Colloquium on Violence & Religion Conference 2003
"Passions in Economy, Politics, and the Media. In Discussion with Christian Theology"
University of Innsbruck, Austria **(3.2 Literature) 14:00-15:30, Friday, June 20, 2003**

Shakespeare, Aristotle, and Ben Jonson in Mimetic Rivalry

The 'Prophet of Modern Advertising', the 'Strange Fellow', and the 'Poets' War'

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Background:

Achilles asks Ulysses at *Troilus and Cressida* 3.3.95 what he is reading. Ulysses reports what "a strange fellow", an unnamed author, teaches him through the book, which he does not name (96-102). Achilles retorts emphatically that what Ulysses reports is quite commonplace and "not strange at all" (103-112).

Many modern commentators have not hesitated to take Achilles' side on the issue. They regard what is voiced (e.g. "beauty … commends itself to others' eyes": 104-106) as commonplace, finding the substance of Ulysses' report (96-102) and Achilles' paraphrase of it (103-112) in a variety of ancient and Renaissance sources. In a previous play, however, Shakespeare had a copy of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* brought onstage as a plot device (*Titus Andronicus* 4.1.42). Perhaps the same kind of self-conscious literary event is occurring in *Troilus and Cressida*, for Ulysses goes on to answer Achilles' protest. He argues that the commonplaces (with which both Achilles and the modern commentators profess familiarity) are treated by the unnamed author in a decidedly different fashion (113-127).

William R. Elton has suggested that the unnamed author is Aristotle and that the book to which the passage alludes is the *Nicomachean Ethics* (1129b30-3; cf. 1103b13-14). This interpretation fits with his thesis that situates *Troilus and Cressida* within law students' festivities (the Inns of Court revels which rely on learned allusions). Elton attempts to solve the questions of the genesis and genre of *Troilus and Cressida* by placing the work in its historical context. While Elton's work marshals an impressive array of evidence for his Inns of Court thesis, he neglects the context of mimetic rivalry in which the play was born. In that mimetic context, however, which James P. Bednarz has recently reevaluated as a major literary debate on the nature of mimesis, the Aristotle suggestion assumes great significance with regard to both the play's genesis and genre.

Thesis:

Aristotle is seen as the "strange fellow" of *Troilus and Cressida* once we understand the generative context of the play: namely, Ben Jonson's rivalry with Shakespeare in "The Poets' War" (1599-1601). Shakespeare uses Aristotle when responding to Jonson's own appeal to Cicero for theoretical justification of Jonson's rival genre of "comical satire".

Argument:

This paper presents further evidence (from Minturno, *De Poeta* 1559) that establishes Aristotle as the "strange fellow" at 3.3.96-127, in order to evaluate René Girard's claims that the passage in question articulates mimetic theory's "relational theory of self".

Girard's interpretation of the play (in which he sees Shakespeare as a "prophet of modern advertising") recognizes that the passage articulates the play's thematization of conflictive mimesis. The play is a comical satire of communicative virtue (man must "communicate his parts to others": 3.3.118), in which desire is corrupted into the envy and emulation characteristic of mimetic rivalry.

This paper historicizes *Troilus and Cressida* 3.3.96-127 by showing how, with its theatrical allusion to Aristotle, the scene also alludes meta-theatrically to Ben Jonson's rival conception of comedy. The paper argues therefore that the play's genesis lies in a Shakespearean deconstruction of the theatrical rivalry of "The Poets' War" (1599-1601): i.e. a deconstruction of the new neoclassical genre (Jonson's "comical satire") to which this rivalry gave birth. Hence the genre of this "problem play" can only be understood with reference to that context of mimetic rivalry. In this light, Shakespeare is not so much a "prophet of modern advertising" in *Troilus and Cressida* as he is the dramatist who pushes the neoclassical esthetic to its limits.

The survival of the play's tragic protagonist (Troilus) prefigures the romantics, while the entry of this peripheral figure into the center of Greek myth deconstructs the classics. Theatrically, then, the play is comical satire. Meta-theatrically, however, it uses tragic forms from the classical esthetic to deconstruct and satirize the sacrificial catharsis that is demanded by Jonson's comic variations within the neoclassical esthetic. Seen both in its historical moment and in its place in esthetic history, the play is neither "anti-Aristotelian" nor "anti-theatrical" (*pace* Girard), but instead, as Aristotle's *Poetics* (at 1460a 15 and 1460b 26) helps illustrate, consummately neoclassical.

Conclusion:

Shakespeare is not so much a "prophet of modern advertising" in *Troilus and Cressida* (as Girard maintains by interpreting the "strange fellow" passage as an articulation of mimetic theory) as he is the dramatist who pushes the neoclassical esthetic to its limits by developing a rival, more Aristotelian mimesis that emphasizes the moral ambiguity of the theatrical, in response to Jonson's Ciceronian didacticism.

Textual Evidence:

Aristotle,
***Poetics* 24 (1460a 14-17):**
δεῖ μὲν οὖν ἐν ταῖς τραγῳδίαις ποιεῖν τὸ θαυμαστόν, μᾶλλον δ' ἐνδέχεται ἐν τῇ ἐποποιίᾳ τὸ ἄλογον, δι' ὃ συμβαίνει μάλιστα τὸ θαυμαστόν, διὰ τὸ μὴ ὁρᾶν εἰς τὸν πράττοντα· ἐπεὶ **τὰ περὶ τὴν Ἕκτορος δίωξιν** ἐπὶ σκηνῆς ὄντα γελοῖα ἂν φανείη, οἱ μὲν ἑστῶτες καὶ οὐ διώκοντες, ὁ δὲ ἀνανεύων, ἐν δὲ τοῖς ἔπεσιν λανθάνει.

"Now the marvelous should certainly be portrayed in tragedy, but epic affords greater scope for the inexplicable (which is the chief element in what is marvelous), because we do not actually see the persons of the story. **The incident of Hector's pursuit** would look ridiculous on the stage, the people standing still and not pursuing and Achilles waving them back, but in epic that is not noticed."

Aristotle,
***Poetics* 26 (1460b 23-26):**
ἀδύνατα πεποίηται, ἡμάρτηται· ἀλλ' ὀρθῶς ἔχει, εἰ τυγχάνει τοῦ τέλους τοῦ αὑτῆς (τὸ γὰρ τέλος εἴρηται), εἰ οὕτως ἐκπληκτικώτερον ἢ αὐτὸ ἢ ἄλλο ποιεῖ μέρος. παράδειγμα **ἡ τοῦ Ἕκτορος δίωξις**.

"If an impossibility has been portrayed, an error has been made. But it is justifiable if the poet thus achieves the object of poetry - what that is has been already stated - and makes that part or some other part of the poem more striking. **The pursuit of Hector** is an example of this."

Minturno [1559],
***De Poeta* (280-281):**
... seu quae cum civilia, tum privata negotia sine periculo comprehendat, sive, quod, puto, Aristoteles maxime probaret, imitationem esse ad effigendam suavi puroque sermone aliquam rerum, vel civium, vel privatarum actionem non sane insignem, ...
[Snuggs omits (543) this passage from Minturno, with his ellipsis between "*imaginem veritatis*" and "*non gravem*".]

Ben Jonson [1599],
***Every Man Out of His Humour* (3.6.202-206):**
Quid sit Comoedia? ... Imitatio vitae, Speculum consuetudinis, Imago veritatis.
[Note that Jonson passes over in silence the endorsement by Minturno ("*puto*") of Aristotle over Cicero ("*Aristoteles maxime probaret*") on the question of mimesis ("*imitationem esse ad effigendam ... aliquam*").]

Shakespeare [1601],
***Troilus and Cressida* (3.3.92-127):**
ACHILLES
… Here is Ulysses;
I'll interrupt his reading. -
How now, Ulysses?

ULYSSES
Now, great Thetis' son!

ACHILLES
What are you reading?

ULYSSES
A strange fellow here
Writes me that man, how dearly ever parted,
How much in having, or without or in,
Cannot make boast to have that which he hath,
Nor feels not what he owes, but by reflection;
As when his virtues, shining upon others,
Heat them, and they retort that heat again
To the first givers.

ACHILLES
This is not strange, Ulysses.
The beauty that is borne here in the face
The bearer knows not, but commends itself
To others' eyes; nor doth the eye itself,
That most pure spirit of sense, behold itself,
Not going from itself, but eye to eye opposed
Salutes each other with each other's form.
For speculation turns not to itself
Till it hath travelled and is mirrored there
Where it may see itself. This is not strange at all.

ULYSSES
I do not strain at the position -
It is familiar - but at the author's drift,
Who in his circumstance expressly proves
That no man is the lord of anything,
Though in and of him there be much consisting,
Till he communicate his parts to others,
Nor doth he of himself know them for aught
Till he behold them formed in the applause
Where they're extended - who, like an arch, reverb'rate
The voice again, or, like a gate of steel
Fronting the sun, receives and renders back
His figure and his heat. I was much rapt in this,
And apprehended here immediately
Th'unknown Ajax. Heavens, what a man is there!
A very horse, that he knows not what.

Annotated Bibliography

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Snuggs, Henry L. "The Source of Jonson's Definition of Comedy." *Modern Language Notes* 65.8 (1950): 543-44. Definitively argues that Jonson's source for the Ciceronian definition of comedy used in *Every Man Out* is Minturno, *De Poeta* (1559).