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René Girard: The Scapegoat Study Guide

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RENÉ GIRARD: THE SCAPEGOAT
STUDY GUIDE, 2003
Steven Alan Samson

CHAPTER ONE: GUILLAUME DE MACHAUT AND THE JEWS

Study Questions

1. What are some of the catastrophic events Machaut describes? What led to the massacre of the Jews? How is the process of **scapegoating** described in a fable by Jean La Fontaine? [The tendency to euphemize an evil is similarly depicted in the Harry Potter stories, as, for example, with "He who must not be named"]. (1-3)

2. [SKIP] How does Machaut's account of the arrival of the plague illustrate the phenomenon of scapegoating? What makes Machaut's use of *epydimie* [epidemic] a "linguistic scapegoat" and how is its essential structure the same as a human sacrifice? Does he ever connect these events into a single entity? ["The Thirty Years War" and "The Hundred Years War" were, of course, not perceived as such at the time]. (3-4)

3. [SKIP] Why can we, at this late date, be confident in that Machaut did not know what he was saying, on the one hand, but that Jews were really massacred? But, after all, how reliable are *any* of the documents from that period [c. 1350]? Here we come to a critical reading of the text itself: what René Williamson called *explication de texte*. How can the modern reader say that the text is false but that there really were victims? What is out-and-out skepticism about the text unwarranted? How does Girard deal with matters of probability and improbability? What then is the character of *this* text? What process of "solid intellectual reasoning" leads us to conclude that the persecution was real? Why is the testimony of "naïve persecutors" more conclusive than supposedly "reliable" testimony. (4-8)

4. [SKIP] Of what value is the testimony of "naïve persecutors?" What are some of the critical principles [of postmodern literary criticism] Girard contradicts? What are "persecution texts" and how are they to be handled? [Girard's observations may be applied to more recent testimony, such as the "confessions" of old Bolsheviks at Stalin's show trials during the Great Purge]. What is the golden rule of persecution texts?

Review

massacre of the Jews	scapegoating	*epydimie*
naïve persecutors	persecution texts	

CHAPTER TWO: STEREOTYPES OF PERSECUTION

Study Questions

1. What are **collective persecutions**? **Resonances**? What conditions favor mob formation? What is the common experience of those who live through collective persecutions? What does Girard mean by **absence of difference**? (12-13)

2. What is the impression left by institutional collapse? By contrast, what is significant about the "impression of difference" in a society that is **not** in a state of crisis? What does Girard mean by **negative exchanges** and negative reciprocity that occur in a state of social breakdown? [The sameness Girard describes is similar to what Erik von Kuehnelt-Leddihn saw as one of the temptations of modern leftism: **identitarianism**, which gives an impression of uniformity by uniting group identity with equality]. (13-14)

3. What are the first two **stereotypes of persecution**? Regarding stereotypes of crisis, what does Girard mean by the **eclipse of culture** with its lessening or loss of differentiation? What three types of crime are associated with the stereotypes of accusation? What makes such crimes fundamental? [The loss of foundations entails a loss of differentiation, as in the loss of a division of labor or a social class system where social order is replaced by chaos]. What are contagious crimes? (14-16)

4. Why does the crowd or mob seek action? What in the nature of a **mob** accounts for its "appetite for violence?" Why is poison a convenient object of blame? [***Sabbat*** here refers to a "witches' sabbath" held during the "witching hour." Spiritual signs or "spectral evidence" was introduced, for example, at the Salem witch trials]. What are the typical charges (and the point is that they are stereo-typical) against the scapegoats? [Of course, poisonings and other such practices may actually take place, as in the case of the Rajneesh cult in Oregon]. (16-17)

5. Identify some of the ways the third stereotype against "abnormality" is manifested? [Colin Wilson's *The Outsider* is an interesting study of marginalized or alienated men]. What is a **marginal insider**? How do the examples of Marie Antoinette and the rapist Illustrate the stereotypes of persecution? (17-21)

6. What does Girard mean by a "disturbing dynamism" that seems to threaten a system, as in the case of an obvious physical disability? Why is it that difference that exists outside the system is so terrifying? What is it that really obsesses persecutors? What general idea (***krino***) links the words crisis, crime, criteria, and critique?

Review

collective persecutions	absence of difference	negative exchanges
stereotypes of persecution	eclipse of culture	mob
marginal insider	Marie Antoinette	