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Paper Proposal

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Shame and Violence in the Mimetic Theory

Girard often talks about the perpetrators and victims of sacrificial violence in terms of guilt and innocence, insofar as the collective belief in the *guilt* of the scapegoat is of paramount importance: from the perspective of the dominant group, the victim really has committed “crimes that eliminate distinctions” and this guilt is the group’s justification for the sacrifice. And yet, whether the victim of sacrificial violence is *in fact* innocent or guilty is irrelevant: the victim is chosen at random or is deemed “sacrificeable” because he or she bears the “signs of victims.” In this paper, I will argue that a more precise definition of guilt as distinct, not from innocence, but from *shame* provides an important qualification to this aspect of Girardian theory. Drawing on insights from shame theory (Tomkins, Sedgwick, Broucek, Nussbaum) and examples from comparative literature across a broad historical spectrum (from Chaucer to Coetzee), I will suggest that the difference between breaking a written rule, which incurs guilt, and the piercing of physical and categorical boundaries, which creates shame, bears directly on the transformational potential of sacrificial violence. Because it is “embodied,” shame is experienced as a tangible thing—a stain, an infection, a physical burden—and so it can be displaced, projected, and purged in a way that guilt cannot. Thus, I will explore some possible implications of considering substitutionary violence as dependent on shame, or the act of shaming the victim, rather than on a collective belief in the victim’s guilt.