenomenon that contemporary portraits of King Richard III have been altered, made ugly, to suit dominant views in the Tudor-period. In short, the theme of my novel is one of political spin. It offers historiography from three points of view, one of which includes *The Trial of Richard III* by Drewett & Redhead, broadcast by London Weekend Television in 1984.

FIRST IMAGE OF VILLAINY

My topic at this conference is that *The Tragedy of King Richard III* is not a tragedy. Therefore a 'romanesque reading' - a mimetic reading against

the grain which we can apply to *Oedipus Rex* and *The Merchant of Venice* for instance, is not possible. Why?

One can summarize the plot in one sentence, the rise and fall of Richard III, but when it first appeared in print, in the Quarto of 1597, this was how the play was announced (3):

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

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

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

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

My point is, that from the very first lines, Richard of Gloucester is modelled into a fascinating monstrosity in a rather melodramatic way. He is the charming Vice we remember from the mystery plays, blaming himself for all Evil to come, cheating the rather flat agents of goodness and justice. Categories of ‘good’ and ‘evil’ are clear-cut from the beginning. Moreover, there is hardly any character development, no tragic dimensions of doubt and darkness like in *Macbeth*. As a consequence the Tudor-Richard’s problem will never become ours. There are no signs of an internal struggle, though his nightmare before the battle of Bosworth functions as a kind of confession of guilt and responsibility. The ghosts which confront him in his sleep, do encourage and comfort his opponent

Richmond who is to become the rightful king. The line between good and evil is sharp, here as well.

A TEXT OF PERSECUTION

According to Girard, a text of persecution manifests itself by the mythic proportions of the supposedly committed crimes, which direct the attention of the reader to the scapegoat. In general such a text will not be 'romanesque' literature, since it is an unconscious effort to supply the audience, and the author, with an explanation of past events.

A text of persecution contains a rather seductive narrative. It is written from the perspective of the dominant party and guides the reader to a certain satisfaction about offences, attributed to somebody who during the action is brought down and punished. The characteristics of such a text, mentioned by Girard in *The Scapegoat* are the following:

1. The blotting out of differences: indifferentiation, chaos as a result of expanding mimetic rivalry.

2. The marks of victimization: stereotypes like marginality, physical deviations, monstrosity.

3. The transition from all to one: in the midst of collective violence a rather arbitrary offence or stereotype leads to the accusation of one individual, the scapegoat.

4. In the ruthless persecution of this offender, mimetic symmetry has changed successfully into asymmetry.

5. Mythological explanations erase the historical social setting.

6. And I would like to add: the myth is confirmed by religious intervention, the persecution is sanctioned by God. In Shakespeare's play first we experience the workings of divinity in the prophecies of the former queen Margaret, secondly in the cursing of Richard by his own mother, the duchess of York (note: damnation means not only death but also the impossibility of redemption, leading to eternal wanderings of the soul). And thirdly in the visit of the ghosts at the very end of the play, encouraging the invader Richmond (Henry Tudor) but driving king Richard III to despair.

All the features mentioned can be applied to the *Tragedy of King Richard III* by Shakespeare. And I can prove it with an illustration. As a result of the author's theatrical aesthetics, using scapegoat-signs from the Tudor tradition (Richard as a monster in the physical and the moral sense) the audience takes his villainy for granted, and receives his ruin in the end with pleasure and relief. So did I as a drama-critic, writing on a Dutch production of the play with one of our leading companies, Toneelgroep Amsterdam.

It was only after understanding mimetic theory that I was able to acknowledge what had happened in the production and in my review. Despite my critical distance as a journalist, I found myself totally on the side of the persecutors, exactly as Girard describes, one of the naïve followers, voicing the murderous crowd in the play (4).

Realising this, I understood the workings of the play even better. To describe its scapegoating effect - the proof being present in my own review - I will refrain definitely from the word catharsis. Instead I would like to introduce in this case, or in any similar situation, a fresh notion: mimetic satisfaction.

Within this notion I try to encompass the mechanism which inflames not only the murderous crowd in the play but also the audience during the production. The unanimity of the persecutors on stage and us, the public, finds its expression in the climax. We do not leave the theatre torn apart, mangled in our own choices. Nothing of the sort.

Of course dramatic motives are partly personal interpretations in the spectators' mind, but through the aesthetics of the theatre available in this text, all our reactions agree on one point: Richard is guilty and his death is completely justified. How does this come about?

STRUCTURE

Here I would like to draw your attention to the general structure of drama. By my training in drama theory and the history of theatre, teaching at the Amsterdam High school of the Arts and reading Girard notions on Greek tragedy, I have come to a new contention, which I would like to share with you.

a. Girard.

Since you are familiar with the concept of mimetic rivalry, reciprocal violence and its unchecked spreading to mimetic crisis - a symmetry of uncontrolled violence which is only to be stopped by the use of a successful scapegoat - we can move on. As Girard demonstrates, agreement concerning the obvious guilt of an arbitrary scapegoat is decisive. A solution of the crisis is found in blaming and killing this victim, who is seen as the ultimate criminal. In this way a new balance is created, a new world.

b. Drama-theory.

In a theatre play the main action is about mental development of the hero, the protagonist (5): a progress - or lack of progress – confirming itself in the recognition of an error or in an act. The general structure is marked by inciting force, a turning point and the climax.

The inciting force is a minor event from outside, interfering with the protagonist's dilemma (sharpening his problem or ambition). Here begins *the rising action*, during which the protagonist will overcome several obstacles and set-backs (most of them the result of the actions of the antagonist).

The turning point is the most important decision or behaviour of the protagonist, and this decision will eventually lead to the outcome of the play. From that sharp-cut moment on we are part of the *falling action*. Events have only one direction now: catastrophe is coming down and will crush the protagonist, unless....

In tragedy this results in a terrible downfall, the climax. It is here that the *catharsis* is experienced, not so much by the protagonist but above all by the audience. It is our hope, pity and fear which is being modelled in the construction of the theatrical arch.

c. Combining these notions, I invite you to follow my thoughts:

The inciting force leads to the sharpening of the hero's mimetic desire. This makes him sensitive to the world of mimetic rivalry. In the case of

our play: Richards eldest brother, King Edward IV, suddenly dies, leaving the throne vacant.

From here the *rising action* leads to the pinnacle of the mimetic crisis, the turning point where the protagonist decides his course. This point is characterized by a certain crime or trespassing, which exposes the protagonist as a potential scapegoat. The existing mimetic symmetry transforms into asymmetry and the focus of the action shifts definitely to only one agent: in Shakespeare's history play Richard of Gloucester who by blasphemy accepts the crown and becomes King Richard III.

Now we experience the *falling action*, which includes the catastrophe coming down on the protagonist. The protagonist/scapegoat is being sacrificed, since only he seems responsible for the social upheaval. The antagonist forces have already joined in one front of persecutors and King Richard is slain at the battle of Bosworth.

CATHARSIS.

Indeed, drama is ritual. The most balanced pattern can be found in *Oedipus Rex*. In the falling action of Sophocles' play we are torn apart by pity and fear. The catharsis is unleashed at the climax, when Oedipus recognizes his guilt and blinds himself. But before, as always in a dramatic structure, traces of reciprocal rivalry have been evident in the rising action. Such collective violence changes into individual desire concerning state control, kingship, sexual admiration and so on. We witness this individual's decision at the turning point and become acquainted with his trespassing of the community's laws. The climax includes a recognition by the protagonist himself. This is necessary, since a mimetic crisis will only be solved by full agreement. There seems to be an unmistakable evidence of guilt and the protagonist accepts being sacrificed, which ends the (hidden) mimetic crisis. In *Oedipus Rex* this leads to enormous relief in the audience, because all responsibility for unconscious patricide and incest is signified by the scapegoat. Though we did identify with Oedipus and are torn apart in the drama questioning our own motives, the guilt is taken from our shoulders.

In this way tragedy, Girard says, will always contain awareness of collective violence and the danger of mimetic rivalry. In the end,

however, even a writer like Sophocles must submit to the *need for total agreement and the need in the audience for being cleansed*. Being excused is a relief which goes together with drama-aesthetics.

The crucial word here is 'in the end'. In *Oedipus Rex* we witness a terrible agony in the protagonist during the falling action. That's why, when he accepts his destiny and punishes himself, we feel a release of tension, called catharsis. His problem is ours, though he is 'guilty'. The change from symmetry to asymmetry feels adequate and not too soon. But there are hints and stubborn irregularities, as René Girard and Sander Goodhart have pointed out, that enable us to read the play against the grain and to discover a mimetic conflict and a mimetic solution.

How can we picture the effect of Shakespeare's history on King Richard III? The difference, I dare say, lies in our *experience* of catharsis. In our play there is no agony, no internal struggle to identify with. We know from the start who the scapegoat is and witness his conscious exposure to criminal acts. Only in a short moment at the very end of the play Richard reflects on his actions, but within a couple of minutes he is vanquished and slain. And the audience is pleased. Not torn apart, not even shaky. We are pleased, because the villain is punished and everything is okay now. Justice has been reinstalled.

SHAKESPEARE'S DOUBLE STRATEGY

Although Girard acknowledges a double strategy in Shakespeare's text, serving on one plane the vindictive mob and on another the more sophisticated parts of the audience, I didn't find it in the play.

Perhaps this critical notion of Shakespeare's can be applied to four histories together: Henry VI, part 1, 2 and 3 with Richard III as the closing part. Then there is a sense of repetition in the power game, always pushing a new king to the foreground, killing off the former one. Such a mimetic coherence certainly affords a 'romanesque' dimension. But within the *Tragedy of King Richard III* there is no double strategy, offering the simple parts of the audience the excitement of the public execution and at the same time mirroring the educated classes their mechanisms of rivalry. That crucial notion is missing. Studying the text

one can hardly uncover a comparable double strategy as Girard demonstrated (6) in the *Merchant of Venice*. With regard to the Christians in Venice I do appreciate that they function as a model for Shylock and manifest a negative parallel to his values. Perhaps the Elizabethan elite did feel the critical undercurrent in that play, which Shakespeare emphasised by having Portia, entering the court, ask: '*Who is the criminal here?*'

Analysing in the same chapter Shakespeare's history on Richard III, Girard attests to the power game of Elizabeth I and the remarkable longing for 'evil' in the female characters in the play. But in my opinion an effective double strategy is wishful thinking. It was simply not possible for three reasons:

1. Censorship, in this particular case of justification of the Tudor reign, would never have allowed it.
2. The pleasure of Tudor and Jacobean aristocracy is evoked by their own ancestors on stage, making the 'right' political choice, siding with Richmond (Henry Tudor). So part of the fun for the elite is that the play confirms their magnificent pedigree.
3. Melodrama does not carry the seeds of a contrary vision. The text positions Richard as a self-declared villain and no development in this view is offered during the play.

CONCLUSIONS

Though historical evidence points to political and military upheavals by the nobility of the time, and even the danger of civil war which Richard averted by becoming king, this collective dimension of 15th century violence in England disappears very soon in Shakespeare's play. Because Richard is modelled on the charming criminal, proudly announcing his crimes, there is hardly any doubt who causes the chaos and who is to be sacrificed.

Shakespeare's art is effective. In the *Tragedy of King Richard III* the rise and fall of the Tudor-enemy is being enacted, culminating in the climax where this charming monster, this symbol of Evil, is wiped out - so that peace can be restored by a new king who creates a new tree of lineage.

Hence the dawn of a celebrated period of humankind, where Richard III as the ultimate 'troublemaker' and murdered god may rise again in film and on stage. The villain gets the better tunes. Needless to say, staging the play through the centuries has engraved this specific ritual. Scapegoating Richard III has become a habit. In that light I draw your attention to the films by Laurence Olivier in the sixties and by Loncraine and McKellen in the nineties. And almost every theatre production, up to the recent RSC performance with Richard as a corrupt sheik in de Middle East.

So, my effort to read Shakespeare's *King Richard III* against the grain amounts to the assumption that this is a very long way to go, because:

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

I do agree with Girard that we should discover and expose our own need to create enemies, sacrificing them in order to feel freed from ambiguous complicity. Let's investigate that need also in art. Otherwise we never will be able to stop debunking Richard III.

ELS LAUNSPACH

Questions still to be studied:

- 1) Commercial drama in our modern culture (including films, television, opera, choreography, clips) seems to fulfil a need for public punishment which in former times was furnished at the market-place. Easy labels of 'good' and 'evil' produce mimetic satisfaction rather than catharsis in the Aristotelian sense.
- 2) If 'romanesque' literature reveals mimetic mechanisms to the thoughtful reader, tragedy does the same to the attentive audience in the theatre.

- 3) Is it possible to deconstruct 'scapegoating' in a persecution text by means of production in the theatre: acting, light, sound, scenery and so on? And to what extent can we balance these efforts with our need for a mimetic resolution?

Footnotes

- 1) René Girard, *A Theatre of Envy*. New York 1991.
- 2) René Girard, *The Scapegoat*, London 1986.
- 3) *The Mitchell Beazley's pocket companion to Shakespeare's Plays*.
- 4) See my review in Dutch, *Medeplichtig aan terreur*. In: *Toneel Theatraal* 1994 and [Theaterschrift Lucifer](#).
- 5) Of course the male form applies as much as the female.
- 6) To entrap the wisest. In: *A Theatre of Envy*, chapter 28.